

A RETROSPECTIVE EXPLORATION OF LESBIAN, GAY, AND BISEXUAL  
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER SUPPORT

by

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I would like to dedicate this work to my grandmother, Betty Liller, who passed away on January 31, 2015. She has always been my biggest fan. I hope that I have made her proud.

## **Abstract**

### A RETROSPECTIVE EXPLORATION OF LESBIAN, GAY, AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER SUPPORT

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The need for teachers to provide social-emotional support to students in order to promote learning is well documented. Although teacher support is important for all students, studies show that students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual do not feel as supported as their heterosexual peers. This study examined the perceptions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals about the ways in which teachers provided social-emotional support. Using a retrospective, exploratory approach, the study included semi-structured interviews with young adults who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Data gathered from the interviews was coded and analyzed to develop a better understanding of teacher support for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students from the students' perspectives. As themes emerged, a three-tiered model of support was developed that describes how lesbian, gay, and bisexual students determine whether or not a teacher is supportive and to what degree. Additional analysis revealed that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students often harbor strong beliefs about teacher characteristics that may serve as barriers to teacher support. The findings in this study fill a gap in the current literature and may be used to inform in-service and pre-service teacher preparation programs aimed at improving the ability of teachers to act in ways that are supportive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students.

*Keywords:* *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, teachers, social-emotional support*

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

At a time when the American education system is experiencing constant change brought about by mounting pressures to keep pace with other countries around the world, one aspect of education remains constant. Students continue to walk through the doors, and teachers are expected to support them until the day they walk back out again. One particular segment of the student population, however, may not be getting the support that is required for them to succeed within or beyond the school building walls. Students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are at an increased risk of falling through the proverbial cracks.

What does it mean to support lesbian, gay, and bisexual students? How can teachers provide the kind of support that is needed to help these students succeed? These are questions that need answers. This study attempts to provide those answers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem of bullying in schools has surfaced in recent years as one of the major threats to the health and well-being of the nation's youth. Of particular concern is anti-LGBT bullying, which specifically targets an individual who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) or who is perceived to be non-heterosexual or non-gender conforming by the aggressor. Although the acronym *LGBT* is commonly used as an umbrella term to describe a particular group of people, the label actually encompasses two distinct human characteristics. The terms *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* refer to an individual's identification of their sexual orientation, whereas the term *transgender* refers to an individual's gender identity. While there is a need to address all anti-LGBT bullying, this study specifically focuses on sexual orientation and, thus, individuals who

identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB).

According to a nationwide Harris Interactive study commissioned by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), actual or perceived sexual orientation is the second most common reason for students to be bullied, surpassed only by physical appearance (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). The Harris Interactive/GLSEN study (2005) found that 7% of non-LGB students reported feeling unsafe at school, while 22% of LGB students indicated that they do not feel safe. Likewise, 90% of LGB students (compared to 60% of non-LGB students) reported being verbally or physically harassed or assaulted in school during the previous year (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). In a meta-analysis of 18 studies conducted within the previous decade, Fedewa and Ahn (2011) determined that the odds of LGB students being bullied by peers were 2.24 times the odds of heterosexual students being bullied by peers. Similarly, the odds of peer victimization for LGB students were 1.82 times more than for their heterosexual counterparts (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011). The authors defined bullying as “verbal harassment and teasing” and peer victimization as “physical and sexual assault” for the purposes of their study (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011, p. 402).

A surge in LGB teen suicides in September 2010 brought the issue of anti-LGB bullying into the national spotlight. During that month there were six high-profile cases in the United States of LGB youth committing suicide after apparent bullying by their peers (Crary, 2010). According to the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), LGB youth are four times as likely as their non-LGB peers to attempt suicide. LGB youth also exhibit higher rates of absenteeism, lower academic achievement and educational aspirations, and poorer states of well-being,

such as depression (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012).

GLSEN offers four strategies for creating safer school climates for LGB students based on the findings of its 2013 National School Climate Survey. These strategies include comprehensive bullying/harassment policies and laws, supportive educators, LGB-specific student clubs such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), and inclusive curricula (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). The focus of this study is the strategy of supportive teachers. Teachers generally recognize that they need to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for all students, and the majority of teachers believe they are doing so for LGB students (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). Unfortunately, LGB students do not believe they receive adequate support from their teachers (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). This study explores LGB students' perceptions of teacher support in an effort to better understand the discrepancy between those perceptions and what teachers believe they are doing to offer support.

### **Purpose and Rationale of the Study**

Previous studies have examined teacher behaviors that create caring and supportive learning environments for the general student population. One study (Merritt, Wanless, Rimm-Kaufman, Cameron, & Peugh, 2012) investigated teachers' supportive behaviors in elementary schools. Their look at first grade classrooms revealed several teacher behaviors that can be considered emotionally supportive: showing respect for students through eye contact, respectful language, and a calm, kind voice; engaging in positive communication; offering gentle guidance; encouraging students to be kind to one another; providing encouraging feedback about behavior or schoolwork; showing an understanding of students' likes and dislikes; and giving students the opportunity in class to share their own views and ideas. A second study (Suldo et al., 2009) focused on

middle school students and the teacher behaviors that most contribute to students' subjective well-being (SWB), a wellness construct consisting of three components: frequent positive affect, relatively infrequent negative affect, and high life satisfaction. Specific behaviors included connecting with students on an emotional level; using a wide variety of teaching strategies; acknowledging and celebrating students' academic success; demonstrating fairness in interactions with students; and fostering a classroom climate in which questions were encouraged.

These studies provide valuable information about what teachers do to support students' social-emotional well-being, particularly students in elementary and middle schools. However, the support needs of LGB students vary from their heterosexual peers (Clarke, 2012). Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of research surrounding teacher support for the social-emotional well-being of LGB students. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explain how teachers support the social-emotional well-being of LGB students from the perspective of those students.

### **Significance of the Study**

Currently, there is a deficiency in the training of teachers to support LGB students (Baldwin, 2002; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). Findings from this study fill a current gap in the literature and are the first step toward improving professional development programs for in-service teachers and teacher education programs for pre-service teachers. Data gathered from the study is used to gain meaningful insights into LGB students' perceptions of teacher support for their social-emotional well-being. By adding to the body of knowledge in this area, the study provides much needed information for programs aimed at training teachers to act in ways that support the social-emotional well-

being of LGB students. More informed training programs will result in an increase in the number of teachers identified as supportive by LGB students. Compelling evidence from the 2013 GLSEN National School Climate Survey suggests that this will, in turn, result in safer school climates for LGB students (Kosciw et al., 2014).

### **Research Question**

This study answers the following primary research question: How do teachers support the social-emotional well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students from the perspective of those students? As the data collection process progressed, additional questions and answers emerged. One related question became immensely apparent: What do teachers do or say that indicate to LGB students that they may or may not be supportive?

### **Research Design Overview**

Using a retrospective, exploratory approach, I determined common themes and relationships and developed a model to answer the primary research question. I collected data from personal interviews with participants who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual,<sup>1</sup> are age 18 or older, and attended high school between 2006 and the present. I utilized a combination of snowball and network sampling in order to recruit participants. Interviews were semi-structured to allow exploration into the emerging themes. Following data collection, I coded the interview transcripts using multiple coding methods and analyzed the data in order to develop a model explaining LGB students' perceptions of teacher support.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* are used to provide a consistent framework for the study and as categorical identifiers during data analysis and reporting. This study does not exclude individuals who prefer to self-identify using terms such as *queer*, *same-gender loving*, *pansexual* or similar variations.

## **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined.

*Ally.* An ally is a person who supports and stands up for the rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals.

*Asexual.* A person who identifies as asexual generally does not feel sexual attraction to any group of people.

*Bisexual.* A person who identifies as bisexual is sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of the same gender as well as people from another gender, although this attraction may not be simultaneous or equal.

*Cisgender.* A person whose gender identity is congruent with their biological sex assigned at birth.

*Coming out.* This phrase indicates the disclosure of one's sexual identity. It is the process or event of declaring that one is gay, lesbian, or bisexual to another individual or group. It is a shortened version of the phrase "coming out of the closet," in which "the closet" is a metaphor for the act of keeping one's sexual identity private and possibly living outwardly as a heterosexual person.

*Gay.* A person who identifies as gay is sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of the same gender. Men who are attracted to other men commonly describe themselves as gay. Some women who are attracted to other women describe themselves as gay, while others prefer the term lesbian.

*Gender identity.* A person's gender identity refers to their sense of being a man, woman, or other gendered. When a person's gender identity and biological sex are incongruent, the person is said to be gender variant. Such individuals often refer to

themselves as transgender. Gender identity is not synonymous with sexual identity or sexual orientation.

*Heteronormativity.* This is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual or that heterosexuality is the norm. An example of heteronormativity in a school setting is the instance of a teacher telling students to take a paper home “to show your mom and dad.” In this case heteronormativity is perpetuated when the teacher assumes that all students have a mother and a father, ignoring the fact that some students may have two mothers or two fathers.

*In-service teacher.* An in-service teacher is one who is currently employed as a teacher.

*Lesbian.* A woman who identifies as lesbian is sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of the same gender.

*Pansexual.* A person who identifies as pansexual experiences sexual, romantic, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions.

*Pre-service teacher.* A pre-service teacher is one who is not currently employed as a teacher and is in the process of completing a teacher education program.

*Professional development.* This refers to an event, program, or other opportunity for teachers to improve their skills, understanding, or professional behaviors in order to become more effective.

*Queer.* A historically derogatory slang term, this is now a term that has been reclaimed by some members of the LGBT community as a symbol of pride, representing all individuals who fall out of the gender and sexuality “norms.”

*Sexual identity.* A person’s sexual identity is the way in which he/she describes

his/her sexuality. Terms commonly used to label one's sexual identity include gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight.

*Sexual orientation.* A person's sexual orientation is an internal feeling of attraction toward others.

*Social-emotional well-being.* Stewart-Brown (2000) defined social-emotional well-being as “a holistic, subjective state which is present when a range of feelings, among them energy, confidence, openness, enjoyment, happiness, calm, and caring, are combined and balanced” (p. 32 ).

*Straight.* A person who identifies as straight is sexually and/or romantically attracted to members of the other sex. Straight men are attracted to women, while straight women are attracted to men.

*Teacher education.* A teacher education program is an academic program at the postsecondary level that trains individuals for a career in teaching.

*Transgender.* A person whose gender identity is incongruent with their biological sex assigned at birth.

## **Assumptions**

During the data collection process, I made many assumptions. I assumed that study participants would be open and honest about their experiences and that their recollection of those experiences was accurate. Further, I assumed that all study participants shared common definitions of terms used and that they sought clarification if any term was ambiguous or unknown.

## **Risks**

Potential risks to study participants were examined and methods for managing

these risks were identified. There were no anticipated physical risks associated with this study. Social and psychological risks, such as feelings of shame, embarrassment, or regret, were involved to some degree because the participants were asked to share prior personal experiences. This risk was potentially higher when those experiences were troubling or traumatizing. I managed these possible risks by adhering to a strict code of confidentiality and professionalism during participant interviews. I also provided participants with contact information for appropriate professional assistance as needed (Frostburg State University Counseling and Psychological Services – 301-687-4234; GLBT National Hotline – 1-888-843-4564). I allowed participants to select whether they preferred a face-to-face interview or use of video conferencing software, such as Skype or Face Time. Participants engaging in face-to-face interviews were given the option to select the location of the interview that made them most comfortable. In addition, participants were informed that they could stop the interview temporarily or permanently at any time and that they could skip any questions they preferred not to answer. I emphasized to participants that doing so would not incur a penalty on them in any way. Although no participant requested to permanently stop the interview after it had begun, I was prepared to seek verbal confirmation that I may use the data collected to that point. Finally, I also explained to participants that I am a mandated reporter, which means that I am required by law to report current and past child abuse and neglect, even when the former victim is now an adult and even when the former alleged abuser is deceased. I clarified that if the participant disclosed current or past abuse or neglect during the interview, I would be required by law to report it. Economic and/or legal risks were minimal, although participants may reside in a state in which they are not legally

protected if their sexual orientation becomes known. Examples of risks under these circumstances include loss of employment or housing. While I cannot prevent the participant from revealing his or her involvement in the study, I have taken and will continue to take the necessary steps to prevent such disclosure on my part. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription. The digital recordings and transcribed files are housed in a password-protected folder on the computer in my office at Frostburg State University, which is also password-protected. The participant and I agreed upon an alias at the time of the interview to maintain confidentiality. This alias was used during note taking, in transcripts, throughout data analysis and within all reports. I recorded the alias on the informed consent form, ensuring that the only document linking real names with aliases is the informed consent form. Participants' real names only appear on the informed consent forms, which are securely stored in a locked file cabinet in my locked office at Frostburg State University, and in email correspondence, which were printed and stored with the informed consent forms. Digital copies of emails between me and the participants were deleted daily.

### **Limitations**

Due to the nature of this study, I used a retrospective approach. This approach presented a possible limitation in that participants may not have accurately recollected their K-12 school experiences and/or may have been influenced by experiences since they were a student. I addressed this concern by establishing a small range of participant ages based on the year they attended high school. By selecting individuals who attended high school more recently, I attempted to include participants who would have more accurate memories of their school experiences.

The use of snowball and network sampling may have limited the diversity of participants as individuals may tend to recommend others who are similar to them.

Attempts to expand the participant pool to additional networks were unsuccessful for reasons that were beyond my control.

### **Delimitations**

This study focuses on participants who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, are at least 18 years of age, and who started high school in 2006 or after. Individuals outside of this age range were not interviewed. Individuals who identify as heterosexual are beyond the scope of this study. Transgender individuals are also beyond the scope of this study. Although transgender people commonly fall under the same umbrella as LGB people (thus the “T” in the popular acronym *LGBT*), this study is concerned with the experiences of individuals based on their sexual identity, not based on their gender identity. While a transgender individual may identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual as well, the study only includes cisgender individuals in order to maintain the clear focus on sexual identity. The exclusion of the transgender population from this study is not meant to imply that such work would not be valuable. Gender identity is simply not within the scope of the current research study.

### **Overview of the Study**

According to researchers at GLSEN, more LGB students are reporting supportive teachers than ever before (Kosciw et al., 2014). My hope is that the findings of this study will serve as an initial step towards improving professional development and teacher education programs so that this trend continues at a more rapid pace.

