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**Hiding in Heteronormative Sight: Students' Concealment of
(Nonhetero)Sexual Identity in Public Schools**

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A Dissertation Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
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Abstract

Increased legal protections and visibility in popular media of sexual minority persons can lead some to believe that sexual prejudice is a thing of the past (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016). However, national statistics still show sexual minority youth at greater risks for self-harming thoughts and attempts than their heteronormative counterparts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, & National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2019); and indicate schools as particularly hostile environments for these youth as well (Kowsic, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). The current study looks to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on the experience of sexual minority persons who concealed their nonheterosexual identity in their K-12 setting. Because this aspect of identity is not readily observable to those outside oneself, the needs and struggles this population faces as they navigate heteronormative school institutions can seem invisible. This population holds a unique position to reflect upon the factors that prompted them to keep that aspect of themselves hidden and insight into what may be beneficial actions for schools to take to create a more inclusive climate, culture, and curriculum for sexual minority students.

Keywords: sexual minority, heteronormative, education, LGBTQ

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Personal Orientation

As I watched the five seasons of Netflix's *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* that originally aired from 2018-2020, I was enthralled with the "complex and dynamic representations" of both supporting and central characters representing "a range of sexualities and genders" (Mantoan, 2020). The portrayal of sexual minority characters in television programming has not been restricted to one incidence, and recent years have shown increases in the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) characters shown on streaming services like Netflix, cable channels like Cartoon Network, and broadcast television networks like the CW and PBS (Townsend, Deerwater, Adams, & Trasandes, 2020). I sometimes wonder how different my life would be if I was growing up today, a time when children could watch shows like *She-Ra*, or watch Mr. Ratburn get married to another male character on PBS' *Arthur*. Off of the television screen, some public libraries have embraced programs like Drag Queen Story Hour, where drag queens read stories to children with the goal of giving them "glamorous, positive, and unabashedly queer role models" (Condren, 2018). Further, students who have internet access today, have more information available in a quick search than a research trip to the library would have provided me when I was their age.

As a child, I recall no examples of sexual minority visibility readily available or easily searchable, much less positive, accepted, or celebrated images. I do remember always feeling different, never fitting in, and being forced to align with gender norms that I did not want to perform. In grade school, frustrated with the role I felt compelled to

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play, I contemplated ways that I could pass myself off as a man when I grew up. Then, when I saw one line in a textbook in middle school defining homosexuality, it challenged everything I thought I knew about the world and my place in it. I went home to share my new learning with my family, because clearly none of them could have known about it since I had never heard any of them mention it before. I never imagined the discomfort and anger it would invoke. Trying to understand their response, I asked what was wrong with it and my father shouted that if any of his children were gay, he hoped they never told him, and stormed out of the room. Whatever this concept was, it was apparently an atrocity and an affront that would best be kept secret if it applied to me.

During the next few years of puberty and moving to high school, I underwent a personal fight to conform to expectations. Driven by what Carvallo and Pelham (2008) refer to as the need to belong, I tried to present myself in a more conventionally feminine way, generally blending in, and refraining from disclosing any same-sex attractions. My junior year I tried dating a couple of boys, and I found I could go through the motions but ultimately being with a male did not feel like the right pairing for me. I decided I should give up the charade, and the second boyfriend became the first person I attempted to let in on my secret. Johnson (2019) reframed the concept of coming out as an idea of letting people in instead. However, my attempt at this was unsuccessful. After I shared my belief that I was gay, he responded that I was not gay because he knew gay people and I did not talk like them. Apparently similar to the roles for males and females, there was also a prescribed way of being gay, and I did not fit in this category either. So, I returned to my silence for another 5 years. The next time I shared the information with anyone I was away at college and on the verge of turning 21. Blackburn (2005) noted that LGBT

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youth experience neglect in schools as “personnel typically ignore the issues of LGBT youth in the academic curriculum and in extracurricular activities” (p. 17). My K-12 schooling years held a similar experience for me. From what I could see, sexual minority visibility and acceptance was absent from my society and the school curriculum offered no help in putting what I was experiencing into any sort of context (Blackburn, 2005).

Feeling so lost through my own education is part of what led me to becoming a school counselor. I thought that I could support students; help them navigate through the systems, the world, life and help them find ways to cope when it seemed like none of those things were set up for them. However, I came to realize that providing individual support without looking at and challenging the systems that are not inclusive of all students can also perpetuate unjust and inequitable systems. Becoming increasingly aware of and distressed by various unjust and inequitable practices toward multiple minority identities I observed occurring within the smaller, more rurally located, schools I was working in, I moved to a larger district closer to a major metropolitan area. At this point in the United States, *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* had been overturned, same-sex marriage was now legal, and for the first time, I was employed in a school that had sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy.

I thought moving to such a district in St. Louis County would be moving to a place that was open and supportive of diverse populations. The district had emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion as part of the comprehensive school improvement plan. Some of the initiatives aligned with providing race-related windows and mirrors (Style, 1996) for the students, including hiring and retaining more teachers of color so students can see themselves reflected in their educators. The elementary school I work in also

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received a grant to buy books for their classroom libraries from EyeSeeMe, a bookstore in St. Louis that specialized in providing children's books featuring positive stories about African-American history and culture.

However, in areas of diversity that may be less externally visible the focus seemed less clear or present (Rosiek, Schmitke, & Heffernan, 2017). In the past few years, I have witnessed a first grade teacher nervous about a student sharing a book with the class that featured two gay rabbits, instances of fourth graders calling each other gay or lesbian, boys pushing other boys into the girls' bathroom in retaliation for this name calling, and elementary lessons presenting limited heteronormative examples of families. In the spring of 2019, during a summative review with my principal, I mentioned that I was thinking about exploring ways to increase sexual minority visibility and inclusion in elementary curriculum and her response was "in ways that aren't explicit," to which I responded "or seeing if it needs to be explicit." The subsequent silence before she began talking about another topic left me wondering if I was going to have a job the following year.

After over three years of working with the district's diversity committee, the areas of focus for initiatives continued to revolve around race. At one meeting where the discussion was on trying to organize support for new teachers of color being hired into the district, I asked if we were going to look at trying to support people of other marginalized groups that may be less visually obvious, like gender or sexuality diverse populations. This question was diverted, with others responding that we should just focus on the race aspect right now. In other meetings, I have been told that bringing up other aspects of identity that may also experience oppression or marginalization waters down

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the conversation about race. My district's narrative, similar to other institutions, appeared to employ a narrow concept of justice and which populations were included, "mainly race, language, and culture. The things liberal folk most easily name as inequitable" (Rosiek, Schmitke, and Heffernan, 2017, p. 10).

The morning of July 12, 2019, I sat in a meeting with a small group of stakeholders discussing issues facing students within our school district. In attendance were a few school administrators, educators, and community members. As I listened to a school board member speak passionately about the needs of our Black students, I was caught off-guard when she interjected that our gay and lesbian students were fine and then continued to detail the struggles our Black students face. For me, this brief acknowledgement and dismissal required further exploration. The flippant remark seemed simultaneously to imply that Black students could not be gay or lesbian and preemptively cut off any conversation related to the conditions faced by students existing outside of the norms assumed by heteronormativity. Thinking back on my own educational history, I imagine that I was probably considered fine from an external viewpoint because I performed well on educational expectations and kept my fear and turmoil internalized.

In the past couple of years, as I have been open about my sexual identity with my coworkers, I have noticed a new dynamic develop. I noticed colleagues coming to me to talk about young relatives they have who they believe are struggling with their sexuality. I recall one instance where they told me that their daughter just needed to come out because no one cared that she was gay. This statement left me wondering what had been done to support this child in her process or if the burden and responsibility was being left

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for her to bear. Thinking about our nonheteronormative students, I wondered if the onus was being left on them as well, or what we were doing within the school system to affirm their existence and offer appropriate support. Based upon my personal experience as a nonheteronormative youth and my subsequent witness of the deprioritization of sexual and gender diversity inclusive curriculum--in stark contrast to other diversity initiatives--this research project aims to fill knowledge gaps on the experiences of sexual minority students who concealed information about their sexual identity in their K-12 educational settings.

Race and Sexuality

Nonheterosexuality is not an identity reserved solely for White people. Quinn and Meiners (2016) found this to be an obvious statement, writing, “of course, not all queers are white or able-bodied or wealthy, so LGBTQ liberation necessarily includes struggles against racism, ableism, and capitalism. These forms of domination are inseparable” (p. 30). Shelton (2017) called out the faulty assumption of Whiteness in her aptly titled article *‘White people are gay, but so are some of my kids’: Examining the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender*. She notes that “LGBTQ topics are often discussed as if Whiteness is a preexisting parameter for queerness” and “stereotypes pair non-White identity with assumed heterosexuality” (p. 114). This dynamic can produce additional struggles for nonheterosexual persons of color.