In the remaining chapters, I describe the context, methods, and discoveries of the

study. Chapter two includes a review of the literature related to experiences of LGB students and the role schools play in supporting all students as well as students who identify as LGB. In chapter three, I provide the details of my research design and methodology, including how I obtained participants and collected and analyzed the data. In chapter four, I describe the results of data analysis according to the themes and relationships that emerged during the study. Finally, in chapter five, I put forth a model to answer the primary research question and related questions that developed through the collection and analysis process. Chapter five also includes implications and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2 – Review of Literature**

### **The Plight of LGB Students**

**Experiences in school.** Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual face significant challenges in school. According to a recent meta-analysis of existing literature (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011), LGB youth experience much higher levels of bullying and peer-victimization than their heterosexual peers. That review of 18 studies conducted between 1999 and 2011 led researchers to determine that the odds of an LGB student being bullied or harassed by a peer were, on average, 124% higher than the odds of a heterosexual student being bullied or harassed by a peer.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has conducted the National School Climate Survey, a nationwide survey of LGB adolescents, every two years since 1999. The most recent survey, conducted in 2013, consisted of 7,898 student participants representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Kosciw et al., 2014). For the first time in the history of the survey, the 2011 survey results showed a slight decrease in two measures of negative school climate: hearing anti-LGB comments in school and experiencing victimization (Kosciw et al., 2012). This encouraging trend continued with the 2013 survey, but the challenges facing LGB students remain disturbing. Over 71% reported often or frequently hearing “gay” used in a negative way at school, and 64.5% reported hearing other homophobic remarks (Kosciw et al., 2014). Alarmingly, over 51% of the students said they heard biased comments from teachers and other school staff (Kosciw et al., 2014). Meanwhile, 74% of the study participants reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation in the previous year, 36% said that they had been physically harassed, and 16.5% were physically assaulted

(Kosciw et al., 2014).

Data obtained in the 2007 National School Climate Survey were analyzed to determine variance caused by demographic factors (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2008). A regression analysis indicated that LGB students in rural communities and communities with lower educational attainment among adults were at greater risk of facing negative school climates. In response to those findings, Blackburn and McCready (2009) argued that such quantitative studies have not revealed the full experiences of urban LGB youth. They claimed that while urban schools have more diverse student bodies and offer more extensive resources than rural schools, the school climate in urban settings can be particularly harsh for LGB students, particularly those of color. They further concluded that the unique intersection of sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic status, and nationality that exists among many urban LGB students places them squarely beneath an overwhelming sum of oppressive forces (Blackburn & McCready, 2009).

**Outcomes for LGB youth.** It should be noted that not all LGB youth experience victimization in school and that even those who do may or may not suffer negative consequences as a result. Robinson and Espelage (2011) determined that the majority of LGB youth are not at risk for several negative outcomes. However, extensive research has indicated that for many LGB students, the impact of a negative school climate can have damaging effects. Significantly, those damaging effects occur at a much higher rate for LGB youth than for their heterosexual peers (Robinson & Espelage, 2011).

According to the 2013 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2014), many LGB youth skipped classes or even entire days of school because they felt uncomfortable or unsafe there. LGB students who experienced higher levels of

victimization were three times as likely to miss school as those who experienced lower levels of victimization (Kosciw et al., 2014). In the same study, LGB youth who had been victimized to a greater degree were more likely to have symptoms of depression and lower self-esteem than their LGB peers who experienced lower levels of victimization (Kosciw et al., 2014). One noticeable trend is that while heterosexual students show an increase in unexcused absences from middle school to high school (7% to 14%), rates of unexcused absences for LGB students remain steady across those grade levels at 22% (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). There is a similar trend for feelings of school belongingness. Heterosexual students exhibit a decrease in feelings of school belongingness as they move from middle school to high school. LGB youth, on the other hand, show steady levels of school belongingness, but those levels are consistently lower than their heterosexual counterparts (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). These trends suggest that the negative outcomes for LGB youth begin during middle school and continue through high school.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2011) found that LGB adolescents have a higher prevalence of high-risk health behaviors than heterosexuals in the same age range. The specific risk behavior categories for which LGB youth were more likely involved included violence, use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, risky sexual behaviors, poor weight management, and attempted suicide. Other reports have indicated that LGB youth are 3-4 times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers and that LGB runaways may account for up to 40% of the teenage homeless population (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010).

At school, LGB youth are more likely to suffer academically. A lack of support

and negative school climates (defined as hearing biased remarks; feeling unsafe; feeling social exclusion or a lack of belonging; and/or experiencing direct victimization) result in lower grade point averages and diminished academic aspirations (Clarke, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). According to Russell, Seif, and Truong (2001), grades were significantly lower among adolescent males who reported bisexual attractions than all of their peers. In the same study, adolescent females who reported same-sex attractions tended to have more negative attitudes about school and greater school troubles, which was measured on a scale that averaged scores for getting along with others, paying attention in class, and completing homework assignments (Russell et al., 2001).

Clearly, the typical school climate puts LGB students at greater risk of physical, psychological, and academic harm. At a time when most youth are already navigating the murky waters of adolescence, LGB youth are doing so with less support from the institutions where they spend nearly half of their waking hours.

### **The Role of Schools**

Uribe and Harbeck (1992) contend that one primary role of schools is to aid students in their development of a sense of self, including the formation of self-identity and the management of social roles. The social support that can be provided has been categorized by House (1981). The four types include emotional, appraisal, instrumental, and informational support. Emotional support consists of love, trust, and caring behaviors. Appraisal support boosts one's self-esteem and includes positive feedback and affirmation. Instrumental support comes in the form of tangible resources such as money, labor, and time. Informational support includes offering advice, suggestions, or factual

information. Social support can originate from a variety of sources, including parents, peers, teachers, and other adults. Johnson (2009) claimed that students' relationships with their teachers play the most significant role in determining students' feelings about school and their academic success. She further proposed that this is particularly true during adolescence because students begin to rely more heavily on relationships beyond the family for support.

**Theoretical foundations.**<sup>2</sup> Students need the social support of teachers in order to achieve in the educational setting. This understanding is grounded in the work of several well-known theorists. One of the most respected theorists on motivation, Abraham Maslow suggested that human motivation derives from needs that must be met by the individual (Maslow, 1943). He organized these needs into a triangular hierarchy, with the very basic physiological needs, such as hunger and thirst, at the base of the triangle. According to Maslow, motivation will arise from the lowest level on the hierarchy in which needs are not met. The second level in Maslow's hierarchy consists of safety needs. He stated, "we may generalize and say that the average child in our society generally prefers a safe, orderly, predictable, organized world, which he can count on, and in which unexpected, unmanageable, or other dangerous things do not happen" (Maslow, 1943, p. 378). The third and fourth levels in the hierarchy are belongingness and love needs and esteem needs, respectively. The belongingness and love needs center around an individual's desire to give and receive love, to feel connected, and to identify

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<sup>2</sup> Birks and Mills (2011) recommend that the typical theoretical frameworks used to direct a research project are not indicated in a grounded theory study as the purpose of this methodology is "to generate theory that is grounded in the data and not influenced by preconceived ideas about the area of study" (p. 24). Grounded theory strategies were used frequently throughout this study. While this section of the literature review explores three particular theories, they are meant to serve as a basis for the justification of the research direction rather than a framework for the study as a whole.

as part of a group. Characteristics of the esteem needs include feelings of self-worth, confidence, independence, and appreciation by others. Based on Maslow's theory, the motivation to learn (the need to know and understand) arises only if the needs at the four lowest levels are met (Maslow, 1943). Thus, unless students feel physically and psychologically safe and connected, they cannot be expected to learn.

In his framework for instruction and assessment, Robert Marzano (1992) also described the importance of students' emotional needs in the classroom. His familiar model, Dimensions of Learning, explains the process of learning as a function of five types of thinking. He labeled the first dimension, which serves as a foundation for all learning, "Positive Attitudes and Perceptions about Learning" (Marzano, 1992). Marzano concluded that unless students have positive attitudes and perceptions about learning, they will not be able to take in new knowledge sufficiently, if at all. He specifically described two categories within this dimension: attitudes and perceptions about the learning climate and attitudes and perceptions about classroom tasks. In order to have positive attitudes and perceptions about learning, students need to feel accepted by the teacher and their peers, have a sense of comfort and order in the classroom, value and understand the tasks at hand, and believe they have the resources to accomplish those tasks (Marzano, 1992).

A third viewpoint of significance is Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory. According to these psychologists, an individual can only reach his or her highest potential if three psychological needs are nurtured: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence refers to the need to control the outcome and master the skills and concepts in a learning task. Relatedness implies interaction with and

connection to others, particularly in one's peer group. Autonomy is the urge to have sovereignty over one's life. Self-determination theory suggests that fostering these three natural desires will motivate a person to seek his or her potential, which involves the process of learning.

Taken together, these three theories provide a justification of the need for teachers to create caring and supportive learning environments. It is clear that learning can only occur when students perceive a positive climate that meets their basic physiological, social, and psychological needs.

Much evidence has been provided to support the theories of Maslow, Marzano, and Deci and Ryan. Furrer and Skinner (2003) found that perceived teacher support contributes to students' sense of relatedness in early adolescence. They further concluded that students who ranked high on a relatedness scale were more likely to participate enthusiastically in learning activities and display fewer negative emotions. Jia and colleagues (2009) studied middle school students in both the United States and China and determined that students' perceptions of teacher support was positively associated with self-esteem and grade point average but negatively associated with symptoms of depression. Another study of middle school students indicated that teachers can have an effect on the emotional state of students in the classroom (Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009). Adolescents in a separate study revealed that high teacher support correlated with a greater sense of belonging (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008). Several researchers have linked supportive teacher-student relationships with favorable psychosocial outcomes, including positive peer relationships and decreases in suicidal ideations, violence, drug use, and emotional distress (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001;

Paulson & Everall, 2001; Resnick et al., 1997).

**Teacher support for the general student population.** While several studies have examined the connection between teacher support and student learning, research on the specific teacher behaviors that have a positive impact on students and the classroom climate is not quite as robust. In a study of high school students' preferred teacher characteristics, the participants cited very general qualities, including communication, indulgence, friendly attitude, fairness and patience (Drobot & Roșu, 2012). The study did not explore observable behaviors which led participants to determine that a teacher exhibited any of those characteristics. In a rather narrow study, LaRusso and colleagues (2008) found that a respectful climate can be created when teachers take student perspectives into account as they handle discipline problems. Student autonomy, one of the three key components in Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), can be created when teachers listen, give students opportunities to talk, praise signs of mastery or improvement, encourage effort, respond to students' comments and questions, and acknowledge students' perspectives and experiences (Reeve & Jang, 2006). Still, none of these researchers have specifically addressed the observable teacher behaviors that lead students to conclude a teacher is supportive. There are, however, two studies that have examined teacher behaviors that predict a positive, supportive classroom climate.

Merritt and colleagues (2012) investigated teachers' supportive behaviors in elementary schools. Their look at first grade classrooms revealed several teacher behaviors that can be considered emotionally supportive: showing respect for students through eye contact, respectful language, and a calm, kind voice; engaging in positive

communication; offering gentle guidance; encouraging students to be kind to one another; providing encouraging feedback about behavior or schoolwork; showing an understanding of students' likes and dislikes; and giving students the opportunity in class to share their own views and ideas. They also discovered behaviors that supportive teachers avoid, such as criticizing students, using sarcastic language or punitive approaches to discipline problems, and acting in a controlling manner (Merritt et al., 2012).

Suldo and colleagues (2009) focused on middle school students and the teacher behaviors that most contribute to students' subjective well-being (SWB). According to the authors, "SWB is a wellness construct that communicates children's self-appraisal of their own protective factors (e.g., positive emotion, life satisfaction)" (Suldo et al., 2009, p. 68). In that study perceived support from teachers accounted for sixteen percent of the variance in students' SWB scores. The specific behaviors that students perceived to be most supportive were connecting with students on an emotional level, using a wide variety of teaching strategies, acknowledging and celebrating students' academic success, demonstrating fairness in interactions with students, and fostering a classroom climate in which questions were encouraged. Other favorable teacher behaviors included asking questions about a student's well-being, allowing students to have free time, showing concern for whether students have mastered the material, explaining errors made on assignments, keeping the workload manageable, appearing objective in the selection of students to participate in class, responding positively to students' questions, and explicitly stating an intent to treat all students equally (Suldo et al., 2009).

To a lesser degree, the study also identified teacher behaviors that are perceived to

indicate low support to students (Suldo et al., 2009). A key behavior that met this criterion was use of an authoritarian style of management, in which the teacher displays an aversive tone of voice and sets very firm rules and expectations. Interestingly, while this study was conducted with primarily Caucasian, middle-class students in a suburban area, the results of a smaller study on African American, lower-class students in an inner-city area were completely opposite regarding this issue. Students in the latter study perceived the most caring teachers to be those who were strict, controlled disruptive behavior, and pressured students to complete their work (Alder, 2002).

**Teacher support for the LGB student population.** As limited as the research is regarding teacher behaviors the general student population perceives to be supportive, the literature in this area specifically addressing the LGB student population is nonexistent. At this time, there appears to be no exploration into the teacher actions that LGB students perceive as supportive. Despite this paucity of research, an understanding of the role teacher support plays in the lives of LGB youth has increased drastically in the past decade.

Data from the 2013 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2014) indicate that when LGB students believed there were at least eleven supportive teachers in their school, they were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (36.3% compared to 74.1% of those who did not believe there was single supportive teacher). The perception of greater teacher support was also associated with student reports of fewer absences, increased sense of being part of the school community, higher grade point average, and improved aspirations for attending college (Kosciw et al., 2014). In a follow-up to the 2011 National School Climate Survey, Kosciw and colleagues

(2013) concluded that supportive teachers are especially helpful for LGB students who are highly victimized and that the number of supportive teachers is the strongest predictor of a less hostile school climate. Murdock and Bolch (2005) and Clarke (2012) found similar results. In their work with over 100 LGB high school students, Murdock and Bolch (2005) determined that teacher support facilitated a sense of psychological belonging. In fact, social support from teachers counteracted a homophobic school climate for many participants. Using data from California's Preventing School Harassment survey of middle and high school students, Clarke (2012) ascertained that appraisal and emotional support from teachers were the strongest buffers between victimization and academics for LGB students. Findings were much more varied for heterosexual participants, indicating that not only are the support needs of LGB youth and their non-LGB peers different, but that those needs are more consistent within the LGB population.

Not surprisingly, while it is important that teachers are supportive of LGB students, it is even more important that LGB students perceive that support. LGB students who believed there were no adults in the school to talk to about a problem were more likely to be threatened by their peers and reported multiple suicide attempts over the previous year (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). Feelings about their teachers played the most important role in the school troubles (paying attention, completing homework, and getting along with peers) experienced by LGB students, especially youth reporting bisexual attractions (Russell et al., 2001). The perception of accessibility and a willingness to help is particularly meaningful. Gastic and Johnson (2009) used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to determine that having a teacher-

mentor contributed to improved educational resilience, especially for LGB women of color. Unfortunately, many LGB youth have chosen not to disclose their sexual identity to teachers for fear of losing their support (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002).

**Barriers to teacher support for LGB students.** That LGB students fail to perceive teachers as supportive is somewhat understandable. Despite whether teachers believe they have a responsibility to provide a supportive environment for LGB youth or not, there are a number of barriers to such support, including negative attitudes and a lack of knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality and inadequate preparation for handling LGB issues in school.

In the first study of its kind, Sears (1992) found that nearly 80% of pre-service teachers held negative feelings toward LGB individuals, and one third of those pre-service teachers scored in the “high grade homophobic” range on a measure of attitudes toward LGB persons. Attitudes in the United States have improved since this early study (Smith, 2011). In fact, the Pew Research Center (2013) reports that the percentage of people in the U.S. who believe homosexuality should be accepted rose from 49% in 2007 to 60% in 2013 alone. However, a cross-cultural study revealed that American pre-service teachers were less likely to report attitudes of acceptance toward LGB youth than pre-service teachers in England and Spain (Cardona Moltó, Florian, Rouse, & Stough, 2010). Furthermore, even pre-service teachers who expressed positive attitudes toward LGB students had limited knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality and were less willing to discuss topics of sexual orientation than topics of race and ethnicity in the classroom (Hirsch, 2007). Dowling, Rodger, and Cummings (2007) found that the more positive pre-service teachers’ attitudes were about homosexuality, the greater the chances

were that they wanted to take part in creating a more positive environment for LGB youth. Hirsch (2007) also concluded that increased knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality was connected to decreased negative attitudes and feelings about LGB youth, increased positive anticipated behaviors, and more inclusive curriculum practices.

It is no wonder that teachers lack knowledge about LGB students. In a review of secondary teacher preparation programs at 77 public universities across seven U.S. states, Sherwin and Jennings (2006) determined that 40% did not address sexual orientation as a diversity topic. Even those programs that did address LGB issues tended to abandon the focus when it came to clinical and field experiences. In a small-scale study of 208 pre-service teachers at three universities in the northwest, only 25% of respondents indicated that their teacher education instructors addressed or included LGB issues in course curricula (Baldwin, 2002).

As previously mentioned, regardless of whether teachers are supportive of LGB youth or not, the benefits of such support will be minimal unless LGB students perceive that the support exists. Unfortunately, there is a substantial gap between the support that many teachers say they provide and students' perceptions of teachers' willingness to take action when they are harassed or victimized. A nationwide study of over 3,000 secondary students and over 1,000 secondary teachers commissioned by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) revealed this gap (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). Among the teachers surveyed, 73% strongly agreed that they have an obligation to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for LGB youth, and 89% reported that they would feel comfortable intervening if they heard homophobic remarks. However, only 69% said that they frequently intervened when they heard homophobic remarks. In

stark contrast, less than 40% of the student participants indicated that teachers frequently intervened when they were present to hear such remarks. It is unclear whether this discrepancy is due to an overestimation by teachers, an underestimation by students, or a combination of the two. Regardless, LGB students tended not to report harassment to their teachers, and 23% of those who did not report said it was because they didn't think the teachers would do anything to help (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). By comparison, only 9% of non-LGB students indicated not thinking the teacher would help as the reason for not reporting harassment. Perhaps these students had good reason to predict a lack of assistance. Of the LGB students who did report harassment to a teacher, only 4% said that the problem was resolved (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). In a Canadian study of secondary school teachers, participants cited a variety of external barriers to intervention, including a lack of support from administrators, a lack of formal education on the issue, inconsistent responses from colleagues, fear of parental backlash, and concern about a negative community response (Meyer, 2008).

### **A Missing Piece of the Puzzle**

An increase in research over the past few decades has provided key insights into the experiences of LGB students. Support from teachers is critical to the development of all adolescents. Unfortunately, LGB students do not believe they receive adequate support from teachers, and the negative consequences are profound. LGB students experience higher levels of harassment and bullying than their heterosexual peers. They are also more likely to attempt suicide, run away from home, and engage in numerous health risk behaviors. Teachers recognize that they need to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for all students, and the majority of teachers believe they are doing

so. How can such a drastic discrepancy exist? What actions could teachers take to indicate to LGB students that they are supportive? What behaviors do teachers exhibit that signal, perhaps unintentionally, to LGB students that they are not supportive? The present study aimed to provide answers to these questions so that the gap in understanding between teachers and LGB students can begin to close.

## **Chapter 3 – Research Design and Methodology**

In order to answer the primary research question, “How do teachers support the social-emotional well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students from the perspective of those students?” I utilized a retrospective, exploratory research design. The methodology contained major aspects of grounded theory, specifically the emergent design described by Creswell (2008). Using participant interviews and a process of constant comparative analysis of emergent themes, I produced a theory to describe LGB students’ perceptions of how teachers support their social-emotional well-being. As the data collection process progressed, additional questions emerged. One related question became immensely apparent: What do teachers do or say that indicate to LGB students that they may or may not be supportive? The theory I produced about teacher support for LGB students includes a response to this related question.

### **Study Participants**

Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were at the center of this study. Participants were obtained through the use of snowball and network sampling. Creswell (2008) defines snowball sampling as a form of purposive sampling in which participants are asked to recommend other potential participants. Snowball sampling is a valuable method when seeking participants from minority populations (Swann & Anastas, 2009). Network sampling is a form of snowball sampling in which participants are located through their association with social or other networks, such as the workplace or community organizations (Davis, Gallardo, & Lachlan, 2010).

I began the snowball sampling method with two individuals who were personal acquaintances. Unfortunately, this did not lead to any additional participants. Thus, the

snowball sampling method was not effective.

In addition to this method, I also attempted to recruit participants through three LGB-specific organizations. The primary organization for network sampling was SMYAL (Supporting and Mentoring Youth Advocates and Leaders), a Washington, D.C.-based organization that serves LGBTQ youth ages 13-21. I selected this organization because I am personally acquainted with a member of SMYAL's Board of Directors. While I was able to communicate my research design and recruitment needs to the Executive Director of SMYAL, who allowed me to post participant recruitment flyers within the organization's building, I was not successful in recruiting participants through this avenue. I encountered problems with the timing of my recruitment attempts. Flyers were posted during the summer months, which is the slowest time of the year for that organization because they do not run their usual quantity of programs. In the latter part of the summer, the Executive Director left SMYAL, and a new Executive Director was hired. This created a gap in the flow of communication that was challenging to overcome.

In an effort to increase the diversity of the sample, I also sought participants from other LGB-focused organizations, including the following: Common Roads, the youth program (ages 14-22) of the LGBT Center of Central PA, with locations in Harrisburg, Carlisle, and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and The Frederick Center, an LGBTQ organization in Frederick, MD. Despite multiple efforts to communicate with the leadership of these organizations, my emails and calls were not returned. Thus, I was unable to conduct network sampling at any of the three LGB-focused organizations I had targeted.

Because neither sampling method was fruitful, I revised my recruitment plan. I

shifted to a new network in that I advertised to the student body at a small university in Western Maryland. I recruited participants at this university by posting flyers in campus buildings and sending a mass email to the student email list. This was a successful method of recruitment as I obtained 17 participants who were affiliated with the university network. With these 17 in addition to the two I obtained through personal acquaintances, I had 19 total participants in this study.

Focusing primarily on the network sampling method, I continued to recruit participants until I reached the point of saturation. Creswell (2008) defines saturation as “the point where you have identified the major themes and no new information can add to your themes or to the detail for existing themes” (p. 257). Following data collection from the nineteenth participant, I determined that the point of theoretical saturation had been met. This determination was supported at the conclusion of the data analysis process.

In addition to self-identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, participants were also required to have started high school no earlier than 2006. According to Martin and D’Augelli (2009), “Knowing what we do about cultural and historical developments in the LGBT communities, and about developmental theory, it is conceptually critical to also determine the meaningful age range that should be included in any given study” (p. 200). Martin and D’Augelli (2009) note, for example, that the experiences and perspectives of gay men are very different depending on whether they lived through the AIDS crisis of the early 1980’s.

The decision to restrict the current sample to individuals who started high school no earlier than 2006 was based on the need to limit such cohort effects in the present study. Students who began high school in 2006 would not have graduated prior to 2010,

assuming a typical 4-year high school arrangement. This restriction to the sample allowed me to capture a particular group of LGB individuals who attended high school during a period of positive change in the United States for the LGB community (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011). The phrase “Class of 2010” was avoided so as not to indicate that participants must be high school graduates.

Finally, participants were required to be at least 18 years old at the time of their participation in the study. This ensured that parental consent was not necessary for participation. Requiring parental consent to study LGB youth could have placed those youth at significant risk if they had not previously disclosed their sexual orientation to their families (Murdock & Bolch, 2005).

Individuals who learned of the study and were interested in participating were asked to contact me via telephone or email. Prior to establishing a plan for interviewing the potential participant, I requested information from each individual regarding sexual identity, age, and the year they began high school. Any individual who did not meet all three criteria were thanked for their interest and denied participation in the study. Thus, all 19 participants met the participation criteria.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

**Methods.** I collected data by conducting interviews of study participants. After confirming that interested individuals met all participation criteria, I worked with each participant to determine a date, time, and place for the interview. I allowed participants to select whether they preferred a face-to-face interview or use of video conferencing software, such as Skype or Face Time. Video conferencing is an acceptable form of interviewing that is useful when geographic location makes participants otherwise

inaccessible (Birks & Mills, 2011).

All participants elected to engage in face-to-face interviews. The two initial interviews were conducted at the home of a mutual friend. The 17 participants I obtained through network sampling met with me at various private locations on the university campus.

At the beginning of each session, I provided the participant with an overview of the study and allowed time for any questions to be answered. I then reviewed and asked the participant to sign the informed consent form. A copy of the informed consent form can be found in Appendix A. I asked each participant to provide an alias that would be used in future correspondence and all files and reports related to the study. I recorded the chosen alias at the top of the informed consent form, and this was the only location where a participant's real name and alias were linked. I locked these forms in a file cabinet in my locked office at Frostburg State University.

I used a digital recorder to record the interviews in order to transcribe them at a later time. During the interviews, I also took notes on participants' responses. These notes provided an additional data source as I completed data analysis. Birks and Mills (2011) suggest that a combination of field notes and interview transcriptions provide a rich data set for analysis.

**Instrumentation.** Interviews of participants consisted of a series of open-ended questions with relevant clarifying and elaborating probes (Creswell, 2008). Interview questions and sub-questions were developed to allow a semi-structured exploration of the participants' school experiences as LGB individuals and the support they received from teachers. The questions led to the primary research question: How do teachers support the

social-emotional well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students from the perspective of those students? The interview protocol is presented in Appendix B.

I anticipated that each interview would take no longer than one hour. The longest interview lasted 43 minutes, while the shortest interview lasted 22 minutes. On average, interviews were 35 minutes in length. Although I informed participants that they could stop the interview temporarily or permanently at any time, none of the participants did so.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Following data collection, I transcribed all interviews and uploaded the transcripts as well as my interview notes to QSR International's NVivo 10 software. I utilized a series of coding strategies to analyze the data. The coding strategies were carefully selected. However, the series of strategies used does not fit neatly into any specific methodological category. It is for this reason that I chose to label this a descriptive, exploratory study.

**Roots in grounded theory.** Because my goal in this research was to develop a theory from the collected data, I used the essential methods of data analysis in grounded theory studies as a template for my own analysis procedures. Grounded theory as a qualitative methodology provided an appropriate foundation for my work. According to Birks and Mills (2011), grounded theory is suitable when there is an absence of knowledge about the topic, the intent of the study is to generate a theory that will explain a phenomenon, and "an inherent process is imbedded in the research situation that is likely to be explicated by grounded theory methods" (p. 16).

The decision to veer away from the coding methods prescribed by traditional grounded theorists was based on a few primary factors. First, the initial struggle to recruit

participants as well as the short timeframe for completing the study combined to make it challenging to perform the concurrent data collection and analysis that is a cornerstone of grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). The final 17 interviews were conducted over a span of 30 days.

Second, the first three coding methods involved in grounded theory studies (in vivo, process, and initial) are very appropriate when there is very little known about the topic (Saldana, 2013). While the lack of knowledge about this topic is evident, the interview protocol, and therefore the data collected, was driven to some extent by the findings in GLSEN's National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2014). Thus, general codes were determined prior to the start of analysis, which led to the decision to utilize other coding methods.

Finally, on the advice of Saldana (2013), I selected appropriate coding methods on the basis of my purpose and goals for the research rather than aligning myself with a strict procedure dictated by traditional grounded theorists. Creswell (2008) refers to this as an emergent design within the broader grounded theory category. In fact, if one ignores the labels attached to certain coding methods and views them instead in terms of their function, it will become clear that grounded theory is at the heart of this study.

**Codes, categories, and themes.** In order to develop a model that would answer the primary research question, I analyzed the data using a process of constant comparative analysis. Creswell (2008) describes constant comparison as a data analysis procedure in which codes are compared to other codes, codes are compared to categories, and categories are compared to other categories.

Before analyzing the data contained within the interview transcripts, I completed

attribute coding to create a matrix of demographic characteristics across the sample. Saldana (2013) indicates that attribute coding is used to note basic descriptive information about data sets so that interrelationships can later be explored. I coded all participants for the following attributes: gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, school type (public, Catholic, or secular private), school location (urban, suburban, or rural), and whether or not the school had a gay-straight alliance (GSA) or similar club.

Two of the participant descriptors were scaled. Therefore, I also minimally utilized magnitude coding in order to add to the pool of information about each participant. The two codes generated from this process were the participant's overall school experience (positive, mostly positive, mixed, mostly negative, or negative) and the number of supportive teachers the participant recalled within the school (none, one through five, or six or more). Again, these codes provided an opportunity for an analysis of interrelationships later in the process.

One of the primary exploratory coding methods described by Saldana (2013) is provisional coding. He notes that provisional coding “begins with a ‘start list’ of researcher-generated codes based on what preparatory investigation suggests might appear in the data before they are analyzed” (p. 141). Based on information from the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2014) as well as the participant response themes I anticipated due to my interview protocol, I established five provisional codes before analyzing the data: teacher support, teacher non-support, negative experiences, searching for clues, and other sources of support. As I noted in an early analytic memo, I was not particularly satisfied with these provisional codes. While coding the data, I noticed several cases of overlap, in which a single statement from a

participant could reasonably be coded in more than one way. In other cases, data did not fit well into any code, but it still seemed valuable. I decided to code such data as appropriately as possible rather than adding more codes. This allowed me to maintain an initial list of only five codes, which Creswell (2008) refers to as lean coding. The purpose was to start with those broad codes before expanding to 25 to 30 codes in a subsequent coding cycle.

Upon completion of these preliminary coding methods, I conducted an expanded provisional coding analysis. This resulted in the development of 26 new codes. I used the data from the provisional coding process to analyze the data according to the 26 expanded codes. However, I decided not to nest these new codes within the five provisional codes because I wanted to avoid a viral coding structure. This occurs when the same sub-codes are repeated in more than one code (Jackson, 2014).