Shelton (2017) observed that depictions in the media contribute to this narrative as representations of “LGBTQ community consistently feature white celebrities and characters” (p. 114). These stereotypes and depictions may have led to the cognitive pairing of nonheterosexuality and Whiteness among the general heteronormative population that Shelton (2017) referred to. Since 2005 GLAAD, an American non-governmental media monitoring organization founded by LGBTQ people in the media, has been tracking LGBTQ representation on television. From the 2005-06 to the 2019-20 television seasons, the percentage of characters identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer increased from 2 percent to 10 percent for broadcast scripted primetime programming (Townsend, Deerwater, Adams, & Trasandes, 2020). Further, for the 2018-19 and 2019-20 television seasons they found “that LGBTQ people of color outweighed white LGBTQ” characters in broadcast television (Townsend, Deerwater,

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Adams, & Trasandes, 2020, p. 16). While these data showed a quantitative increase in the number of characters, the report noted that:

This puts primetime scripted broadcast series back to where the platform was in the 2015-16 season. That year saw the deaths of many lesbian and bisexual+ women characters – part of the decades-long “Bury Your Gays” trope – and broadcast has been slow to recover in the years since. It is worth pointing out that summer and early fall of 2019 programming has included the death or presumed death of several queer women – including lead character Annalise Keating on the final season of ABC’s *How to Get Away with Murder*. It is critical that these instances prove to be anomalies rather than a resurgence of this dangerous trend. (Townsend, Deerwater, Adams, & Trasandes, 2020, p. 8)

People exist at the intersection of various identities which may include racial and sexual minorities not only in scripted depictions, but in the real world as well.

Sometimes this reality follows the *Bury Your Gays* trope noted above. The June 12, 2016, shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, a popular LGBTQ and Latin club, resulted in the death of “49 mostly queer and Puerto Rican people” and wounding of many more (Ganesh, 2017, p. 194). Between 2017-2019, eighty homicides of trans and gender non-conforming persons occurred in the United States, and “While just 16 percent of the trans population in the U.S. is estimated to be Black, 79 percent of known trans homicide victims were Black” (Human Rights Campaign, 2020).

Current Political Climate

The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a mental illness diagnosis in 1973 (Drescher, 2015). The Immigration Act of 1990 removed the United States “complete ban on homosexuals’ entry” (Human Rights Watch, 2006). The United States Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality in 2003 (*Lawrence v. Texas*), legalized same-sex marriage in 2015 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*), and declared employment discrimination against an individual for being gay or transgender was in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in 2020 (*Bostock v. Clayton County*). In 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama repealed the military’s *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell* policy related to keeping an enlisted person’s nonheterosexual orientation a secret. The relatively rapid shift over the last few decades from pathology, criminalization, and immorality to greater social acceptance, legal rights, and visibility may lead some to believe that homophobia or sexual prejudice is a thing of the past (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016).

However, as of this writing, there was still not nation-wide constitutional protections for sexual minority persons against discrimination, nor were there broad protections or a universal ban on conversion therapy. Local and state laws on these topics varied greatly across the nation. Conversion therapy, “a widely discredited practice that attempts to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity...to ‘cure’ individuals of their same-sex sexual orientations and transgender identities” (Movement Advancement Project, 2017, p. 1), was first banned by California in 2012 and since then 19 additional states and the District of Columbia have enacted similar laws (Movement Advancement Project, 2020). Currently, twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have laws that explicitly protect sexual minority people from discrimination in housing or

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public accommodations, which means that in over half the country someone could be evicted or denied services because of their nonheterosexual orientation or gender identity (Lopez, 2019). At the time of the 2020 U.S. Supreme Court decision granting federal employment protections to sexual minorities (*Bostock v. Clayton County*), twenty-nine states did not explicitly provide sexual minorities employment protection and they could be fired because of their nonheterosexual orientation or gender identity (Lopez, 2019).

Some researchers hypothesized that the considered achievements noted above may be due to a shift in “the focus of mainstream lesbian and gay organizations in the United States...[to] assimilation, characterized by a prioritization of issues such as full and equal participation in the military and marriage,” rather than due to a true acceptance and respect for difference (Butler-Wall, Cosier, Harper, Sapp, Sokolower, & Tempel, 2016, p. 30). Further, activists note that “The progress of the last decade – the result of robust partnerships and concerted action in support of youth health and safety – has slowed.... and youth development now faces an entirely new level of pushback” (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018, xiii). GLAAD (2021) cited 181 anti-LGBTQ actions taken by the Trump Administration during the four years of Donald Trump’s time in presidential office. It will be interesting to see how things may shift with the change in presidential leadership from Donald Trump to Joe Biden. On January 21, 2021, an article in the Washington Post wrote that “on his first day in office, President Biden issued a sweeping executive order making it clear that gay and transgender people are protected against discrimination in schools, health care, the workplace and other realms of American life” (Schmidt, Wax-Thibodeaux, & Balingit, para. 1). Another news outlet noted that “advocates are optimistic about passage of pro-

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LGBTQ federal legislation, including the Equality Act, which would grant LGBTQ people federal protections” (Moreau, 2021, para. 29); however, they also are bracing for backlash, particularly at the state level, as there are “an estimated 21 anti-LGBTQ measures that have been filed or pre-filed for 2021 state legislative sessions” (Moreau, 2021, para. 3).

The national-level juxtaposition of progress and pushback described above can be seen replicated on a local level. According to Mansouri and Jenkins (2010), schools in general can be considered microcosms of the society they are situated within, and public schools in particular are subject to following government regulations to maintain their funding. In 2019, there were not nation-wide constitutional protections against discrimination of sexual minority persons, and local and state laws on these topics varied greatly across the nation (Human Rights Campaign, 2019). Only fifteen states and the District of Columbia had laws that explicitly ban anti-LGBTQ discrimination in schools (Human Rights Campaign, 2019). Due to these inconsistencies, sexual minority persons and students could have vastly different experiences depending upon what state and/or municipality they resided in, or even what school they attended.

National Statistics

The Human Rights Campaign reported that “in 2018 alone, over 1,300 reported hate crimes were motivated by bias against LGBTQ people,” accounting for one in five hate crimes and marking an increase of 11 percent over 2017 (2020, p. 2-3). The Southern Poverty Law Center (2020) also found a 43% increase in the number of anti-LGBTQ hate groups in 2019. A 2019 survey of non-LGBTQ adults in the United States, indicated that while 80 percent supported equal rights for the LGBTQ community;

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respondents between the ages of 18-34 reported a decline in comfort and acceptance of LGBTQ persons in personal situations (GLAAD, 2019). While physical and legal rights are a concern, acceptance and respect are also important. Researchers have found “evidence that the pain of being excluded is not so different from the pain of physical injury” and “social rejection can influence emotion, cognition and even physical health” (Weir, 2012, p. 50).

In the United States, suicide is the tenth leading cause of death across populations, and the second leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 34, and sexual minority youth “experience increased suicidal ideation and behavior compared to their non-sexual minority peers” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, & National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2019). Nationwide, one in six high school students considered suicide over one year’s time, and sexual minority youth were nearly three times more likely to contemplate suicide, and five times as likely to attempt suicide, as their heterosexual counterparts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). It is estimated that the likelihood of self-harming behavior increases 2.5 times for each act of physical or verbal victimization experienced (IMPACT, 2010). Adding to these already sobering statistics, each iteration of the National School Climate Survey since it began in 1999 portrayed schools as a hostile place for sexual minority students (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018).

The Gay and Lesbian Student Educational Network’s (GLSEN) 2017 National School Climate Survey provided a view into what these youth experience in schools (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Participation was solicited from students in grades 6 through 12 from all 50 states, the District of Columbia and 5 U.S.

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territories. The final sample consisted of 23,001 students, and 4 in 10 identified as gay or lesbian (41.6%).

The study found that 60% of the LGBTQ students who participated in the survey reported feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at school, seventy-five percent avoided school functions because of these feelings, and nearly one-fifth reported changing schools due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Almost all of the respondents (98.5%) reported hearing negative or disparaging remarks related to sexual orientation or gender expression, over half (56.6%) reported hearing such comments from school faculty or staff, and a vast majority (87.3%) reported experiencing harassment or assault (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). The above statistics on school climate combined with those on self-harm, paint a bleak picture for sexual minority students in the school setting that some have come to refer to as the school-to-coffin pipeline, “a system that (un)intentionally positions LGBTQ teens in what has become a horrific, yet normalized, epidemic of queer youth suicide” (Wozolek, Wootton, & Demlow, 2017, p. 1).

Statement of the Problem

National data and research have shown that the United States school environment can feel unsafe for sexual minority students, educators, and families, and have detrimental effects on their personal well-being (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Lugg, 2016; Wozolek, 2018; Wozolek, Wootton, & Demlow, 2017). Even in places that have laws and non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and/or gender identity, such discrimination still existed and evolved to include subtle and ambiguous forms that were not as blatant and overt as

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observed in the past (Baricevic, 2016). Baricevic (2016) investigated sexual orientation microaggressions and found that same-gender-attracted adolescents identified 6 types of sexual orientation microaggressions they experienced in their high school settings: expressed denigration, lack of recognition, change in relationship, mixed messages, stereotyping, and secondary microaggressions.

The general heteronormative culture of schooling (Lugg, 2016; Walton, 2005), and recent apparent political achievements toward equality (Butler-Wall, Cosier, Harper, Sapp, Sokolower, & Tempel, 2016), can contribute to hypocognition (Wu & Dunning, 2018) on the part of educators to the actual experiences of sexual minority students within the confines of their institutions (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016). Lacking awareness of these experiences may lead educators to a potentially faulty assumption that these students are fine and neglect taking actions to provide a safe and inclusive environment for them.

Purpose of the Study and Guiding Questions

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of sexual minority persons who concealed their nonheterosexual identity in their K-12 school environments. The main question of interest was, what are sexual minority persons' perceptions of their K-12 school experiences when they were not out or open about their nonheterosexuality during that time? The approach to research was through qualitative interviews to gather in-depth information on sexual minority perceptions regarding their K-12 experiences. A complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A. This information was then sorted into categories used to find common themes. This study sought to gather participants' perspectives on climate, culture, and curriculum, and insights into policies and procedures that may benefit sexual minority students.

Scope of Study

While there has been information gathered from sexual minority middle and high school students experiences while in their educational settings (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Wozolek, 2018; Wozolek, Wootton, & Demlow, 2017), little research has focused on sexual minority persons' perceptions of their previous school environments (Knight-Beck, 2016). Previous research has also not focused specifically on those who concealed their sexuality during that period of their life. This study focuses on sexual minority persons who previously attended public school in the greater St. Louis, Missouri, area. Missouri is a Midwestern state with a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas, and the greater St. Louis area reflects this mix--St. Louis City encompasses an urban dynamic, the multiple municipalities making up St. Louis County tend to be more suburban, and the surrounding counties a mix of suburban

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and rural. The Movement Advancement Project (2021) created state equality profiles and ranked Missouri overall as low on sexual orientation policies and negative on gender identity policies. As there were no state-wide protections in place, they looked to local policies and found that St. Louis City was the only city in the entire state that had both ordinances prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) in employment and also prohibiting conversion therapy for minors (Movement Advancement Project, 2021).

To participate in the current study, individuals identified as sexual minorities who were not out in their K-12 public school settings. Multiple LGBTQ organizations in the St. Louis area were contacted about the study, and information about the study was also posted on social media sites to recruit participants. Snowball sampling was also used, as each participant was asked if they could refer other participants. This research reflects the lived experiences of the people that participated in the study; however, their experiences may not be reflective of all previously closeted sexual minority youth.

Definition of Terms

Sexual minority

Many terms have been used in various contexts to try to encompass persons of nonheterosexual orientation or non-cisgender identity. The National LGBTQ Task Force (2019) defines lesbian as “a woman whose romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction is towards other women” (p. 2). gay as “a person whose romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction is towards their own gender, most commonly used for men” (p. 1), bisexual as “a person whose romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction is towards same and/or different genders” (p. 1), and transgender as “a broad term for people whose gender

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identity or expression is different from those typically associated with their sex assigned at birth” (p. 3). Since several terms are used to try to encompass the spectrum, often acronyms are used as a form of shorthand such as LGBTQ (Wozolek, 2018), standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Other iterations of these acronyms include LGBT (Beckerman, 2017), which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender; and GLBT (Kim, 2009), standing for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. More recently the term queer has been used in literature as an umbrella term encompassing all these identities (Grigsby, 2010).

Some people find empowerment in these labels while others have had them used against them in a derogatory manner. Due to the lack of consensus on a single term and the potential negative connotation some may experience, the current study will use the term sexual minority as an umbrella term for anyone not fitting the heterosexual norm. Savin-Williams (2001) believed this terminology also provided a more inclusive consideration for youth who had same-sex desires but did not identify with common cultural definitions such as gay, lesbian or bisexual. I will default to the term sexual minority in this study unless referencing another study that specifies a different term for its research population.

Heteronormativity and Heterosexism

Forty years ago, heterosexuality was conceptualized as a “compulsory, institutionalized system that supports gender inequality” (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, pp. 440-441). Queer theorists have built upon these ideas with the theory of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity consists of the “cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders,”

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that those genders reflect biological sex, and that natural or acceptable sexual attraction occurs only between opposite genders (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Peterson (1999) further explained that “heterosexism refers to the institutionalization and normalization of heterosexuality and the corollary exclusion of non-heterosexual identities and practices” (p. 39).

In the United States, and most of the globe, heteronormativity is a cultural norm. Ward and Schneider (2009) contended that this “force of sexual normalcy cuts across multiple systems of privilege and oppression, is used to regulate all people, and frequently sits at the heart of national and global struggles” (p. 433). Heterosexism solidifies heteronormativity within our institutions. Lugg (2016) noted how this dynamic plays out within our educational system, observing “heterosexism merely assumes everyone in the public school building is non-queer and gender-conforming--without question” (p. 94). Both heteronormativity and heterosexism do not acknowledge the existence or legitimacy of sexual minorities.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.

(Bishop, 1990, p. 557)

Sexual minority students often find themselves in a precarious position within heteronormative school institutions. Blatant legally enforced oppression is not as strong as it has been in the past (Lugg, 2003), and discrimination has evolved to include subtler and more ambiguous forms (Baricevic, 2016). However, the absence of legally sanctioned persecution is not the same as providing an environment in which these students can thrive (Ginwright, 2016). In U.S. public schools in particular, often “two forms of bias work hand-in-hand, with heteronormativity being the cultural norm and homophobia emerging when some queer students fail to ‘cover’ or hide their identities” (Lugg, 2016, p. 94).

Intersectionality

In 1989, Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality through her analysis of the intersection of race and sex. Crenshaw (1989) presented a Black feminist critique of the “tendency to view race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (p. 139); however, categorizing struggles by single issues misses the complexities and compounded nature of struggles experienced by those at the intersection

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of multiple disadvantaged identities (pp. 166-167). Since her initial writing, the theory of intersectionality has been applied to many other aspects of identity and influenced various fields of study (Carbado, 2013).

In regards to sexuality, James Baldwin noted that “the sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined” (1989, p. 178). However, Armengol (2012) observed that when he began writing in the 1950s “Baldwin responded to both the racist sexualization of African Americans by the white community and the homophobia of the African American community by removing (at least from the surface) the subject of race from much of his early fiction” (p. 673).

Race, gender, and sexuality are a few of the aspects of a person that intertwine in ways that affect their experiences and perception. McCall (2005) observed that intersectionality considers “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (p. 1771), and as more aspects are considered the more complex and nuanced the analysis becomes. Further, she noted that social life can be “irreducibly complex—overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures—to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences” (p. 1773). However, while interrogating “the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself” (p. 1773), intersectionality also “acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time” (p. 1774).

Queer Theory

The term queer is often associated with persons not identifying with the heteronormative categorizations, such as those who are gay, lesbian, or transgender

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(Lugg, 2016; Meyer, 2007). Frequently queer theory is seen as something that only applies to sexual minorities--persons of non-majoritarian gender identities and sexual orientations (Meyer, 2007). However, Lugg (2016) contended that "Queer Theory posits that all identity is unstable, especially the identities that we understand to be gender and sexual orientation" (p. 3). Meyer (2007) added, "queer theory is just another step further down the road initially paved by critical pedagogy, post-structural feminism, and theories of emancipatory education," and a queer pedagogy can have a liberatory impact on all persons in an educational setting (p. 28). Solorzano (2013) described part of that road through his use of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2018) as an influential theory shaping his understanding of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Solorzano (2013) stated that Freire "starts from the premise that all education is political and thus schools are never neutral institutions....when schools domesticate, they socialize students into accepting as legitimate the ideology and values of society's dominant class" (pp. 52-53). Freire (1970/2018) described two potential methods of education--a banking method and a liberatory problem-solving method.

Freire (1970/2018) described the banking method of education as a tool for oppression that facilitates the domestication or assimilation of minority populations. Within this method, teachers were to present the knowledge that was deemed worth knowing, and students were supposed to absorb what they were taught. This practice created an environment where those in authority or power, typically the dominant class, decided what information was important for students to have, as well as the expectations of how they should behave. Frequently topics that may be controversial, considered

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taboo, or make those in power uncomfortable were avoided, resulting in the exclusion of certain areas of learning that may have been beneficial or empowering to certain students.

Sexuality and gender identity are topics that frequently fall victim to such avoidance. Vavrus (2008) stated that “schools reflect a general societal ambivalence toward gender identification and sexuality” (p. 383), and Lugg (2016) has written extensively on what she refers to as “the politics of queer erasure” within United States public schools (p. 3). Lugg (2016) traced historical measures, including morality codes, surveillance, criminalization, pathologizing, and removal of suspected queers, and noted that in “the 1970s numerous ballot initiatives and laws have attempted to ban queer people or those suspected of being queer...from working in public schools” (2003, p. 96). Instead of providing limited information or avoiding topics, Freire (1999) insisted that “we must address problems in ways that invite people to understand the relationship of the problem to other factors, to the politics of oppression” (p. 38). Using queer theory as part of a critical inquiry into the systems and functions of the school setting can work towards interrupting heteronormativity and providing an emancipatory educational experience (Sumara & Davis, 1999).