One aspect that emerged during data analysis was the presence of a variety of values, attitudes, and beliefs among participants. Suspicious that this may provide additional insights, I decided to go back to the data sources and conduct a values coding analysis. Saldana (2013) notes that values coding is appropriate in studies that explore interpersonal participant experiences. I constructed the codes during the analysis, resulting in 10 value codes, four attitude codes, and 28 belief codes.

At this point in the analysis, I collected the multitude of codes and organized them using the code mapping strategy. Saldana (2013) describes code mapping as a useful analysis tool for organizing the full list of codes into three or four categories, and then further condensing those categories into central themes. This process resulted in the emergence of the core category of teacher support and the additional category of teacher

non-support.

One of the hallmarks of the grounded theory approach is the use of axial coding during data analysis (Saldana, 2013). While other coding strategies prescribed by traditional grounded theorists would not have worked well with the present study, axial coding provided an avenue for reassembling the data into meaningful categories around the core category of teacher support. It was this segment of the analytic cycle that provided the categories and sub-categories that ultimately produced a model of teacher support for LGB students.

In order to fully understand the data and the relationships among codes, categories, and concepts, I took advantage of several query tools in QSR International's NVivo 10 software. Basic text search and word frequency queries allowed me to see patterns in the data from a broad perspective. I also conducted several matrix coding queries to explore the data at a deeper level. Matrix coding queries allowed me to examine relationships between codes, especially by cross-tabulating codes within the core category and related categories, and their corresponding sub-categories, as they intersected with various participant attributes. For example, I was able to explore whether certain types of teacher support varied for participants who attended rural, suburban, or urban schools. The use of queries at various points throughout constant comparison provided depth to the data analysis. The result of this was the development of a detailed model of support that answers the primary research question.

### **Risks and Threats to Validity and Reliability**

McMillan (2008) describes reliability in qualitative research as "the extent to which what is recorded as data is what actually occurred in the setting that was studied,

as well as whether interpretations and conclusions are accurate” (p. 297). Reliability in this study was enhanced through the process of member checking, whereby participants are asked to check notes, transcripts, and interpretations for accuracy (McMillan, 2008). Specifically, I attempted to contact each participant to ask him or her to review the interview transcript and make corrections to it as they deemed appropriate. I did not receive any requests from the study participants to alter a transcript.

According to Rovai, Baker, and Ponton (2013), member checking is also a useful tool in reducing threats to interpretive validity. Birks and Mills (2011) suggest the use of an audit trail to reduce threats to validity in grounded theory research. An audit trail is a record of research activities, changes in direction, and reasons for decisions made throughout the research process. I maintained a journal throughout the data collection and analysis process. The journal, in addition to the analytic memos recorded within the analysis software, served as a detailed audit trail. This procedure provided greater opportunity for theory triangulation, which is useful in reducing threats to theoretical and internal validity (Rovai et al., 2013).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a self-identified lesbian I had a particular interest in this research topic. This interest was heightened by the fact that my chosen career path involves preparing college students to become teachers. The outcome of this study will likely impact my own professional practices, a reality that could have served as both a motivator and a bias. I acknowledged this potential throughout the study as a reminder to conduct this research both ethically and objectively.

LaSala (2009) argued that qualitative researchers who are “insiders,” members of

the groups or communities being studied, are in a unique position to elicit and understand the importance of participants' perspectives. As a lesbian studying LGB individuals, LaSala suggested that I would have success in gaining participants because potential respondents would trust that I am committed to portraying them accurately and respectfully. The ability to build rapport with participants was particularly beneficial in a grounded theory approach, where the construction of knowledge is a joint effort between the researcher and the participants (Birks & Mills, 2011).

There are also potential biases inherent in being a member of the group that is the focus of the study. I was cautious not to assume that I understood participants' perspectives, which could have limited my ability to further explore their responses or ask meaningful follow-up questions (LaSala, 2009). The fact that I did not self-identify as lesbian while in high school was beneficial because my preconceived ideas of how teachers can support LGB students' social-emotional well-being were minimal.

## **Chapter 4 – Findings**

The primary purpose of this research was to determine how teachers support the social-emotional well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students from the perspective of those students. A total of 19 participants were interviewed. In this chapter, I first describe the attributes of these participants for eight demographics. I then present the findings based on two themes: the core theme of *Teacher Support Strategies* and the related theme of *Teacher Non-support*.

### **Summary of Study Participants**

I conducted interviews with 19 participants in order to reach theoretical saturation in this study. All interviewees met the requirements for participation. During each interview, I collected information about the participant's gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, school type, school location classification, and experience in school. In addition to these attributes, I asked participants to identify the number of supportive teachers they could recall in their schools as well as whether or not the school had a gay-straight alliance or other similar clubs that provided safe spaces for LGB students.

There was a variety of personal attributes among the participants. Fourteen of the participants were female, accounting for 73.7% of the sample. The remaining five participants (26.3%) were male. In terms of race/ethnicity, 13 participants (68.4%) were Caucasian and six participants (31.6%) were African American. The greatest diversity was apparent in the way that participants reported their sexual identity. Eight participants (42.1%) identified as lesbian, five (26.3%) identified as bisexual, three (15.8%) identified as gay, two (10.5%) identified as pansexual, and one (5.3%) identified as asexual. It should be noted that while the individuals who identified as pansexual and asexual did

not technically meet the participant criteria that I initially established (identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual), I decided to include them for two reasons. First, all three participants consider themselves part of the LGB community, and I wanted to honor both their self-identity and their identity within a larger group. Second, I conducted these three interviews with the understanding that they may not become sources of data; however, throughout each of the interviews, I recognized the common themes that had been apparent in the other interviews I had conducted up to that point. A summary of the personal attributes of participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Personal Attributes of Study Participants*

Participant	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Sexual identity
Adam	Male	Caucasian	Bisexual
Anna	Female	Caucasian	Lesbian
Bridget	Female	Caucasian	Bisexual
Chase	Male	Caucasian	Gay
Cooper	Male	Caucasian	Gay
Diamond	Female	African American	Bisexual
Domo	Female	African American	Lesbian
Ezekiel	Male	Caucasian	Bisexual
Hope	Female	Caucasian	Lesbian
Kane	Female	Caucasian	Asexual
Kat	Female	Caucasian	Lesbian
Lucy	Female	African American	Pansexual
María	Female	African American	Lesbian
Nicky	Female	Caucasian	Lesbian
Rena'e	Female	African American	Lesbian
Ryan	Male	Caucasian	Gay
Selena	Female	African American	Bisexual
Tara	Female	Caucasian	Pansexual
Toni	Female	Caucasian	Lesbian

The 19 participants in this study came from differing school backgrounds. Before each interview began, I asked the participant to describe his or her school location as

rural, suburban, or urban. Nearly half of the participants (47.4%, n=9) attended schools in suburban locations. Six participants (31.6%) attended schools in rural locations, and the remaining four participants (21%) attended schools in urban locations.

Participants also reported whether their school was public or private. One participant had a unique experience in that she was homeschooled through eighth grade and attended a private, non-religious high school that was designated for all homeschooled students in her district. Of the remaining participants, 15 (78.9%) attended public schools and three (15.8%) attended private, Catholic schools.

During the interview, participants described their school experience in general terms. I ranked their responses on a five-point scale – positive, mostly positive, mixed, mostly negative, and negative. Four participants (21.05%) described their school experience as positive, while another four participants (21.05%) described their school experience as mostly positive. Three participants (15.8%) expressed mixed feelings about their school experience. Two participants (10.5%) described their school experience as mostly negative, and the remaining six participants (31.6%) described their school experience as negative.

Based on information from GLSEN's National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2014), I was interested in learning about two additional school factors from the study participants. During the interviews, I asked each participant to recall the number of supportive teachers present in their school. Consistent with the GLSEN report, I categorized their responses according to three levels – zero teachers, one to five teachers, and six or more teachers. Only two participants (10.5%) reported having no supportive teachers in their school. Twelve participants (63.2%) reported between one and five

supportive teachers being present in their school. Five participants (26.3%) reported six or more supportive teachers being present in their school, including one participant who said that there was not a single teacher in her school who was not supportive.

The second school factor originating from the GLSEN survey was whether or not the participant attended a school with a gay-straight alliance (GSA) or other similar club. Twelve participants (63.2%) indicated no presence of a GSA or similar club, while seven participants (36.8%) indicated that their school did have a GSA or similar club. As an overview, the school factors related to each participant are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*School Factors for Study Participants*

Participant	Type	Location	School Experience <sup>a</sup>	Number of Supportive Teachers	Presence of GSA
Adam	Catholic	Urban	4	≥6	No
Anna	Public	Suburban	3	1-5	Yes
Bridget	Public	Rural	1	1-5	No
Chase	Public	Rural	1	1-5	No
Cooper	Catholic	Rural	3	≥6	Yes
Diamond	Public	Urban	3	≥6	Yes
Domo	Public	Urban	5	≥6	Yes
Ezekiel	Public	Suburban	5	1-5	No
Hope	Public	Suburban	4	1-5	No
Kane	Public	Urban	4	1-5	Yes
Kat	Public	Rural	1	0	No
Lucy	Public	Suburban	2	1-5	No
María	Catholic	Suburban	5	1-5	No
Nicky	Private <sup>b</sup>	Suburban	1	1-5	No
Rena'e	Public	Rural	4	1-5	No
Ryan	Public	Rural	2	≥6	Yes
Selena	Public	Suburban	1	1-5	No
Tara	Public	Suburban	1	0	Yes
Toni	Public	Suburban	5	1-5	No

<sup>a</sup>School experience is coded in the following manner: 5=Positive; 4=Mostly Positive; 3=Mixed; 2=Mostly Negative; 1=Negative. <sup>b</sup>Private indicates no religious affiliation.

## **Core Theme – Teacher Support Strategies**

The core theme was one that was pre-established based on the primary research question. During the interviews, I asked specific questions to gather information about participants' perceptions of teachers who were supportive and those who were not supportive. I coded their responses and, through the process of code mapping, organized those codes into three sub-themes of teacher support. The three sub-themes include good teaching practices, inclusive practices, and making deeper connections. The codes that were used to determine these sub-themes are both positive and negative. They include instances in which participants described supportive teachers and instances in which they described non-supportive teachers. For example, Chase described teachers who did not respond to students who used homophobic language in class. "They didn't do anything. I think that they just heard them and thought, 'Oh, they're just being kids' or 'Boys will be boys' and so on" (Chase, personal communication, November 18, 2014). This was originally coded as *Teacher Non-support*, but in order to use the data to answer the primary research question, it was coded as *Address Bullying and Harassment* in the expanded coding process. Thus, participants' responses reinforced the development of sub-themes regardless of whether their experiences were positive or negative.

The cyclical process of coding, recoding, code mapping, and analyzing resulted in the emergence of three robust sub-themes that provide insight into how LGB students perceive teacher support. I will now provide a detailed look into each of these sub-themes.

**Good teaching practices.** Following the expanded coding process, codes were organized into three groups using a code mapping strategy. I labeled the first group *Good*

*Teaching Practices*, and it became the first sub-theme under *Teacher Support Strategies*.

Although the participants never referred to these strategies as such, it became clear that several of the codes represented the characteristics one should expect from an effective teacher.

One of the most common references during the interviews was to the importance of teachers addressing bullying and harassment within and beyond the classroom. Sixteen out of the 19 participants discussed this as a supportive action. Some participants shared examples of teachers' supportive reactions to homophobic language and verbal harassment.

- The biology teacher witnessed it once, and she kicked the person out of class.

And that's why I felt comfortable (in her class). (Cooper, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- One teacher really pushed for not saying "gay" as in a negative way. She would kick people out of her class if they ever used it as an insult or something. (Diamond, personal communication, December 10, 2014)
- Everybody was treated the same. There was no bashing of homosexuals or bisexuals allowed in the class. (Domo, personal communication, November 14, 2014)

Although the act of removing students from class seemed to be supportive for these participants, others indicated that this wasn't enough to provide long-term support for them.

- Let's be real. A lot of schools are not exactly great at dealing with bullying.

My school was one of those schools, so it was sort of like a slap on the wrist,

“don’t do this again” kind of thing, rather than taking affirmative, protective action for the people that were getting bullied. (Kane, personal communication, November 20, 2014)

- They went to the principal’s office after her parents came up to the school, but the next day they were still there. So, at the most they probably got detention or something, but nobody... you sit in a room for a half hour, and then they let you go home. (Lucy, personal communication, November 19, 2014)
- They just, you know, slap on the wrist. That was it. “Don’t do that.” And that was done. And, of course, did that stop them? Not really. It just kept going. (Kat, personal communication, August 17, 2014)
- Just sending a student out of the room doesn’t really do anything, because I used to get sent out of the room all the time. I used to just walk around and do nothing. It wouldn’t be this severe consequence. (Rena’e, personal communication, November 20, 2014)

A greater number of participants expressed this support strategy by describing ways in which their teachers failed to address bullying and harassment.

- There were teachers who saw things happen and just didn’t do anything. Like if two guys got into a fight over a honey bun, they’d be like, “Okay, break it up, break it up.” But they see this girl on the floor while people are stomping on her and things like that, and they’re just standing there watching. (Lucy, personal communication, November 19, 2014)
- The teachers seemed more apathetic than anything. They didn’t really care. I felt like I was unsafe, and they didn’t do much more than say “stop” if I tried

getting the teacher's attention. I would raise my hand, and sometimes the teacher would tell me to put my hand back down because they would say they knew I was just going to complain about being bullied, and they didn't want to hear that. (Ryan, personal communication, December 9, 2014)

- It was mostly the student body itself because they were constantly making homophobic jokes or those sort of things, and the teachers really didn't do anything about it. (Nicky, personal communication, November 13, 2014)
- When I cut my hair, I came to school the next day, and [a male classmate] stood up on a chair in the middle of class and yelled, "Why don't you just tell everyone you're a lesbian?" And the teacher did nothing. The teacher just sat there and ignored it, and then like 20 minutes later, he did it again. And I looked at my teacher and was like, "Really? Are you not...do you not see this?" So he was like, "Okay, calm down, sit down, don't say anything." But that was it! (Toni, personal communication, December 12, 2014)

It became clear that addressing bullying and harassment was a support strategy at the most basic level. Doing so adequately helped the participants feel safe in the presence of that teacher. Teachers who failed to act when bullying and harassment occurred left the participants feeling frustrated, insecure, and isolated.

In addition to addressing bullying and harassment, several participants also described ways in which teachers showed that they were caring, kind, or nonjudgmental, which added to their feelings of safety and security. Most spoke fondly of a particular teacher who provided them with this basic level of support.