Passing Privilege?

Over 70 years ago, Maslow (1943) categorized human needs into a hierarchy, explaining that lower needs must be taken care of and people's focus and behaviors will be centered on meeting those needs before being able to move on to higher-order needs. More recently Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, and Schaller (2010), viewed human needs and motives as overlapping instead of stacked, reflecting that earlier developing needs or motives continue to be important and never completely replaced by those located higher

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up on Maslow's triangle. Beginning at the bottom of the pyramid and moving upward, Maslow's five identified categories were: physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Burlison and Thoron (2014) noted that "the first four needs can be categorized as deprivation needs; the lack of satisfaction of these needs produces deficiencies that will motivate people to work towards satisfying these needs" (p. 2).

Gill (2014) defined passing privilege as "the privilege to be able to 'pass' as a more privileged group, such as a light-skinned person of color passing as white, a transperson passing as non-trans, a disabled person passing as able-bodied, etc" (p. 63). For sexual minority students and non-students, the concept of passing by concealing their nonheterosexual identity, or presenting a heteronormative persona can be strategies to maintain their own safety within environments deemed unsafe to be out or open in (Johnson, 2017; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Lugg, 2016). Both the framework presented by Maslow (1943) and Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, and Schaller (2010) placed concepts related to providing for physiological needs and safety as foundational motives driving human behavior. When the goal of efforts was to escape discrimination, considering a lack of discrimination as a privilege to be afforded rather than a right deserved seems odd.

Nevertheless, persons able to manage passing may create a different space for themselves on an individual basis, but at a cost to themselves and others. Acts of heterosexual passing may paradoxically provide physical safety to individuals or access to certain spaces or experiences otherwise denied to them, while continuing to reinforce and perpetuate heteronormative ideas and structures that oppress them. In situations

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where a person gained access under the assumption that they are part of a group that they do not identify, there followed a fear of being exposed or outted, and the consequences if that were to occur (deLeon & Brunner, 2013). People in such situations would often engage in extreme self-surveillance, making sure they were performing in accordance with societal norms of the assumed position (Lugg, 2003). Kim (2009) explained the internal turmoil experienced by sexual minority educators at the thought of being open about their nonheterosexual identity:

even experienced, tenured educators experience sheer terror in “coming out” (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) to students. They worry that their jobs are on the line if a parent or guardian were to complain....They may engage in self-censoring, and they battle their own internalized feelings of shame or guilt about being GLBT. They struggle to balance their commitment to raising or responding to GLBT issues in the classroom with keeping the discussion on a universal, as opposed to a personal, level. (p. 35)

Trying to belong in a space while not authentically fitting the norms of a group can create conflict between overlapping human motives (Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, and Schaller, 2010). In writing about the invisibility of transsexual men, Green (1996) described this conflict and constant fear in a question often considered by someone attempting to pass for any identity dimension: “What good is safety if the price is shame and fear of discovery?” (p. 441).

A Complicated History

In the introduction of his book, *A Queer History of the United States*, Bronski (2012) stated that “much of the popular LGBT history that has been published...is

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essentially a list of famous lesbian or gay people and events used to justify contemporary understandings” (pp. xiii-xiv); however, “serious writing on LGBT history...complicates and enriches the American imagination and the national story we already know” (p. xiv). The timeline presented in Figure 1 is meant as a visual of the dates provided in the current political climate section of the introduction of this text. It is not meant to imply the events listed are comprehensive of all events or that those listed were the only events of importance. Such an in-depth history or analysis of historical events would be a research project in its own right and was beyond the scope of this current project.

Figure 1*Partial Timeline of LGBTQ Political Events in the United State*

Note. Timeline compiled using data from *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020), Burks (2011), Drescher (2015), Ganesh (2017), GLAAD (2021), Human Rights Watch (2006), *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015).

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The points on the timeline in Figure 1 illustrate how rapid the shift from pathology, criminalization, and immorality to greater legal rights and acceptance has been for same-sex attraction. Less than fifty years ago homosexuality was considered a mental illness. Less than twenty years ago, it was still a crime in some parts of the country. Less than ten years ago, same-sex marriage was illegal, and less than a year ago a person could be fired for being a sexual minority, as far as the federal government was concerned. Figure 1 also highlights heightened governmental pushback at the federal level under Donald Trump's presidency. Considering Bronski (2011) covered 500 years--prior to the events of the last decade--in his book, there was much that contributed and built up to these recent shifts. Please refer to his book, *A Queer History of the United States* (2011), for a more in-depth look at this history. Also, *US Public Schools and the Politics of Queer Erasure* by Catherine A. Lugg (2016) and *The Right to be Out: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in American Public Schools* by Stuart Biegel (2018) provide in-depth historical analyses of the cross-section of law and schooling.

Schools as Heteronormative Spaces

“Schooling provides the contexts through which students’ identities are constructed, refined, resisted, and altered” (Letts, 1999, p. 106), and heteronormativity is standard throughout the United States (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Sumara, & Davis, 1999; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). Historic and contemporary school climates reflect the pressures of heteronormativity and shape expectations regarding gender and sexuality in these contexts (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012).

Lugg (2016) detailed decades of what she terms the politics of queer erasure in U.S. public schools. These efforts have been aimed at educators as well as students; and

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in a recent study, Connell (2015) interviewed 45 gay and lesbian teachers who expressed feelings of being stuck in a no-win situation between responsibilities of being out and proud and educational professionalism. Kim (2009) explains that:

many GLBT school employees don't feel comfortable being out about their sexual orientation or expressing gender nonconformity in schools. This discomfort is partially reflected in established limitations on educators' free speech rights. K-12 educators have free speech rights but are expected to act "professionally." They are held to a higher standard as role models and in formal education settings, they're expected to adhere to approved curricula and topics controlled and set forth by the school district. In addition, they have limited ability to speak on matters of public concern if it would disrupt the work environment. (p. 37)

This dynamic is found more so in schools than in larger society where Lugg (2016) claimed that "life in the United States has improved for most adult queers (transgender adults excepted);" she further acknowledged, "this does not appear to be the case for queer youth, nor for transgender youth in particular" (p. 85). In a 2010 publication, the National Education Association noted:

gender nonconformity—not appearing or acting masculine or feminine enough according to societal standards—is perhaps the root cause of why students and adults discriminate against not only GLBT people, but heterosexual people who are perceived as GLBT. Regardless of sexual orientation, the more gender nonconforming a youth, the more likely he or she is to face homophobic violence. Youth whose gender nonconforming stands out—particularly transgender

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youth—face higher levels of violence and risk of serious physical harm. (para. 1-2)

This finding is in line with the aims of assimilation and conformity to the dominant culture found within the Freire's (1970/2018) banking method of education.

In an observational study of science classrooms, Letts (1999) noted several ubiquitous techniques which reinforced the heteronormative standards. Expounding on tactic, he explained:

taunting boys who refuse to engage in activities that even girls can do is a common misogynist put down strategy used against boys...to work to humiliate him, to police his own enactment of his heterogender, and to coerce him into behaving in ways boys are expected to behave. (p. 100)

Since heteronormativity tends to be pervasive in school settings, the dominant values that go along with it remain unquestioned and are accepted as normal until students decide to resist such narratives. Walton (2005) contended:

Although members of some parents' groups accuse gay and lesbian educational activists of promoting such a "hidden" agenda, it is, in fact, heteronormativity that tends to be "hidden" within most school cultures and school policies....When students confound heteronormativity and homophobia in schools, they expose particular dimensions of the hidden curriculum. Similarly - and paradoxically - when school authorities and parents attempt to reinforce values and norms of dominant paradigms of gender, sexuality, and family through educational policy

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and curriculum at the exclusion of some students, they, too, expose the hidden curriculum. (pp. 32-33)

Thus, the institutional hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is a barrier to providing gender and sexual diversity (GSD)-inclusive education that allows all students to be positively visible and supported (Block, 2019; Crisp, Gardner, & Almeida, 2018; DePalma, 2016; Lee & Carpenter, 2015; Martino & Cumming-Povin, 2016; Ryan, 2016).

A survey of Canadian educators found that approval of and comfort with LGBTQ-inclusive education seemed to grow steadily based on the age of the students that teachers worked with (Meyer, Quantz, Taylor, & Peter, 2019; Payne & Smith, 2018), meaning that heteronormativity has even less checks or challenges for younger students. Children's books are seen as a reflection of a child's world and in a recent study of 143 winners and honor recipients of the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction Literature for Children from 1990-2017, only 3 books include mention of LGBTQ population and none of the books include a direct representation (Crisp, Gardner, & Almeida, 2018). In observing 14 different primary classrooms over 2 years, Ryan (2016), noted the perpetuation of heteronormativity through the actions of adults and students through curricular silences, explicit disparaging of queer-inclusive sexualities and silencing those sexualities by constructing heteronormative perspectives as common sense. Rosiek, Schmitke, and Heffernan (2017) noted that "even in circumstances that are favorable to gender and LGBTQ advocacy, the heteronormative discursive context of our broader culture can undermine efforts to this end by rendering such advocacy invisible to important stakeholders and decision makers" (p. 13). Due to the pervasive nature of our

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heteronormative culture, direct and intentional instruction of GSD topics is necessary to counteract its effects (Gibbs, 2018; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Moorhead, 2018).

Current Status of Sexual Minority Inclusion in Curriculum

While there have been shifts in the legal rights and social acceptance for LGBTQ people, discrimination still exists (Crary & Saltler, 2019; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Lugg, 2016; Rice, 2019). Currently the United States does not have a federal policy related to sexual minority inclusion in K-12 curriculum; however, some individual states have passed their own laws requiring such inclusion. In 2012, California became the first state to do so when it passed the FAIR (Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful) Education Act which expanded the state's education code to require that the roles and contributions of LGBTQ individuals and people with disabilities be part of history and social studies instruction (Moorhead, 2018). In August of 2019, Illinois became "the fifth state to pass a law requiring LGBTQ history be taught in schools" (Wittich & Issa, 2019). Canada has had legislation in place prior to California's law that schools were required to follow; however, researchers still noted barriers of inclusion and a gap between theory, policy, and application (Meyer, Quantz, Taylor, & Peter, 2019; Peter, 2018; Shipley, 2013).

The Every Teacher Project on LGBTQ-Inclusive Education in Canada's K-12 Schools was published in 2015 (Taylor, Peter, Campbell, Meyer, Ristock, Short). The authors noted that in 2005, "LGBTQ-inclusive education was rarely addressed beyond a few major Canadian cities and school divisions" (p. vii); however, legislation, such as the Ontario Accepting Schools Act of 2012 and the Manitoba Public Schools Act of 2014 mandate the development of equitable, safe, and inclusive policies for LGBTQ students.

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The Every Teacher Project “set out to investigate the perspectives of Canadian educators on the safety and inclusion of LGBTQ students and topics in schools” and found that:

even in 2015, given LGBTQ students’ long and ongoing history of exclusion, both systemic and systematic, from all aspects of official school life, as well as their extreme marginalization in unofficial school life, the persistence of organized opposition to their right to a safe and inclusive education continues. (p. viii)

The United Kingdom Equality Act of 2010 includes people of different ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, gender identities, religions, ages, and abilities as protected groups. When Moffat (2016), UK educator and researcher, published his first set of primary school lessons on equality with a LGBT focus in 2007, he noted that young children needed to be taught that LGBT persons existed. Since that time, he believed that the increase of representation on the media and more people being out have made it so children have seen or been in contact with a LGBT person (Moffat, 2016). He, perhaps optimistically, stated that:

What we now need to be teaching is that homophobia once existed but we don’t have it in our school today, and that to be a person who is gay or lesbian or transgender or bi-sexual is normal, acceptable and OK. Children also need to be learning that they may identify or not identify as LGBT as they grow up, and that whoever they grow into as an adult is also perfectly normal and acceptable.

(Moffat, 2016, p. 2)

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As noted above, the United States has limited federal regulation providing inclusive educational experiences for sexual minority students (Crary & Saltler, 2019; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Lugg, 2016; Rice, 2019). Even though laws and policies in schools are only as effective as the way educators are employing them, the absence of such policies shows either a lack of awareness or lack of concern regarding the experiences of sexual minority persons in U.S. schools. The GLSEN 2017 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018) sought to shed light on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in schools across the United States through surveying middle and high school students.

They found that:

schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBTQ students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBTQ language and experience victimization and discrimination at school. As a result, many LGBTQ students avoid school activities or miss school entirely.... A hostile school climate affects students' academic success and mental health. LGBTQ students who experience victimization and discrimination at school have worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being.... Students who feel safe and supported at school have better educational outcomes. LGBTQ students who have LGBTQ-related school resources report better school experiences and academic success. Unfortunately, all too many schools fail to provide these critical resources. (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018, pp. xviii-xxiv)

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Furthermore, Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, and Truong (2018) noted that students reporting “lower levels of anti-LGBTQ victimization and discrimination, were some of the least ‘out’ about their LGBTQ identity” (p. 109). Indicating that to remain safe in school, students may create heteronormative personas as a strategy to protect themselves from anti- LGBTQ bias (Johnson, 2017; Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). An additional finding of note was that “LGBTQ students in the South and Midwest had more negative school experiences overall than students in the Northeast and West, including higher rates of biased language, victimization, and anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices” (p. xxvi), illustrating the uneven experience of sexual minorities based upon their region of residence.

School Equity

Schools are institutions that provide students with an introduction into the public realm. All states have a provision on free public schooling written into their constitutions (Wong, 2018), and also maintain compulsory education laws requiring children to attend a public or state-accredited private school for a certain period of time. The Compulsory Attendance Law of Missouri states that:

a parent, guardian or other person in this state having charge, control, or custody of a child between the ages of seven years of age and the compulsory attendance age for the district shall cause the child to attend regularly some public, private, parochial, parish, home school or a combination of such schools not less than the entire school term of the school which the child attends. (para. 1)

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website states that “the term ‘compulsory attendance age for the district’ shall mean seventeen (17) years of

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age or having successfully completed sixteen (16) credits towards high school graduation in all other cases” (para. 2). This equates to students spending thousands of hours in school, learning from explicit and implicit experiences in those settings. Thus, students are legally required to attend these institutions even if doing so is a detriment to their own physical, mental, or emotional well-being. Therefore, educators need to be aware of the experiences of all students in order to create an optimal learning environment where students feel safe and can reach their full potential (Knight-Beck, 2016).

In her work advocating for school equity, Jones (2017) has taken Maslow’s concepts of a hierarchy of needs and applied them to schools. Her conceptualization placed an emphasis on how school climate and culture can impact students' ability to thrive in that environment; and away from deficit views of students, like labelling them as unable to learn. Since sexual minorities must navigate and survive heteronormative school climates, schools may be deficient at meeting the needs of these students. Moffat (2016) believed that instead of placing the onus on sexual minority persons-- whether they be students or adults--to assimilate into the heteronormative school structure, or to carry the burden of challenging this structure by outing themselves, schools have a responsibility to ensure that they have created an environment that is safe and supportive for these persons to be out. Additionally, Lugg (2016) contended that focusing attention on interventions aimed at an individual level to ease distress, “misses the larger issue of who is actually inflicting all the pain, and the policy mechanisms that allow it to happen....the larger political culture and relentless homophobic educational policies are ignored” (p. 96).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Research design provides specific direction for procedures within a research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study employed a phenomenological design that used qualitative interviews as a form of research. Qualitative data provides in-depth information related to a topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This form of research was best suited to gain a sense of the sexual minority persons' perceptions of their closeted k-12 school experiences.

Creswell & Creswell (2018) described qualitative research as a means to provide an in-depth, complex, and holistic picture of information related to specific events or phenomena. They noted that qualitative research tends to collect data from the natural setting in which it occurs with the researcher talking directly to people or observing them in that setting. After being gathered from multiple sources, data is analyzed through an inductive process, organizing information collected into patterns, categories, and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In this study, individual qualitative interviews were conducted with sexual minority persons who concealed their nonheterosexual identity in their K-12 public schooling experiences. The interviews focused on factors contributing to their decision not to disclose their nonheterosexual identity, as well as their perceptions of the school's climate, culture, and curriculum towards the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity.

The definition of validity in terms of qualitative research includes internal and external factors. Internal validity is considered a strength of qualitative research as it can

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be achieved by the researcher checking for the accuracy of findings through the application of certain procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, the external validity of applying results to new settings, people, or samples is limited due to the small sample group used. In an attempt to maximize the generalizability of the qualitative findings, as long as there were more persons that fit the criteria for interviews expressing interest in participating, I continued conducting interviews until a point of saturation of information being gathered occurred. Saturation means that no new information is being given by new interviewees and provides the best opportunity to believe the results may apply to situations outside those particular to the interviewees (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Several procedures were used to ensure the soundness and rigor of the information obtained during these qualitative interviews. When possible, member checking was used to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Creswell & Miller (2000) described member checking as the process of “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account.” (p. 127). In this research project, member checking was completed by providing a copy of their transcribed interview back to each participant and asking for their feedback. Detailed descriptions were used to convey findings and any negative or discrepant information that ran counter to the dominant themes was also presented. Lastly, I engaged in self-reflection to clarify the bias I brought to the study.

Sample and Participant Selection

One challenging aspect of this research was locating participants. In her research, Browne (2005) noted that accessing participants who identify as LGBTQ is the most challenging aspect of conducting research with this population. Originally, my proposed target population was sexual minority college students who previously attended public schools in St. Louis or St. Louis county, and were not out regarding their nonheterosexual identity at that time. Then I planned to use snowball sampling after finding initial participants. Sometimes called chain referral sampling, “snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling strategy...that is used to reach populations who possess specific characteristics” (Grigsby, 2010). Attempts to recruit participants included contacting multiple LGBTQ organizations at local colleges and in the St. Louis region as well as posting on social media sites. However, these efforts did not produce many results. While there was a positive response from organizers of groups, they indicated that they did not have many students participating at this time; one writing, “This sounds like a WONDERFUL project! I am looking forward to seeing how it turns out! I will definitely pass this along to our PRIZM members, but I should let you know there are only a handful at this time” (M. Dilley, personal communication, October 6, 2020). Possible reasons for lack of participation could have been due to the timing of recruitment coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced opportunities for typical college interactions, and/or students who had concealed their identity in high school still not being out or in a place where they felt comfortable talking about their experiences--for example, if they were living at home instead of on campus and were not out to their families.