- Whenever I went to her, she would make it better. She would talk it out. She

said, "Well, what's the problem?" It was just a safe zone. (Bridget, personal communication, December 11, 2014)

- Just checking up on somebody meant a lot to me at that point. She actually showed she cared. She was like, "Oh, are you still dating that girl?" She knew names. She remembered people's names. She just acted like she cared. (Lucy, personal communication, November 19, 2014)
- One of our teachers, after I told her that I had the talking to [from the principal], broke down in tears and was like, "Oh, you deserve so much better." (Cooper, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- They listened. They really took the time to...it doesn't matter what it was...if I was having an issue, they really took the time to see where I was coming from and offer me perspectives from every viewpoint. They always encouraged me, offered me help. They listened. They were understanding, so that's why I talked to those teachers in particular. (Toni, personal communication, December 12, 2014)

While most participants were able to describe a teacher in their school who was caring or kind, some also expressed problems with teachers who they perceived to be judgmental. As they shared these anecdotes, some participants appeared agitated or even angry.

- Throwing their opinion in my face wasn't cool. I mean, everybody is entitled to have an opinion, but you don't have to...It would have been nice if they were cool about prom, too, 'cause if you didn't want to get judgment stares, then you brought the opposite gender with you. (María, personal communication, December 9, 2014)

- If you walked down the hallway holding hands with someone, whether you were dating them or not, and they were the same sex as you, you would get the most crappy looks from teachers. (Tara, personal communication, August 17, 2014)
- It was mainly just the stares. It was in between classes, the teachers had to stand at their doors and just kinda observe everything. They would just be staring. (Lucy, personal communication, November 19, 2014)
- Well, teachers see so many students, so none of them have really cared to say, “Hey, are you okay today?” They were kind of standoffish. You can feel when somebody’s not comfortable around you. Dirty looks...they just give dirty looks. (Rena’e, personal communication, November 20, 2014)
- Several of the physical education teachers, they would make homophobic remarks constantly. They would say things. Some of these things were targeted at me. People who were assigned male at birth and acted effeminately, they would call “fag,” and this was a teacher that I’m supposed to look to for safety. (Ryan, personal communication, December 9, 2014)

The two support strategies that were most common at this level were addressing bullying and harassment and being caring, kind, or nonjudgmental. Five additional strategies in this sub-theme also emerged to a lesser degree. One particular trend was that teachers were considered supportive when they held all students to the same standards. Participants also noted being intuitive, bringing appropriate humor into the classroom, making a clear promise about confidentiality, and encouraging student participation and group work. A summary of all support strategies in this sub-theme is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Strategies Related to Sub-theme 1: Good Teaching Practices*

Support Strategy	Summary
Address bullying and harassment	Whether it is verbal or physical, teachers act to stop bullying, harassment, and homophobic language. Sending students out of the classroom may provide immediate relief, but teachers must take steps to ensure that these behaviors do not continue.
Be caring, kind, or nonjudgmental	Teachers show that they care about students. They listen and offer words of encouragement. They avoid judging students for their real or perceived sexual orientation. They indicate that they are nonjudgmental in both their words and their body language.
Hold all students to the same standards	Teachers apply the same rules to all students. If, for example, there is no school rule against students holding hands in the hallways, they do not prevent same-sex couples from doing so.
Show intuition	Teachers recognize when students are having personal, familial, or social problems. They notice signs of distress in students and let students know they are available to assist if needed.
Bring humor to the classroom	Teachers who use appropriate humor in the classroom create a more welcoming atmosphere and encourage students to engage in the lesson.
Promise confidentiality	When students know that a teacher is serious about confidentiality, they are more likely to seek assistance from them. Teachers can show students they are supportive by outwardly stating that all personal information will remain confidential.
Encourage student participation and group work	Teachers demonstrate support when they encourage students to participate in class discussions by voicing their own opinions. They also use groups to encourage students to work together.

**Inclusive practices.** The second set of codes to materialize during code mapping related to teaching practices that would be considered inclusive. Some codes indicated inclusiveness of LGB students, while others highlighted strategies that were generally inclusive of all students. I labeled this set of codes *Inclusive Practices*, and it became the second sub-theme under *Teacher Support Strategies*.

The most commonly discussed strategy in this sub-theme related to teachers being open-minded or accepting. Many participants recalled the process of determining whether

teachers were going to be supportive of them as LGB students based on whether they seemed open-minded or accepting of all people in general. When teachers portrayed open-mindedness and acceptance, participants felt more comfortable talking to them about their sexual identity and other personal issues.

- So, they were really accepting of everybody, and they were really great, so we always just went to them. (María, personal communication, December 9, 2014)
- She just seemed like a really open-minded person in general, based on how she talked and what she talked about whenever she wasn't on the lesson of the day. I can't give examples that were word-for-word, but just comparing how what she said in general to my parents, it just sort of, I felt like the conversation bubble around my parents was more like this closed end. Whenever she talked it just sort of opened. (Kane, personal communication, November 20, 2014)
- She always made her classroom feel welcoming, and a lot of the content that she taught, which was about the struggles, past and present, of the black community. She seemed very empowered about that, and she seemed very receptive to other groups' struggles as well. So, I felt like I could confide that in her, and it was a good choice. (Ryan, personal communication, December 9, 2014)
- A lot of my teachers were open and stuff like that. I can think of three or four that, if I were in a situation where I wanted to talk to an adult and it couldn't be my parents or anything, I'd probably turn to them. (Ezekiel, personal

communication, November 21, 2014)

- [The teachers were] generally accepting of everybody, honestly. And they wouldn't let other people bother people or say negative things about anybody or anything. So, they were normally just generally positive about everybody.

(Diamond, personal communication, December 10, 2014)

One participant described purposely testing her teachers to determine if they would be supportive. She and her friends surmised that if teachers were open-minded or accepting in general, there was a greater chance those teachers would support them as LGB students.

A lot of what my friends and I did was we would ask them about less controversial topics just, again, testing the waters to see if it's gonna be safe or not. We would get together and think of questions to ask a specific teacher. We were very organized about it. Like, "Why don't you ask this teacher something about this and see what they say. See if you can get them to actually listen to what you're saying and to consider what you're saying." (Nicky, personal communication, November 13, 2014)

When I asked participants to tell me what teachers could have done to better support them, some offered very specific advice for teachers to be more open-minded and accepting.

- So, I think you should be open-minded. Teachers should be ready for every student. You shouldn't become a teacher if you only want particular types of students. (Selena, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- So, honestly, what teachers could do better is to, like, try to be open-minded a

little bit. (Kat, personal communication, August 17, 2014)

- I think the biggest thing anybody can have, regardless of their position, their walk, anywhere they are in life, is just to be open...and accepting of things that are different than yourself. (Ezekiel, personal communication, November 21, 2014)

According to participants, teachers could also show support by allowing and encouraging students to express themselves. One participant described a teacher who demonstrated this quality.

He is very supportive of everything really, so he tries to push kids to be who they are rather than be somebody that you're not and not to be afraid to speak out. And he's got the charismatic spark that just says, "Be who you are; don't try to impress others. Don't worry about the others that are making fun of you; it won't matter in the end." (Kat, personal communication, August 17, 2014)

Another participant described with a tone of resentment an experience with a teacher in which her gay male friend was forced to suppress his pride and gender expression.

My one friend would wear...we were the Rams, so he'd wear a purple and gold sash with Rams and then gay pride buttons, 'cause it was like a spirit day. And our teachers made him go change, 'cause she was like, "You can't wear that stuff at our school. It's pride in our school, not gay pride day." Some days [he] wanted to wear a kilt, but it was like a skirt. Teachers just...I don't think they...some of them, I think, don't like when kids express themselves. In high school you're very expressive. I wish it wouldn't have been a big deal if someone wants to wear a rainbow or be flamboyant. That kind of behavior was kind of stamped out, and I

don't think that's right. (Bridget, personal communication, December 11, 2014)

There were four additional codes that were organized into the *Inclusive Practices* sub-theme. These four were more specifically focused on the LGB community. Nearly half of the participants mentioned the importance of teachers knowing LGB terms and definitions. Some implied teachers lack proper preparation.

- I really wish that high school teachers could just be given a little packet that explains LGBT definitions, just a big vocabulary list so they understand what we're going through and what we are. (Bridget, personal communication, December 11, 2014)
- I felt like a lot of times teachers felt uncomfortable talking about the subject, just because I guess either they didn't want to talk about it or they weren't educated enough on the topic. So, they kinda danced around it and would try to quickly change the subject. I guess, just since it's about like 10% of the population, just like any other minority group, just actually be educated on it, know basic definitions. (Cooper, personal communication, November 18, 2014)

Others described cases of teachers sharing inaccurate information, often in the classroom setting with other students and usually without ill intent.

Well, I would tell them that they should get their facts straight, 'cause I do remember there was one instance in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade where our biology teacher heard a gay slur from the back of the room, and she told us that it's wrong to do that. But what she said is that it's their choice, and it's not a choice. So that's one thing they could do is brush up on their facts and know that it's not a choice, it's

inherent. (Chase, personal communication, November 18, 2014)

Participants indicated that by not being knowledgeable about LGB terms and issues, teachers may have been accepting of them, but they couldn't support them effectively, especially in terms of reducing the negativity from other students. One participant described a school experience that was incredibly positive. She could not think of a single teacher who was not supportive. She highlighted the fact that teachers not only understood LGB terms and issues, but they helped other students understand as well. This led her to think of school as a safe and supportive environment.

We had some teachers who were highly offended by the ignorance of heterosexual students that would come and be like, "Oh, no, gay is not right." We actually had discussions about it. My 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, particularly my English class, we had a heated debate about it because we had some male students that were just like, "I'm too straight to do this." And the teacher was just like, "Really, now?" The teachers pretty much got rid of all those rumors or bad thoughts of what was wrong with my community of people. So, it made me feel very safe.

(Domo, personal communication, November 14, 2014)

Participants also communicated that teachers were supportive when they had an inclusive curriculum, described friendships or other relationships with LGB individuals, and avoided heteronormative assumptions and comments. A summary of all support strategies in this sub-theme is shown in Table 4.

Table 4

*Strategies Related to Sub-theme 2: Inclusive Practices*

Support Strategy	Summary
Portray open-mindedness and general acceptance	Teachers who are open-minded and generally accepting of others and their differences send a message to LGB students that they accept those students as they are.
Allow and encourage students to express themselves	Teachers who allow students to express themselves indicate to all students that their opinions matter. When students feel that their values and beliefs are being suppressed, they do not sense that the teacher accepts them as they are.
Understand LGB terms and issues	Teachers indicate support when they demonstrate knowledge of LGB terms and issues. When they transfer this knowledge to students, they further support LGB students by working to overcome stereotypes and inaccurate information.
Deliver an inclusive curriculum	Teachers demonstrate support when they incorporate LGB issues into the curriculum. Inclusion may be direct (e.g., discussing the possibility and implications of a “gay gene” during a genetics unit in biology) or indirect (e.g., allowing students to explore LGB topics in their writing assignments).
Describe friendships or other relationships with LGB individuals	When teachers share with students that they have a friend or family member who identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, it not only signals support to LGB students, but it also implies an approachability that may not otherwise be apparent.
Avoid heteronormative assumptions and comments	When teachers assume that everyone is heteronormative, they suggest to LGB students that their identity is not valued. Supportive teachers think about the implications of their statements before they speak to ensure that their comments and questions are not heteronormative.

**Making deeper connections.** The third and final sub-theme of *Teacher Support Strategies* elaborates on the ways that teachers make deeper connections with LGB students. There was a consistent trend among participants who described teachers they turned to for support in school. These teachers were the ones with whom participants felt a deep connection.

In some cases, this connection was described as a natural process that occurred

after being around the teacher for a long period of time.

- The art teachers that I came out to, I had them for more than one year, so I got to know them better than the others [that I only had for one year]. (Chase, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- And, you know, when you're in rehearsals for hours on end, you start to be able to connect with people. (Bridget, personal communication, December 11, 2014)

In other cases, the connections seemed to occur because the teachers made an effort to get to know students on a more personal level.

- I think some of it kind of extended beyond just the orientation itself. It was more of like...more, I guess, personal in a way. I don't know. The teacher kind of got to know you a little bit better and didn't just see you as an LGBT being. They were just the kind of teachers that you have that really seemed to take an interest, and not just in your academics. They take an interest in what you do outside of it. (Hope, personal communication, November 19, 2014)
- We talked about it for a while. We talked about it in the journal, and she pulled me out of class a couple times just so we could talk and get to know each other and stuff. (Diamond, personal communication, December 10, 2014)
- She just more or less got on a certain level with me that I was more comfortable with her than anybody else in the school. Like when I was missing school for certain reasons and stuff like that, she was always the one I would explain it to. She always knew of my struggles. She was very helpful

for me and probably is the only reason I actually stayed going to school.

(Tara, personal communication, August 17, 2014)

A few participants revealed that they had made such positive connections with teachers that school felt like home to them. When I asked Hope what teachers could have done to provide better support, she said that they could have made the environment safer. I asked her to describe what a safe environment would look like, and she paused for several seconds before replying. “I’m trying to think of my high school band director and his office and stuff, because that was where...that was pretty much home. So, I mean, I don’t know...a place where [students] feel that it’s like their second home” (Hope, personal communication, November 19, 2014).

Domo, the participant who could not name a single teacher who was not supportive, described her school with tremendous affection.

It was a home away from home. We were really close, like a really personal school pretty much. Literally, the school was family to me. As we got to our junior and senior year, it was obvious that [the teachers] cared for us like we were their children. They pretty much nurtured us into the college students that we are today. They cared for our well-being way past graduation of high school. I still communicate with my teachers from high school now. (Domo, personal communication, November 14, 2014)

For some participants, a deeper connection was felt when teachers provided them with an escape or safe haven. One scenario that was repeated by three different participants involved teachers allowing LGB students to eat lunch in the security of their own classrooms. The teachers’ classrooms served as an escape from the negative peer

interactions they experienced in the cafeteria.

- We would literally escape to the theater room and eat with our teacher, because sometimes being in lunch was terrible. We could go there and eat lunch and just be us, and we didn't have to worry about being bullied by anyone. We could go to her room, and she would just let us eat. We could eat in quiet; we could do our homework. I mean, it was just better that way.

(Bridget, personal communication, December 11, 2014)

- One teacher was extremely nice, and he let me and my friends come and sit in his room during lunch period, just hanging out in his room. He was perfectly fine with whatever we did as long as we didn't damage anything. He was cool with us just hanging out there. (Diamond, personal communication, December 10, 2014)
- Actually, my art teacher, she would let us eat lunch in her classroom. One of the girls in the group, she had her class after lunch period, and she would always...she said she was eating snacks in her class. And then finally the teacher was like, "Did you eat at lunch?" And she said, "No, it's kind of hard for me to eat at my lunch," 'cause sometimes she wouldn't be able to get her food or they wouldn't really serve her or somebody would knock her food off the table. So, she was like, "Does this happen to a lot of your friends?" And she said, "Yeah, I'm guessing so." She was like, "If your friends want to eat here at lunch, that's fine." So, then she let us know, and we just kind of started going there. (Lucy, personal communication, November 19, 2014)

In Domo's case, the safe haven provided by teachers extended beyond the walls

of the school building.