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The target population for this study was thus expanded to sexual minority persons who previously attended public schools in the greater St. Louis area, and were not out regarding their nonheterosexual identity at that time. The requirement to currently be enrolled in a college or university was removed. Participants were recruited through providing information about the research project on social media and LGBTQ+ organizations in the St. Louis area. The expansion of the target population produced more responses from older adults who were farther removed from their K-12 public school experience, but who all brought an excitement about participating and sharing their experiences and ideas. Having a longer time away from that setting also provided these participants to have more time to reflect upon their experiences and the effects that they had on them.

Variables

Qualitative Analysis

For the qualitative analysis, a detailed description of each participant interview occurred. This analysis focused on themes that emerged related to participants' reasons for choosing to conceal their nonheterosexual identity in their previous school settings, their perceptions regarding the climate, culture, and curriculum at those institutions, and their advice for changes that could improve the experiences for current and/or future sexual minority students attending such institutions.

Data Collection

Nine types of interview questions--Introductory, Follow-up, Probing, Specifying, Direct, Indirect, Structuring, Silence (giving wait time), and Interpreting--discussed by Brinkman and Kvale (2015) were used to elicit information regarding exploration and

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explanation of participants' previous school experiences and personal decision not to disclose their nonheterosexual identity in those settings. Interviews were scheduled with the participants and attempts were made to schedule these meetings to occur in a location where the participant felt safe and comfortable sharing. Due to concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants opted to complete the interviews over the virtual Zoom platform. Notes were taken during the interview and the interviews were recorded to allow for transcription and further analysis for items that may have been missed initially. Throughout the process I reflected on the ways the participants and I interacted and influenced each other due to the personal nature of the research and our sometimes overlapping experiences (Glesne, 2006; Schwandt, 2007). Originally, I had proposed to interview 4-5 sexual minority university students. After 5 months of recruiting participants and expanding the criteria to sexual minority persons, I ended up conducting 6 interviews between October 2020, and January 2021.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis of data began during the data collection and continued after the interviews were completed. Analysis and interpretation of information gathered during the interview was important to know which follow-up questions to use to gather clarity and depth of understanding of interviewees responses during the interviews.

McLeland, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003) noted that "there is no universal transcription format that would be adequate for all types of qualitative data collection approaches, settings, or theoretical frameworks" (p. 64). For the purposes of this study, following the interview sessions, I transcribed the audio of the sessions while editing out pauses and filler words, such as, um, uh, or like, and inserting applicable punctuation

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throughout. Punctuated transcripts of participant interviews can be found in Appendix B. Along with the transcriptions, any field notes taken were summarized, and data was sorted by type for organization. Next, I examined all of the data and made notes regarding ideas, impressions, and general thoughts regarding the data collected. The data was then sorted into categories. Narrative passages were used to share the key themes interviewees related to their personal reasons for refraining from disclosing their nonheterosexual identity, perceptions related to the concurrent school climate, culture, and curriculum that contributed to that decision, and ideas for improving school climate, culture, and curriculum for future students and can be found in Chapter 4. Expected themes, surprising themes, and unusual themes are included in this discussion.

Throughout the process, the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and queer theory guided my analysis of the data gathered, as participants worked within and against narrowly defined categories they were presented as options for them to function within. Intersectionality provided a lens for the unique circumstances each person brought with them, while also highlighting a particular social group at a neglected point of intersection “in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups” (McCall, 2005, p. 1774). Queer theory asked “that the continued construction of narratives supporting that unruly category ‘heterosexual’ be constantly interrupted and renarrated” (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 192), and participants worked to provide such counternarratives.

Ethics and Human Relations

I completed a fourteen module program on social and behavioral research with human subjects through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). This

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program satisfied CITI and the University of Missouri--St. Louis requirements to conduct research with human beings and covered a range of ethical and legal considerations when working in this area. For most research done in social and behavioral sciences, there are three categories where potential harm may occur: invasion of privacy, breach of confidentiality, and study procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, threats in any of these areas were minimal. The informed consent process implemented in this study limited threats to participants regarding the invasion of privacy and study procedures by outlining the purpose and format of the study and gaining participants informed agreement prior to taking part in the study.

While the study questions were designed to gain information in a neutral manner, it was impossible to know the mental and emotional experiences that each participant would bring with them, so some participants may have experienced psychological or emotional discomfort answering the questions. During the interviews, none of the participants opted not to answer any of the questions or indicated that they felt discomfort to the degree that they did not wish to continue participating. In order to avoid any breaches of confidentiality, steps were taken to protect participants' identities and identifying information. Participant responses remained anonymous through the coding of each submission and keeping responses separate from identifying markers. While interviews were conducted in a format that allowed us to visually see each other, pseudonyms were used and I took steps to remove any identifying information about the participants from the descriptions and reporting of results. Participants were given the option of choosing their own pseudonym or having me assign one to them. All study data were stored in a secure electronic database and physical copies of documents were locked

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in a filing cabinet and destroyed after a reasonable amount of time following the conclusion of the study. The potential risks were noted in the informed consent statements, so participants were able to use that information in their decision making process regarding taking part in the study.

Prior to beginning this study, I presented the proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), to gain permission for conducting the proposed data collection. As the risks of participation in the study were minimal and the study population was over eighteen years of age, this project was accorded an exempt status. Once approval was obtained, the recruiting of participants began. An amendment was also submitted to and approved by the IRB to expand the original target population to include any sexual minority adult who previously attended K-12 public school in the greater St. Louis area and concealed their identity in those settings.

Participants that responded or were referred through snowball sampling, were sent an email prior to participation describing the purpose of the study and asking for their informed consent. Additionally, a small monetary incentive was given in the form of a \$25.00 for those who participated in the qualitative interviews. Informed consent was presented to and obtained from the participants prior to scheduling their interviews. Information provided in the informed consent acknowledged that their rights were protected, their participation was voluntary, that they could choose to withdraw their participation at any time, and asked for them to agree to participate in the study. For the interviews, participants received and signed an informed consent form prior to beginning the interview.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of sexual minority persons who concealed their nonheterosexual identity in their K-12 school environments. This study sought to gather their perspectives on climate, culture, and curriculum, and insights into policies and procedures that may benefit sexual minority students. The main question of interest was: What are sexual minority persons' perceptions of their K-12 school experiences when they were not out or open about their nonheterosexuality during that time? Additional questions were used to gain an understanding of how participants defined being out and advice they had for improvements to K-12 public schools that would better meet the needs of sexual minority students in those settings. In this chapter, I will provide an analysis of the themes that emerged from the participants' interview responses.

Participant Demographics

Six self-identified sexual minority persons completed interviews about their K-12 experiences in public schools located in the greater St. Louis area. All persons had concealed their sexual minority identities in those settings. Participants shared any specific sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) labels they applied to themselves: two identified as lesbians, two identified as gay males, one identified as a trans male, and one identified as an agender pansexual. Half of the participants attended schools in St. Louis County, and the other three attended schools in counties surrounding St. Louis County, commonly referred to as the greater St. Louis area. A majority of those

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who responded to recruitment efforts were White, and of those who agreed to participate in an interview only one identified as Black. Participants' high school graduation dates spanned 25 years, from 1995 to 2020. While I originally was hoping to gain information about the experiences of sexual minority students who recently graduated from high school, this span allowed me to note if there were any themes in participant responses that persisted across time. Table 1 summarizes participants' demographic data, displaying the years they graduated from high school, what region of the greater St. Louis area their schools were located in, their races, and their self-identified SOGI.

Table 1*Participants' Demographic Data*

Participant	Graduation	Location	Race	SOGI
Brice	2020	St. Charles County	White	Trans male
Taylor	2018	Jefferson County	White	Lesbian
Jordan	2010	West St. Louis County	White	Gay male
Q	2010	West St. Louis County	White	Agender pansexual
Mark	2002	St. Charles County	White	Gay male
Kelly	1995	North St. Louis County	Black	Lesbian

Note. Participant names listed are pseudonyms to anonymize participants

Defining Being Out

The concealment of one's identity, or aspects of one's identity, exists as an opposition to being open or out about one's identity (Green, 2018; Johnson, 2012; Kim, 2009). Since the overarching question of this study asked about their perceptions of their K-12 school experiences when they were not out or open, I first needed to understand what being out meant to them. Instead of assigning my own personal meaning, I asked the participants to define what it meant to them. Their responses to this question

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provided an understanding of the concept of being out and provided context for the subsequent interview questions.