If the students were having issues at home because they had come out, they allowed them to stay at their houses until the family understood what was going on enough to not, like, physically or verbally abuse them. ‘Cause we had some students that went through periods in which they were, like, homeless because they came out, and [teachers were] just like, “No, we don’t accept this.” (Domo, personal communication, November 14, 2014)

By connecting to participants on a personal level, whether it was within or beyond class time, these teachers provided a level of support that exceeded their typical classroom duties. Participants revealed two additional strategies that teachers used or could have used to express their desire to make those deeper connections. One of these methods was to place safe zone stickers in or outside of their classrooms. Many participants indicated that this is a clear signal that LGB students are welcome to approach the teacher to discuss personal matters.

- My English teacher also had this safe zone thing on her file cabinet, and that was definitely a big thing for me ‘cause I was like, if I ever have an issue, I know I can go and talk to her. So, I think if more teachers had made visible signs without having to say it, I would have felt more comfortable because I would have known that I had people to go to. (Anna, personal communication, November 14, 2014)
- I was able to get safe space stickers from GLSEN, and I asked teachers I had, teachers my friends had who they said might be supportive. And I just asked, “Will you hang this up outside of your classroom?” And I was able to get

about 10 teachers to do that. (Ryan, personal communication, December 9, 2014)

- I like the little Ally postcards we have [at college], so if they had something like that at my high school, that would have been beneficial I'm sure. (Kane, personal communication, November 20, 2014)
- Maybe put a sign...they have the little bulletin boards in the classroom, so they could put, "This is a safe space," like that little thing on it. I mean, saying it's a safe space doesn't necessarily...it doesn't have to have a rainbow and everything. It could just say that. (Selena, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- I guess the [safe zone] sticker thing is a good thing, especially for somebody who is confused and doesn't really know where to turn for that. They don't think they can talk to their parents, and they don't think they can talk to their friends. Just knowing that there's kinda like a...I want to say like an advertisement for that exact purpose nearby. Honestly, just having resources available for people...teachers that are willing to talk. (Ezekiel, personal communication, November 21, 2014)

One support structure that was mentioned by many participants was a gay-straight alliance (GSA) or a similar student organization. Although these will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, it is important to note that teachers' participation in GSA activities was described as an additional method of showing support. By assisting in some way with a school's GSA or similar club, teachers signaled to LGB students that they were interested in making deeper connections. Participants described a variety of

ways that teachers support GSAs and similar clubs.

- A lot of [teachers] helped with Co-Exist, which was our GSA. They helped write letters. They helped work our programs. They were really helpful and talked during those meetings about their past experiences. (Cooper, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- There was a lot of support, to the point that [the teachers] developed a group known as GSA at my school. (Domo, personal communication, November 14, 2014)
- There was one teacher...every few weeks or so [he] would give us something that we could use, like materials to make posters. Or [he] would give us flyers that we could give out from GLSEN. [He] would just give us things that we could use without actually taking part and helping us by attending meetings or mentioning it to their students in class. (Ryan, personal communication, December 9, 2014)
- The librarian offered up her room for our [meetings]. She would bring us movies that she would rent from other libraries for us to watch that dealt with different kind of gay, lesbian scenarios and stuff like that. (Tara, personal communication, August 17, 2014)

Teachers who make an effort to get to know students on a deeper level provide meaningful support to LGB students. A summary of the strategies teachers use to make deeper connections is shown in Table 5.

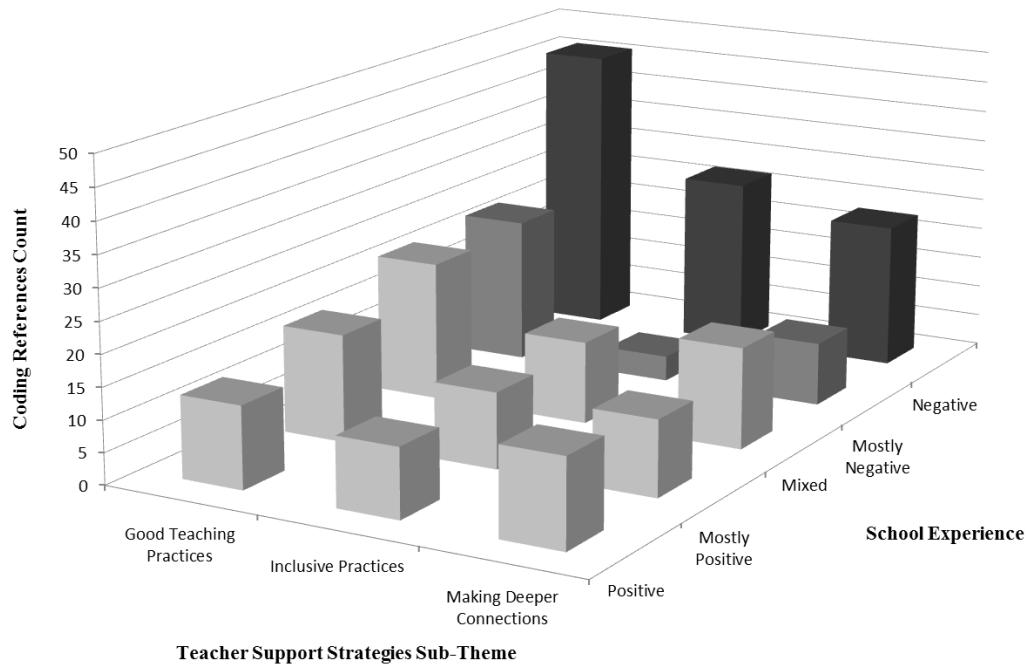
Table 5

*Strategies Related to Sub-theme 3: Making Deeper Connections*

Support Strategy	Summary
Get to know students as individuals	LGB students feel a deeper connection with teachers when they see the students as individuals who are more than just a sexual identity. Teachers provide support by showing interest in students' lives beyond academics. This often transpires as a student spends more time in a teacher's presence, but it can also occur when the teacher strives to make a personal connection.
Make school feel like a home	Teachers who make the classroom or school feel like home provide profound support to LGB students. They can do this in a variety of ways that are somewhat dependent on the needs of each individual student. General methods include being nurturing, treating students as equals, and checking in with students who may be struggling with personal or familial issues.
Provide an escape or safe haven	Teachers can support students on a deeper level when they provide an environment that is safe from the negativity they otherwise experience. This can be as simple as offering a place to talk openly or as significant as opening their homes to LGB students who have been rejected by their parents.
Display a safe zone sticker	Teachers signal to LGB students that they are willing to provide support when they post safe zone stickers on their doors or inside their classrooms. LGB students believe that teachers who advertise their support in this way are likely to speak to them on a personal level.
Assist LGB-specific student organizations	Teachers can provide assistance to students' gay-straight alliance (GSA) or similar clubs in a variety of ways, such as serving as club advisor, offering space for meetings, or providing materials for posters or events. Assisting a GSA indicates that a teacher desires to connect to and support LGB students on a deeper level.

**Differences among participants based on attributes.** The *Teacher Support Strategies* sub-themes were analyzed relative to participant attributes. While there were no differences among participants based on most attributes, one particular trend became apparent. A matrix coding query compared the number of coding references for each sub-theme by participants' reported school experience (positive, mostly positive, mixed, mostly negative, and negative). Because this matrix provided frequency data and the

number of participants at each value of school experience varied, a comparison between and among those value groups offered no meaningful information. However, it was noted that participants who indicated positive, mostly positive, or mixed school experiences discussed the three sub-themes, or support levels, in relatively even amounts. Participants who reported mostly negative and negative school experiences, on the other hand, focused their responses on *Good Teaching Practices* at a much higher frequency than the other two sub-themes. This trend is highlighted in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Coding references count for each *Teacher Support Strategy* sub-theme based on the participants' reported school experience. Counts are relatively level across sub-themes for positive, mostly positive, and mixed school experiences. As school experience becomes more negative, there is a stronger emphasis on *Good Teaching Practices*.

### **Related Theme – Teacher Non-support**

The theme of teacher non-support evolved during the coding and analysis cycle. When I began the provisional coding process, I noted all instances in which participants

described ways that teachers did not support them. Eventually, however, most of these codes were used to build the sub-themes under *Teacher Support Strategies*. For example, Chase described teachers who did not respond to students who used homophobic language in class. “They didn’t do anything. I think that they just heard them and thought, ‘Oh, they’re just being kids’ or ‘Boys will be boys’ and so on” (Chase, personal communication, November 18, 2014). This was originally coded as *Teacher Non-support*, but in order to use the data to answer the primary research question, it was coded as *Address Bullying and Harassment* in the expanded coding process. Thus, participants’ responses reinforced the development of *Teacher Support Strategies* sub-themes regardless of whether their experiences were positive or negative.

Because the data originally coded as *Teacher Non-support* primarily shifted to the core theme, I was prepared to abandon the teacher non-support code altogether. During the process of values coding, a new trend emerged that indicated *Teacher Non-support* was a substantial theme related to the core theme of *Teacher Support Strategies*. Specifically, participants revealed a multitude of beliefs about teacher characteristics that might indicate a teacher is not supportive.

**Common beliefs.** The most noticeable trend was that participants believed religion, or being a religious person, equated negativity towards LGB individuals. Nearly half of the participants seemed to hold this belief, including all three who had attended Catholic school and six who had attended a public or other secular school.

Some participants described teachers and others in the school community who were not supportive for obvious religious reasons.

- Whenever I heard them speak about gay people, they would be like, “It’s

against my religion.” They would go off and criticize, even if it had nothing to do with the class. (Selena, public school, personal communication, November 18, 2014)

- My school was a private, Catholic school, so the majority of teachers, except for those in the theater department, were mainly very homophobic. My religion teachers would constantly tell us that gay marriage is wrong and being gay is wrong and all that stuff. (María, Catholic school, personal communication, December 9, 2014)
- I went to the counselor in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when I was like, “I’m not really sure what I’m doing,” and she pulls out her Bible. And she’s like, “Well, have you gone to church?” And I’m like, “Yeah, I’ve gone to church.” And she’s like, “Well, you know, the Lord can help you.” So, I was like, “I thought this was a school.” (Lucy, public school, personal communication, November 19, 2014)
- They would always throw Bible verses at you to tell you why you shouldn’t do something. They were like, “This is what the Bible says; you can’t do this.” (Nicky, private secular school, personal communication, November 13, 2014)

In other instances, participants made assumptions about the relationship between religion and support of LGB students that did not seem to have a basis in any particular negative event.

- There was one teacher in particular [who was not supportive], but the only reason I can pinpoint was because I knew she was very Christian. (Hope, public school, personal communication, November 19, 2014)

- It was a very conservative, Christian environment. (Nicky, private secular school, describing why she believed there were no supportive teachers in her school, personal communication, November 13, 2014)
- I also had teachers who were almost scary religious. I had this one friend whose father was a pastor, and he and [another male student] had been a thing for a little bit, but he could never tell his father because he was a pastor. When you get religion in high schools, things get muddied, and people...there's almost this stigma that if you're religious, you hate homosexuals, and if you're homosexual, you're not Christian. Especially in my school, we've always struggled with the religion and the gay community. (Bridget, public school, personal communication, December 11, 2014)

Adam described the difference between teachers in his public middle school and teachers in his Catholic high school. His statement exemplifies what many participants believed about religion and what that meant about a teacher's desire to be supportive.

[The middle school] teachers never brought up religion because in public schools you can't really do that. So, I would say, yeah, I felt more comfortable with the teachers there, talking about it, but it may just be because they never talked about religion. (Adam, personal communication, November 24, 2014)

The second most common trend was that participants felt teachers' attitudes toward LGB individuals was largely tied to their political leanings. If teachers were labeled as conservative or Republican, they were not likely to be supportive. If they were labeled as liberal or Democrat, however, there was a much greater chance that they would be supportive. Domo summed this up when she recalled one of her initial attempts at

determining whether a particular teacher was supportive. “I couldn’t even tell. Like, in the class she’s very neutral, so I can’t really explain it. She’s not very Republican, but she’s not very Republican or Democrat. She’s just there” (Domo, personal communication, November 14, 2014).

Based on the responses from some participants, they felt a bit more successful in using political beliefs as a measuring stick.

- You see, my school is...a lot of the people in my school were rather conservative, and I was worried about who I told because they might’ve had a less than pleasant reaction. (Chase, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- They’re better than a lot of the horror stories you hear, but at the same time, they’re still quite conservative. (Kane, personal communication, November 20, 2014)
- The majority of the area are Republicans, conservative Republicans. (Anna, describing why teachers who outwardly support LGB students are likely to be fired, personal communication, November 14, 2014)
- But it was still a really conservative town, so as far as verbal bullying, that did go on. (Hope, personal communication, November 19, 2014)
- And also they had conservative views on other things. They were very pro-life. They actually made us watch a video of this little fetus getting aborted. (Nicky, describing why she didn’t believe teachers in her school would have been supportive if she had come out to them, personal communication, November 13, 2014)

One other commonly held belief among participants was that a teacher who is older is not likely to be supportive. One participant also used the term *old-fashioned* to describe non-supportive teachers. Most participants were quite direct in stating this belief.

- People from older generations tend to not be as open-minded. (Selena, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- In my opinion, homophobia has been passed down, like it's a very old idea. So, in my opinion, it can be stronger in older people. (Adam, personal communication, November 24, 2014)
- I think a lot of it's just a generational thing. The older people probably have a greater chance [of not being supportive], but the older, stuffy, Catholic people have a very great chance. (Cooper, personal communication, November 18, 2014)
- Well, there's a few teachers at the high school that are obviously old-fashioned, so they have different views than most, and they don't look at that very well. (Kat, personal communication, August 17, 2014)

In summary, participants indicated specific characteristics that they commonly used to determine whether a teacher would be supportive of them as LGB students. The characteristics they primarily associated with someone who was not supportive included being religious, having conservative political views (often labeled as Republican), and being older or old-fashioned.

In addition to beliefs that acted as signals, participants also indicated beliefs that explained why they assumed teachers were not supportive unless proven otherwise. One

trend that emerged was the belief that teachers in general don't seem to have time to be bothered by their students' personal issues.

- Well, teachers see so many students, so none of them have really cared to, "Hey, are you okay today?" I've only met a few teachers who actually do that. (Rena'e, personal communication, November 20, 2014)
- My schools just weren't very into their kids, I guess. Like elementary, middle, and high school...all the teachers just seemed very short-tempered and very impatient with kids, always. (Tara, personal communication, August 17, 2014)
- More just about school...talking to me about school...and "I have emails to get to, so stay on point." It didn't seem like they wanted to have the time to get into that sort of thing. (Kane, personal communication, November 20, 2014)
- We were all just sent to the guidance counselor. At every point, every time something happened, you're just sent to the guidance counselor. But why don't you, as a teacher, just talk to this person, instead of being like, "Oh, I'll just send you to the guidance counselor." (Bridget, personal communication, December 11, 2014)
- I think teachers are more distant, in my opinion. I've never had a teacher I could talk to like that. (Adam, personal communication, November 24, 2014)

Some students seemed to believe that seeking support from teachers would be too risky for various reasons. A few were worried that a teacher may change their grades.

- No one wants to take the risks that a teacher's gonna mess up their grade or something. (María, personal communication, December 9, 2014)

- What if it changes the perspective? What if they decide to change my grade or something? You don't know how people can be really. (Selena, personal communication, November 18, 2014)

There were also concerns that a teacher could harass them for being LGB without facing any consequences.

- 'Cause they know we really can't talk back to them, 'cause in the end, they're the teacher, and they get to do whatever they want. (María, personal communication, December 9, 2014)
- I think that's why, because if [the counselor] would have told someone, I could do something about it, more than with a teacher. (Adam, explaining that he felt more comfortable approaching a counselor because of his understanding of confidentiality requirements, personal communication, November 24, 2014)

A few participants, including Kat, believed that reporting bullying or harassment to a teacher would be fruitless, regardless of whether that teacher was supportive or not. "They didn't want to take it to a teacher because that brings on more bullying because you get the other kids in trouble" (Kat, personal communication, August 17, 2014).

Collectively, the common beliefs held by participants about teachers' willingness to support them supplied the data for an emergent and related theme. The possible relationships between this theme and the core theme of *Teacher Support Strategies* will be explored further in chapter five.

**Differences among participants based on attributes.** The *Teacher Non-support* theme was analyzed relative to participant attributes. There appeared to be no differences

across the values for any attribute. Participants discussed their beliefs about non-supportive teachers at similar rates regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, or school type or location classification. Likewise, no differences emerged based on school experience, the number of supportive teachers present, or the presence or absence of a GSA.

### **Summary of Findings**

The primary purpose of this research was to determine how teachers support the social-emotional well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students from the perspective of those students. In order to reach theoretical saturation in the study, I interviewed 19 participants who met the selection criteria. Three personal attributes were noted for each participant, including gender (14 females, five males), race/ethnicity (13 Caucasian, six African American), and sexual identity (eight lesbian, five bisexual, three gay, two pansexual, one asexual). Five additional attributes pertaining to the participants' schools were also recorded, including school type (15 public, three Catholic, one private/secular), school location (six rural, nine suburban, four urban), school experience (four positive, four mostly positive, three mixed, two mostly negative, six negative), number of supportive teachers (five with six or more, 12 with one to five, two with none), and presence or absence of a GSA or similar club (seven GSA present, 12 GSA absent).

During data collection, coding, and analysis, three themes emerged. The core theme focused on teacher support strategies. Three sub-themes developed within this core theme, including good teaching practices, inclusive practices, and making deeper connections. Participants provided numerous examples of the ways in which teachers support LGB students for each of the sub-themes. A matrix coding query revealed a trend

in the frequency with which participants discussed the sub-themes. Specifically, while participants who reported positive, mostly positive, or mixed school experiences discussed the three sub-themes in relatively equal amounts, participants who reported more negative school experiences tended to focus their responses on teacher support through good teaching practices.

In addition to the core theme, one related theme was extracted from the data. This related theme included common beliefs held by participants about teachers who were not, or may not have been, supportive. The characteristics they primarily associated with someone who was not supportive included being religious, having conservative political views (often labeled as Republican), and being older or old-fashioned. Participants also felt that teachers tend to act like they don't have time for students. There was a fear among some participants that coming out to teachers may have adverse side effects, such as teachers changing grades or harassing them. There were no noticeable differences for this related theme across all participant attributes.

These findings support the primary focus of this study, which was to determine how teachers support the social-emotional well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students from the perspective of those students. In the next chapter, I merge the core theme and the related theme with the current literature in the field to explain a model of support that may be used to better understand teacher support for LGB students.

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Implications**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the ways that teachers support LGB students from the perspective of those students. In order to gain a better understanding of this understudied phenomenon, I conducted interviews with 19 participants who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The interviews provided a rich data source to answer the research question as well as additional questions that emerged during data collection and analysis. Results of the data collection and analysis processes were presented in the previous chapter.

The goal of this research was to develop a theory about teacher support for LGB students that is grounded in the data. I will now present a model of teacher support for LGB students that is not only grounded in the data from this study but is also reinforced by prior research and theory. Following the description of this model, I will discuss its potential impact on teacher training and propose additional areas for future study.

### **Conclusions**

An abundance of research over the past decade and a half has demonstrated that LGB students are at greater risk than their non-LGB peers for numerous negative outcomes. LGB students are more likely to experience negative school climates (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2014). Not only do LGB students face greater health risks (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2014), but they are also at greater risk academically (Clarke, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Russell et al., 2001).

If these trends are to change, much of the responsibility for leading that change begins with teachers. Unfortunately, there is a large gap between the support that teachers

believe they provide to LGB students and the perception of teacher support from those same students (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). The themes that emerged in the present study may serve as a model for closing that gap. A visual representation of the full support model is presented in Figure 2.

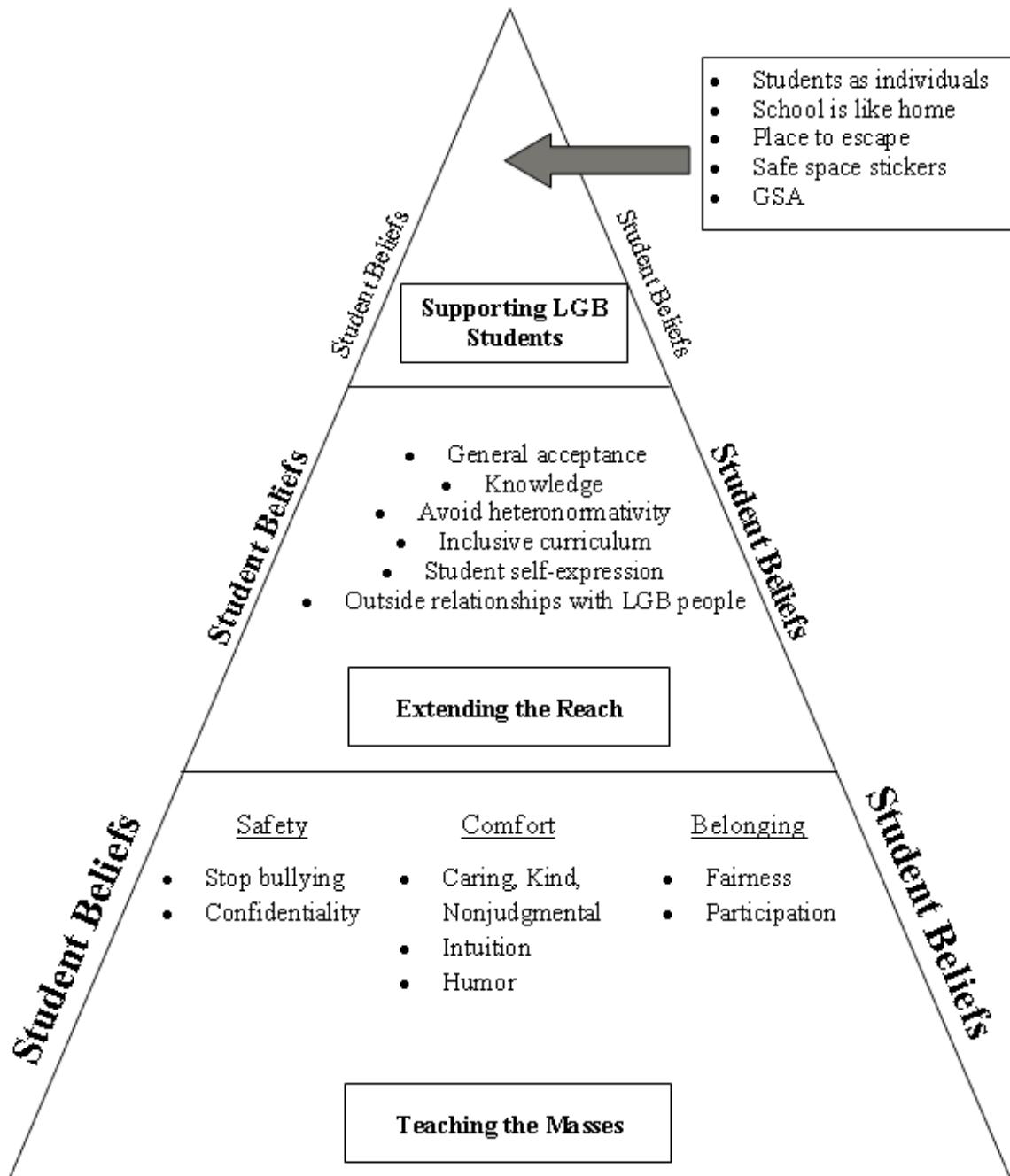


Figure 2. Model of teacher support for LGB students.

**A three-tiered model of support.** The core theme to emerge from the data in this study was *Teacher Support*. Data in this theme were organized into three sub-themes, including *Good Teaching Practices*, *Inclusive Practices*, and *Making Deeper Connections*. One related themes also appeared in the data. The related theme was *Teacher Non-support*, and it included common beliefs among participants about teachers who are likely to not be supportive.

The primary emphasis of the support model is the three-tiered support system in which each tier directly corresponds to one of the *Teacher Support* sub-themes. The theory behind the three tiers is grounded in the current research as well as prior research and theory. Taken together, the three tiers are at the heart of the support model.

At the foundation of the triangle in Figure 2 is a set of strategies that constituted the first sub-theme, *Good Teaching Practices*, of the core theme, *Teacher Support*. Strategies in this sub-theme included addressing bullying and harassment; promising confidentiality; being caring, kind, and nonjudgmental; showing intuition; bringing humor to the classroom; holding all students to the same standards; and encouraging student participation and group work. These strategies can be further divided into three categories: those that promote safety, those that provide comfort, and those that increase one's sense of belonging.

As a model for teacher support, the strategies at the foundation of the model are essential for learning and success for all students, regardless of their sexual identity. Maslow (1943) theorized that before a person can be motivated to learn, he or she must first have four lower levels of needs met. These included physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, and esteem needs. These areas of need can be found

within the foundational tier of the support model. According to Maslow's theory, by utilizing the strategies in the lowest section of the support model, teachers will be able to effectively support a large majority of their students. Thus, this level of the model has been labeled *Teaching the Masses*.

The strategies for teaching the masses are supported by prior research. They align well with students' preferred teacher characteristics of communication, friendliness, and patience (Drobot & Roșu, 2012). Encouraging student participation and using group work are teacher behaviors that contribute to improvements in students' subjective well-being, a wellness construct relating to a person's feelings of happiness and satisfaction with life (Suldo et al., 2009). Fairness, which can be demonstrated by holding all students accountable to the same rules and standards, and showing concern about a student's well-being are also major contributors to a positive subjective well-being (Suldo et al., 2009).

The practices and strategies at the foundational level of the support model are beneficial to all students, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. However, the support needs of LGB students differ from those of their non-LGB peers (Clarke, 2012). For many LGB students, support at the lowest level does not seem to be enough. The difference between teacher support for the general student population and teacher support for LGB students lies between *Teaching the Masses* and the next level of support.

At the middle level of the support model are strategies that were considered *Inclusive Practices*, the second sub-theme of *Teacher Support*. Strategies in this sub-theme included portraying open-mindedness and general acceptance; understanding LGB terms and issues; allowing and encouraging students to express themselves; avoiding

heteronormative assumptions and comments; delivering an inclusive curriculum; and describing friendships or other relationships with LGB individuals.

While some of these strategies, such as encouraging self-expression and portraying open-mindedness and general acceptance, are factors that promote a more positive subjective well-being for all students (Suldo et al., 2009), others are specific to the LGB population. When teachers go beyond the foundational level of support and utilize these inclusive strategies, they offer greater support to LGB students. For this reason, the second level of support in the model is labeled *Extending the Reach*.

Two significant processes occur when teachers implement strategies that extend their reach. First, by being open to individual differences and encouraging students to express those differences, teachers send a signal to LGB students that the classroom is a welcoming place for all students, including those whose sexual identity is in the minority. This gives LGB students more self-confidence and increases the likelihood that they will feel comfortable being themselves in the teacher's presence.

Employing strategies at the second level of the model also provides students with appraisal support. House (1981) theorized that appraisal support comes in the form of positive feedback and affirmation. When teachers include LGB topics in the curriculum or show an understanding of LGB issues, this can serve as affirmation for LGB students who may otherwise feel as though they live in the shadows of a heteronormative society.

Ryan and Deci (2000) indicated that the three psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are necessary for an individual to seek his full potential. Acknowledging students' perspectives and experiences can help to create student autonomy (Reeve & Jang, 2006). When teachers allow students to express themselves

and avoid heteronormative language, they support LGB students' autonomy by outwardly recognizing and appreciating the students' individuality.

For many LGB students, having teachers who utilize second level support strategies is sufficient for positive outcomes. For others, an additional level of support is necessary. The top tier of the model in Figure 2 includes strategies that correspond to the third sub-theme of *Teacher Support. Making Deeper Connections* strategies included getting to know students as individuals; making school feel like home; providing an escape or safe haven; displaying a safe zone sticker; and assisting with LGB-specific student organizations.

The highest level of the support model represents the truly effective practices for providing social-emotional support to LGB students. Thus, it is labeled *Supporting LGB Students*. Teachers who provide support at this level are engaging in practices with the specific goal of meeting the needs of LGB students. Suldo and colleagues (2009) determined that connecting with students on an emotional level is one of the strongest contributors to a positive subjective well-being. For LGB students, this type of connection appears to be even more valuable. As teachers work to build these deeper relationships with an LGB student, they begin to see the student as an individual whose sexual identity is just one part of a complete and complex being. Such connections between teacher and student can provide support that goes far beyond the classroom in both location and time.

One important aspect of the teacher support model for LGB students is that it is a true hierarchy. Strategies at the higher levels are only effective if those at the lower levels are also being used. If, for example, a teacher displays a safe zone sticker (a top-level

strategy) but does not address homophobic harassment in the classroom (a foundational strategy), LGB students are not likely to feel supported. LGB students are, first and foremost, individuals. They need to feel safe. They need to experience comfort and a sense of belonging. For some, identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual does not impact their support needs. For others, however, teachers must go beyond teaching the masses. They must extend their reach and provide specific support to LGB students.