All of the participants responded around the theme of living authentically--being open and honest about who they were and not hiding parts of themselves. While Jordan, a white gay male who graduated in 2010, noted that while “it’s a very vague answer” (personal communication, December 2, 2020), the way that the participants expressed being out varied. For Taylor, a white lesbian who graduated in 2018, and Jordan, part of being out was being open about who they were dating and not feeling like they had to hide their relationships. Both Brice and Q noted the importance of using their preferred names and pronouns as part of what being out meant for them.

A majority of the participants expressed fear and anxiety as the overarching feelings they associated with their first thoughts of coming out to others regarding the nonheteronormative aspects of themselves. Several mentioned worrying and stressing about how people would react, thinking about when or how it may occur, and if it would be on their own terms or not. Mark, Jordan, Q, and Taylor all noted that it took them awhile to process and understand their nonheteronormative identities, due to factors like lack of positive examples, and not possessing the language or information to put their experiences into context. Taylor also mentioned that she had a lot of internalized homophobia that made it a messy process for her. Jordan expressed a complex swirling of emotions surrounding his process of moving from concealment to eventually coming out to himself and others, sharing, “I think this all goes back to first accepting it yourself because there’s a coming out moment to yourself too, where you tell yourself ‘this is who I am.’ I mean, I knew for a while when I was younger that I was different” (personal

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communication, December 2, 2020). However, for a while he thought he was never going to come out, and told himself, "I can just sit here and just be happy with myself and just never explore that part of life because that's the easiest out for me" (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020). He explained that:

a lot of times, in my mind, coming out was a selfish act. Where it's like, "oh this is selfish, I'm going to put my parents through this, I'm going to put people around me through this;" it's easier to like suck it in and say "I don't deserve that." It was more self-pitying and self-hate, and then the actual process of coming out was more fearful because when you say this you have no idea what's going to happen....And then there's just a bunch of different feelings, fear, mostly fear and sadness. Just like "why do I have to do this? Why is it on me?" and a little bit of jealousy of other people who didn't have to do it....There's also a sense of weakness, where I felt like I was being weak, like admitting to yourself that you're not the normal is a weakness, that it's a sign of flaws....so there were a lot of emotions that came with coming out. Being able to say that I'm okay with all these consequences and ripping the cord. (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020)

He also recalled that by the time he had worked up enough self-acceptance and courage to come out:

there was also a sense of regret like "I'm out of high school, I feel old to be doing this." Like I felt not only had I wasted time, but regretted it because other people were younger when they came out and they were probably happier because they

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were true to themselves earlier. (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020)

Jordan's response exemplified the complexity of sorting through the multitude of feelings one can have over coming to terms with one's identity and sharing it with others.

Several of the participants also noted that the intensity of the feelings decreased the more times they came out, as Kelly put it, "it was scary at first, but after a while I kinda got used to it. It was just like second nature. It became normal for me" (personal communication, October 18, 2020). Similarly, Taylor noted that once she came out, she "realized that 'yes this is scary, but if I do this at the right time and if I feel it out with each person, I could do this. I could go forward with it'" (personal communication, October 24, 2020). Mark noted that coming out is not a one-time occurrence, but that there are "a lot of layers" to being out:

because you can be completely in the closet, then you can be out to a group of friends, you can be out with your close family, or you can be kind of generally out to most people that you know, or you can be completely out-like there's nobody that doesn't know. (personal communication, January 5, 2021)

All of the participants shared this sentiment in their own personal journeys, that they thought about each person they historically knew and those that they meet or come into contact with. Each person, each environment, each situation they find themselves in to this day, they assess and decide if they are going to come out, how much of themselves they are going to share.

Fear of Being Out at School

When asked to reflect on their feelings around the thought of having come out in their K-12 educational settings, the participants responded in a similar fashion with most noting varying degrees of fear, using words like scared, scary, afraid, and terrified. Given the prevalence of fear around the idea of coming out in general, the fact that this was the overarching feeling expressed around the idea of coming out in their educational setting could be considered unsurprising. However, the fact that these feelings persist from sexual minority students who graduated in 1995 to those who graduated as recently as 2020 demonstrates the importance of evaluating what factors are at play in our public schools that contribute to this pattern. Themes that emerged as contributing factors noted by participants were:

1. Lack of positive sexual minority visibility within the school
2. Facing backlash if out— losing friends, being treated differently, being excluded
3. Negative external messages about sexual minorities within the school

Lack of positive sexual minority visibility within their school settings was expressed by all of the participants in various ways. The two oldest respondents, Mark and Kelly, did not recall any supports or inclusion of sexual minority topics in any facet-- with Mark noting that “it wasn’t exactly that schools focused on....It was just like my own private little thing....it wasn’t anything like what it is now with the internet and there just wasn’t the opportunity to talk much with other people on it” (personal communication, January 5, 2021). Jordan, Taylor, and Q all noted that there was at least some form of a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) or Equality Club at their high schools, yet

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none of them felt comfortable participating in them, thinking that might out them or put a target on their backs. Meanwhile, Brice, the most recent graduate, shared that he “was terrified because...most people there are not supportive in any way, shape, or form” (personal communication, October 18, 2020). These observations indicate the persistence of lack positive visibility of sexual minorities in K-12 educational systems, particularly for students who may be concealing that part of their identity.

Five of the six participants also described the fear of receiving some sort of backlash if they came out. As noted above, this fear prevented Jordan, Taylor, and Q from participating in or seeking support through the clubs available at their high schools. Types of backlash mainly focused on the way they were treated by others from peers to teachers. Two participants, Kelly and Taylor, both specifically mentioned fear of losing friends if they came out. Taylor observed that she participated in several different activities and Kelly noted that she was “really, really scared” and thought that would mean that she “would never have any friends anymore” (personal communication, October 18, 2020). Q observed that they had considered it their senior year, but after witnessing the way a couple of the gay students were treated “that kind of scared [them] back away from doing anything” (personal communication, December 31, 2020). Similarly, Taylor recalled how “everyone thought it was wrong so...it would be very scary to come out in an educational setting, and I think I would have faced a lot of backlash” (personal communication, October 24, 2020). Jordan recalled that in:

middle school gay was just bad and it was just a joke that people made fun of, like “oh they’re gay,” and in high school it just turned into like “gay kids are open season”....a lot of guys would just like go out of their way to let you know that

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you don't conform to their idea of manhood and they wanted to make you as uncomfortable as possible. (personal communication, December 2, 2020)

That was when he realized that he would never come out in any of his K-12 settings because, as he shared, "I was too afraid, and for decent reasons, they gave me reasons to be afraid" (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020). Brice also expressed a fear of being bullied and that he "didn't want to be left out of anything...because they did that to other kids who came out in any way" (personal communication, October 18, 2020). An example he gave was when teachers asked students to get in groups, they would be left out, or "if they were playing in PE, they would get picked last or not picked at all" (Brice, October 18, 2020). The only participant who did not express a fear of backlash was Mark, and this may have been due to an observation that he noted several times, that "it wasn't something that schools focused on...being gay wasn't a thing, not even a possibility" (personal communication, January 5, 2021), so he never considered coming out and no one ever thought he was gay. These shared experiences lead into the overall third theme that emerged—negative external messages about sexual minorities.

In addition to the factors previously described, negative portrayals of sexual minorities or treating sexual minorities as a taboo subject, in school or society as a whole, were the external messages most frequently recounted by the participants. Mark reflected that "anything like that in my school was really just something that wasn't mentioned" (personal communication, January 5, 2020), while Kelly said that in her school it was a "hush-hush topic and if you brought it up the topic was shut down. The conversation was shut down" (personal communication, October 18, 2020). When asked about what factors contributed to his feelings of fear about coming out, Jordan replied:

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I mean, not to reiterate, but I definitely think that, and it sounds so cliché, but the lack of representation in general and that anytime you did see someone gay, it was always labeled as the other....The only gay people they talked about was like Jeffrey Dahmer, you know actually a bunch of serial killers were all the only gay influences I had until like Nip/Tuck [an American television serial medical drama that incorporated LGBTQ representation]. (personal communication, December 2, 2020)

Taylor described the multiple sources of negative external messages she felt bombarded by, stating:

I really think the biggest part of my experiences just came from those external messages...I really internalized these...I took them very personally and I just let them get to me on many levels and I think that was really the biggest part of what contributed...because it wasn't just from the church, it was from family members, it was from peers, and those are some of your biggest support systems at the time when you're in high school—your friends and family—and that just makes you think, “What can I do? If my support systems are saying all these things that are homophobic, I can't come out. I can't do that because then they're just going to push me to the side.” (personal communication, October 24, 2020)

Brice, the youngest participant who graduated in 2020, noted that “everything was cis/het...cisgender heterosexual type stuff,” and the only representation of sexual minorities he saw in his school was “by the few kids that were comfortable enough to be

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themselves...they didn't really talk about it in any way, shape, or form" (personal communication, October 18, 2020).