**The impact of students' belief systems.** The focus of this study was teacher support for LGB students. One way to examine participants' perspectives was to ask them about teachers who were not supportive. This provided substantial data that helped the three-tiered model of support to evolve, but it also gave rise to an additional feature of that model.

A major theme to emerge from the research was the commonly held beliefs among LGB individuals regarding what indicates a teacher is not likely to be supportive. Many participants reported, for example, that being religious, having conservative political views, and being older were all characteristics of a teacher who would not have supported LGB students. These beliefs did not appear to be based on any factual information, but rather were a reflection of the participants' own biases and stereotypes.

The model of teacher support for LGB students in Figure 2 includes the phrase "student beliefs" along both side edges of the triangle. This is representative of the fact that what students believe about certain teacher characteristics can act as a barrier to support. Thus, a teacher may use strategies within the model of support, but LGB students who have strong beliefs about the influence of a teacher's religion, age, or political affiliation are not as likely to recognize those support strategies.

Although teachers may not bear the responsibility of combating LGB students' belief systems, they should recognize that these beliefs do commonly exist. It is understandable that the participants in this study would associate religion and conservative politics with negativity toward LGB individuals. Most participants mentioned that they were high school students when the debate about marriage equality became popular among religious leaders and politicians alike. It is important to note, however, that as a teacher moves up the hierarchy of the three-tiered support model, the phrase "student beliefs" gets smaller. This represents the notion that the more teachers do to specifically support LGB students, the easier it becomes to overcome this barrier.

## **Implications**

From its inception, the goal of this study has been to produce a theory or model to explain teacher support for LGB students. The expectation is that such a theory or model will be the first step toward improving teacher training so that teachers are more prepared to support their LGB students. If teachers are effectively trained to support the needs of LGB students, there is a greater chance that those students will receive more social-emotional support. If past and current trends continue, an increase in the number of supportive teachers will lead to improved psychological, social, and academic outcomes for LGB students (Kosciw et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2012).

**The impact on teacher training.** Preparation programs for pre-service teachers are severely lacking in the area of LGB support strategies. Many teacher preparation programs fail to address the issue of sexual orientation, and those that do tend to neglect the topic when it comes to field and clinical experiences (Baldwin, 2002; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006).

Some in-service teachers do receive professional development workshops on working with LGB students. However, the focus of these programs tends to be on changing attitudes and increasing knowledge rather than presenting specific support strategies (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Hopkins Shah, 2001; Szalacha, 2004; Watson, 2012). In some instances, individual strategies are discussed, with attention given to responding to bullying and, to a lesser degree, delivering an inclusive curriculum (Hopkins Shah, 2001; Szalacha, 2004). Despite the presence of a number of professional development programs that address LGB issues, the methods used to evaluate their effectiveness is questionable (Greytak et al., 2013; Wilson, 1998).

The model of teacher support for LGB students presented in Figure 2 can impact training programs for both pre-service and in-service teachers. The model provides key insights into the ways that teachers can support LGB students at three progressive levels. Furthermore, the strategies included in the model are grounded in data from the perspectives of LGB students themselves. By employing the strategies in the model, not only will teachers be supportive of LGB students, but those students are more likely to actually perceive the teachers as supportive. It is that perception of support that is the key to closing the gap between teachers' views and LGB students' views on the presence of teacher support (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005).

**Limitations of the study and the need for additional research.** As with any research endeavor, this study had its share of limitations. Those limitations, in addition to further questions that emerged throughout the study, indicate a strong need for future research on this issue.

Despite efforts to recruit a diverse group of participants, there was one particular

voice that was absent from this study. The sample did not include a single African American male. Blackburn and McCready (2009) noted the unique nature of the experiences of LGB students of color, especially those attending schools in urban settings. The lack of the African American male perspective in the present study poses a threat to the generalizability of the teacher support model.

A second limitation of the study also relates to problems with participant recruitment. All 19 participants were high school graduates. Past research indicates that LGB students who face negative school climates tend to miss school more often, have lower grades, and are less likely to aspire to attend college (Clarke, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2013; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; J. P. Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell et al., 2001). By not capturing the perceptions of LGB individuals who did not graduate from high school, the present study is limited in scope. Again, this may pose a threat to the generalizability of the teacher support model.

Although this study focused on support from teachers, the topic of principals and other administrators surfaced frequently during participant interviews. Several participants gave the impression that they believed administrators were not to be trusted. In some cases, support for LGB students from their teachers was stifled by the actions of principals and vice principals. Further research on administrators and their role in supporting LGB students is needed. According to anecdotal data in this study, it may not matter whether teachers intend to be supportive of LGB students if their efforts are not backed by the school's administrators. In fact, Meyer (2008) determined that lack of support from administrators was one of the primary reasons teachers fail to intervene in homophobic bullying and harassment. As the key leaders of the school, administrators

must exhibit attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with those of supportive teachers.

Finally, there is a substantial need for research of this nature to be conducted with transgender individuals. While the climate in the United States has improved for the LGB population, those whose gender identity does not fall within society's version of a normal gender binary suffer ongoing victimization. This is especially true of transgender youth (Kosciw et al., 2014). It is possible that a similar study on transgender students would produce comparable results. However, the difference between sexual identity and gender identity, and the manifestation of each in a school setting, warrants additional research.

## **Summary**

Using a retrospective, exploratory approach with foundations in grounded theory research, I examined the ways in which teachers support LGB students from the perspective of those students. I collected data from semi-structured interviews with individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The interviews provided a rich data set for analysis. I used the findings from this study as well as prior research and theory to develop a model of teacher support for LGB students.

The three-tiered teacher support model consists of several strategies that teachers use to provide social-emotional support to LGB students. At the foundational level of the model, strategies are organized into three primary categories: those that promote safety, those that provide comfort, and those that increase one's sense of belonging. Teachers who utilize these strategies provide support to the majority of students. For this reason, the lowest support level is termed *Teaching the Masses*.

Unfortunately, even if teachers successfully employ strategies at this level, many LGB students do not receive adequate social-emotional support. In order to meet the

unique needs of LGB students, teachers must operate at the middle level of the support model. Strategies at this level signal to students that the teacher is supportive, which makes the environment more welcoming and comfortable. Mid-level strategies also provide appraisal support by affirming LGB students' identity and enhancing their autonomy. This level of the support model is referred to as *Extending the Reach*.

In order to provide the greatest amount of support to LGB students, teachers can engage in practices that exist at the highest level of the support model. These practices allow teachers to connect with students on a deeper level, which can have long-lasting, positive effects on students' social-emotional state. Strategies at the highest level of the support model are labeled *Supporting LGB Students*.

In addition to the three-tiered hierarchy, the model includes a related theory. This related theory is that the belief systems of LGB students can often act as barriers to teacher support. This occurs when LGB students' beliefs about characteristics, such as religion, politics, and age, cause them to determine a teacher is not supportive without having evidence to support such a claim. These beliefs are often based on the students' own stereotypes and biases, but they become less of a barrier as a teacher progresses upward on the support hierarchy.

The model of teacher support for LGB students, grounded in data from the present study and strengthened by past research and theory, provides a much-needed step toward improving teacher training. The model has implications for the way in which training is conducted for pre-service teachers in teacher preparation programs as well as for in-service teachers through professional development programs. Leaders who wish to better prepare teachers to support LGB students are advised to consider the support model in

determining what information to present to current and future teachers.

The topic of teacher support for LGB students remains one that is understudied. Due to limitations of the present study, future research should be done to include the voice of African American males as well as LGB individuals who did not complete high school. Additional research is also advised on the role of administrators in the support process. As this study focused only on LGB individuals, future studies might address the support needs of the transgender student population.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which teachers support LGB students from the perspective of those students. The model of teacher support for LGB students presented has effectively met this objective.

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## **Appendix A – Informed Consent Form**

### **Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Project Title:** A Retrospective Exploration of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students' Perceptions of Teacher Support

**Purpose and Description of the Study:** My name is Nicole Bosley, and I am a Doctoral Student in Educational Leadership at Frostburg State University. I am inviting you to participate in this research project. The purpose of the project is to explore the perceptions of individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual about the ways that teachers supported (or could have supported) their social-emotional well-being when they were in K-12 school.

**Procedures:** You are being asked to participate in a one-on-one interview that may take up to one hour. The interview has some questions that were predetermined, but others may arise based on the responses you provide. Questions will focus on your experiences in school, particularly as an individual who identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The focus of my study is on whether you felt safe and supported at your school and what made you feel that way. Specifically, I am looking at the ways in which your teachers did or did not show support for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in your school.

**Participant Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this research, although you may enjoy knowing that you have helped future LGB students in K-12 schools. The information you provide will be added to the information provided by other participants, and the results may contribute to improvements in teacher support for future LGB students.

**Participant Risks:** There is a possibility that you may feel upset or emotionally distressed about answering some of the questions in the interview. You do not have to answer any question that you feel uncomfortable answering. If you would like to take a break, please let me know at any time. We can resume the interview when you feel ready or you may choose to end the interview completely. Skipping questions and stopping the interview, either temporarily or permanently, will have no consequences for you. If you would like me to refer you to counseling services, I can provide you with contact information. I also want to be sure you are aware that some states do not have comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, which means that you would not be protected from discrimination in things like employment and housing if your sexual orientation becomes known. I will do everything in my power to keep your participation in this study confidential. If you are not legally protected against discrimination, you may want to keep it confidential as well.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:** Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate, you can stop the interview at any time. There will be no penalty for choosing not to participate or for withdrawing from the study.

**Confidentiality:** All individual information collected in this study will remain confidential. All electronic data, including the digital recording and transcription of the interview, will be stored in a password-protected folder on my personal home computer, which is also password-protected. Information that is on paper, such as the hard copy of this signed document and your contact information, will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office. I will be the only person with access to all data related to this research project. Before we begin the interview, we will decide on an alias for you that will be used during note taking, in transcripts, through data analysis, and within all reports. I will record the alias on this form, and this document will be the only thing linking your alias to your real identity. Your real name will only appear on this form, which I will securely store in a locked file cabinet in my home office, and in any emails we send to each other, which I will print and store with this form. I will delete digital copies of our emails..

In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, I will disclose to the appropriate individuals and/or authorities information that comes to my attention concerning (past or present) child abuse or neglect or potential harm to you or others. The law requires me to report anything you tell me about child abuse or neglect, and I would have to give your personal information. I want you to know this in advance so that you can decide for yourself if you want such information reported to the authorities.

**Contact Information:** If you have questions about this research project, please contact:

Nicole Bosley  
Frostburg State University  
262 Cordts PE Center  
101 Braddock Road  
Frostburg, MD 21532  
301-687-4469  
[nlbosley@frostburg.edu](mailto:nlbosley@frostburg.edu)

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Frostburg State University. For research-related problems or questions regarding participants' rights, contact the IRB through the Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 301-687-3101.

**Statement of Informed Consent:** I confirm that I am at least 18 years of age. I have read and understood the explanation provided to me and have been given a copy of this consent form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

---

I agree/consent to participate. (Signature)

---

(Date)

---

(Please PRINT name here.)

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(Signature of Principal Investigator)

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(Date)

## **Appendix B – Interview Protocol**

Research Project: A Retrospective Exploration of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students' Perceptions of Teacher Support

Data and Time of Interview:

Place (or video conferencing software):

Participant (alias):

[Read to participant: *Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of my research is to explore the perceptions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals about the ways that teachers provided support to them in school. This interview should take no longer than one hour. I will ask you a series of questions that will give me a better understanding of your own experiences in school. The information you share will remain confidential. I will not reveal your name anywhere. To protect your anonymity, we will agree on an alias for you. I will also attempt to contact you after transcribing the interview to allow you to read the transcript and correct any inaccuracies. If you do not want to answer any question, feel free to ask me to move on. If you would like to take a break from the interview at any time, you may do so, and we will resume when you are ready to so. If you would like to completely discontinue the interview at any time, you may do so as well. Skipping questions and discontinuing the interview either temporarily or permanently will result in no penalty to you. I do need to let you know that I am required by law to report anything you tell me about child abuse or neglect. I want you to know this in advance so you can decide for yourself if you want to reveal such information.*]

[Ask participant to read and sign the consent form. Collect the consent form. Provide the participant with an additional copy of the consent form for his or her records. If the interview is conducted via video conferencing software, the participant will be emailed a copy of the consent form that must be electronically signed and returned prior to the start of the interview. Ensure that this has been done.]

[Discuss an alias with the participant. Agree upon an alias and record that name on the informed consent form as well as at the top of this document.]

[Turn on the audio recorder.]

Questions and Sub-questions (Probes):

1. How do you define your sexual identity?
  - 1.1. What does that identity mean to you?

- 1.2. At what age did you self-identify as \_\_\_\_\_? (Grade in school?)
2. What was your school experience like as a \_\_\_\_\_ individual?
  - 2.1. To whom, if anyone, were you “out”?
  - 2.2. Was your school safe for LGB students?
    - 2.2.1. Do you remember any instances of homophobic harassment or bullying at your school? If so, what happened? How did it affect you? Were there consequences for the harasser/bully?
    - 2.2.2. Were there any “safe spaces” at your school, such as a gay-straight alliance (GSA) or similar organizations? Did you participate in them?
  - 2.3. Were teachers at your school supportive of LGB students?
    - 2.3.1. How many teachers do you believe were supportive? Can you recall one? Two?
    - 2.3.2. Thinking of a supportive teacher, what did that teacher do that gave you the impression he/she was supportive of LGB students? How did you know that he/she was supportive or what made you think that?
    - 2.3.3. Thinking of a teacher that was not supportive, what did that teacher do that gave you the impression he/she was not supportive of LGB students?
  - 2.4. Thinking back on your high school experience as a \_\_\_\_\_ individual, what do you wish teachers would have done better or differently to support your social-emotional well-being? [Ensure a common definition of social-emotional well-being – *feelings of happiness, contentedness, and confidence.*]

[Read to participant: *Thank you for your participation today. I appreciate your cooperation and willingness to assist me in this research study. Remember that confidentiality is of utmost importance to me. The alias we decided on will be used from this point forward, and it will only be linked to your real name and contact information on the informed consent form that you signed earlier. I will keep your informed consent form and contact information in a locked file cabinet. The recording of this interview and the transcription of it will be stored on my computer with double password protection. After I transcribe the interview, I am going to attempt to contact you so that you can read over it and correct any errors on my part. Before we go, I'd like to ask for your help in finding more participants. If you know anyone who might be interested in being interviewed, please give them my business card – provide business cards with my contact information to participant – and encourage them to contact me at their earliest convenience. Remember that I'm looking for participants who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; are at least 18 years old; and did not start high school prior to 2006. If someone isn't sure if they qualify but they are interested, ask them to contact me, and I will determine if they do or not. Thank you again for your time and for sharing your story.]*

[Turn off the recorder.]