Navigating School While Concealing Their Sexual Minority Identities

All participants decided to conceal their sexual minority identities within their K-12 public school settings. The two previous sections outlined some of the contributing factors that lead to their decisions. The strategies participants described engaging in fell into one of four categories:

1. Trying to be invisible—being quiet and not drawing attention to self
2. Finding safe people—selective friendships
3. Active avoidance—avoiding conversations, relationships, or activity participation
4. Active denouncement—straight personas, relationships, homophobic comments

Trying to be invisible was a strategy that some participants described as a way to maintain their safety within the school setting. The quieter they could be, the less attention they felt they brought to themselves, and the easier it was for them to avoid potential interactions that could out themselves, thus allowing them to slink by without detection. Brice and Jordan each described efforts to be quiet and unnoticed in the school setting. Brice recounted how he “went through a lot of headphones because I would break them playing music too loudly--to ignore other people” (personal communication, October 18, 2020). Constantly assessing his environment for safety, Jordan shared how, even though he is out in more situations now, he continues to use this strategy today, stating:

Anytime I go into a new space, whether it be a new room, a new job, a new

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anything, I am dead silent. I do not talk. I see the situation around me and I figure out where do I fit in here because when you don't think you fit, you have to figure out where you can fit in....I don't want to put myself out there just to get shut down immediately, so I usually wait until the second week of school to start talking to people....when I would try to talk it would be like less than a sentence and it would be like really deep low voice because that's when your voice is going to give you away, where I have to think about every word I say....I wanted to say less words and the words I said were very specific because I didn't want to feel as if I was exposing myself to any form of criticism or just intense judgement. So pretty much every place I went, I was just like that, quiet, and I was so selective about the words I would say and when I would say it. I was terrified because I wasn't really embraced by a lot of people. (personal communication, December 2, 2020)

Jordan did note that on occasion he would find a person that he felt comfortable around, remembering a friend that he ran cross country with in high school, he shared that “on the bus we would sit by each other and talk and it was kind of like a safe space...it was a person I could talk to and not be afraid of saying something about my interests and being judged down” (personal communication, December 2, 2020). Their quiet observations and assessments enabled Jordan and Brice to identify some persons that they saw as friends and they felt safer around, another strategy that several of the participants mentioned.

Along with Brice and Jordan, Taylor and Q noted choosing to spend time around people that they felt safer to be themselves around. Q appreciated that they felt they were

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“lucky enough to go to a school where the teachers were all pretty on board with the LGBT community,” and that they had “very select friends, who obviously themselves were queer in one way or another, but not necessarily vocally out,” to spend time around (personal communication, December 31, 2020). Taylor remembered spending a lot of time with her friends from theater and that was where she “felt most accepted” (personal communication, October 24, 2020). She noted that some of them were also in the Equality Club at their school, so while she did not choose to “explore who I was and be okay with being open” (Taylor, personal communication, October 24, 2020), being around those people created an aura of acceptance that helped her feel more comfortable.

A third category of strategies employed by participants was active avoidance of anything related to their sexual minority status. Kelly recounted how she “tried to avoid any conversations that had anything to do with dating or anything like that” (personal communication, October 18, 2020), and Q recalled how they never got into any serious or committed relationships and kept the relationships they did get into “100% out of school” (personal communication, December 31, 2020). Taylor, Mark, and Jordan all discussed their attempts to deny that part of themselves. As Taylor explained, “I really repressed my sexuality and denied it a lot. And so even when I knew that I was gay, I still was trying to deny it so much” (personal communication, October 24, 2020). Mark tried to avoid focusing on that aspect of himself at the time, stating that he “didn’t really focus much on any sort of romantic relationships or anything” (personal communication, January 5, 2021), and did not envision himself dating anyone during that time.

Similar to Mark, Jordan did not date anyone and also avoided participating in multiple activities and clubs, such as, choir, theater, figure skating, and even taking

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French, because he thought they would make him appear gay. He lamented “all the opportunities” he saw go by that he wanted to try, but did not take because they were “too gay” (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020). While all of these avoidance techniques and denials limited participants' ability to engage in authentic ways in their school environments, Brice's avoidance also limited his ability to take care of what many consider a basic need. He described how he would “avoid going to the bathroom at all costs” and felt like he “was always about to pee” himself while he was at school (Brice, personal communication, October 18, 2020).

Engaging in strategies that denounced their sexual minority status was the fourth category of navigational strategies that emerged. To a degree some of the avoidance strategies, like not talking about their relationships or choosing not to be in relationships or try activities that they thought might out themselves, could be interpreted as a self-denouncement in the denial and repression of those parts of themselves. However, a few of the participants noted taking even more active steps to present a heterosexual version of themselves. Mark recalled how he “did have sort of a girlfriend in high school” even though they “didn't go out much, but like a couple of times to homecoming” (personal communication, January 5, 2021), providing just enough visibility so that no one thought that he was gay. Jordan explained that in addition to avoiding certain topics he also would alter responses he would give to questions from others, sharing:

I liked watching reality TV, I liked pop music, but if someone asked what your favorite band was, I was like “Oh yeah, Journey is great.” Or if someone asked what your favorite song was, I'd say “I love that Fifty-Cent song” because that's the straight person's answer, not like “oh man, Hollaback Girl is so much fun!”

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Because once you say that one, it's over. So, you kinda had to create this persona and it was exhausting trying to remember the things you say because when they're not true it's hard to keep track. (personal communication, December 2, 2020)

Taylor struggled more in sharing this part of her story, but thought it was important to share, hoping to create greater awareness of the struggles sexual minority students face.

After building her courage, she continued:

I'm going to be honest. I probably said a lot of homophobic things that were just not nice to deflect these feelings I had and to just make sure that nobody would ever think, "Oh my God, she's a lesbian!"...I just acted in ways that I don't find appropriate, but at the time that was my defense mechanism and I wish it had been different....It was very hard and I felt, it's like this pull. Like I knew what I was doing and what I was saying was wrong and I knew that I had these feelings, but I also knew everyone around me had this idea of homosexuality and how wrong it was....And, ultimately, for most of that time I chose to just fit in and make myself look better. (Taylor, personal communication, October 24, 2020)

Participants engaged in these strategies as means to try to protect themselves in their school settings and greater societal environments that they found themselves in at the time. They saw metaphorical landmines scattered throughout their days as they tried to navigate their school settings and their interactions within those settings. This limited their abilities to take care of their basic needs, to explore and gain understanding and acceptance of their identities, and to present themselves authentically. Looking back on

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that time, all of the participants noted stress, fear, and negative experiences. Thinking specifically about the strategies she engaged in to keep herself safe at the time, Taylor expressed a deep feeling of remorse, stating that at the time her decisions did not affect her in the same way that they do now, sharing, “it affected me, but not as much as it does now because I look back on that and I think, ‘Why did I choose to do that? Like why? Why was that the path that I chose?’” (personal communication, October 24, 2020). However, she tried not to be too critical of her younger self “for choosing that because I think I was really trying to protect myself in many ways” (Taylor, personal communication, October 24, 2020).

School Resources for Sexual Minority Students

After sharing about their experiences and journeys toward self-acceptance of their sexual minority identities, participants were asked what sort of support services were offered for students who may have identified as sexual minorities in their K-12 public school settings. Half of the participants--Kelly, Mark, and Brice--could not recall any in their respective schools. The other half--Jordan, Q, and Taylor--recalled some things being in place at the high school level, but nothing prior to that. They each noted that their high school had some sort of club, Jordan mentioned a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance), Q mentioned a LGBTQ club, and Taylor referred to an Equality Club, which she explained “was kinda like a Gay Straight Alliance club, but a little more broad” (personal communication, October 24, 2020). Q and Taylor also mentioned that there were counselors at their schools. While half of the participants reported some sort of supports available, none of the participants reported interacting with them for various reasons.

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For Kelly, Mark, and Brice, trying to engage with any supports did not appear to be an option as they could not think of any that had existed within their school settings. While Taylor had mentioned that there were counselors available, she noted that “they were more focused on academic counseling,” and that overall “there was no real support system...that reached out to students who were part of the LGBTQ community, like it was just not talked about” (personal communication, October 24, 2020). Jordan had a complicated view on the supposed supports available at his school, sharing that:

There was a GSA at my school because the school I went to was known at the time for being one of the better schools for gay kids, and I guess if you're openly gay it was better, but if you weren't openly gay--because we had some teachers who were really cool and open and helpful—allegedly; I didn't have them. But there wasn't much support. There wasn't that much help for anyone. There was never, like, counselors reaching out to kids and talking to them about anything, like, 'oh, you seem reclusive, you seem a little bit off. What's wrong? What's going on?' There's never anyone trying to help kids that were just hiding.
(personal communication, December 2, 2020)

Jordan also seemed cautious of the GSA, saying that the students that showed up to it were either ones “who wanted to seem like they were with it” or “a bunch of republicans that would show up just to cause problems” (personal communication, December 2, 2020). Overall, he believed that “there wasn't really a safe space, like with school things, you just hoped the kids would find the right group of kids and other people around them that would give them support and would be supportive” (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020).

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Even though they did not disclose anything related to their sexual minority identity, Q had the most positive things to report about supports available. They recalled: an amazing student counselor...He was the most non-judgmental, welcoming and warm person that I had met throughout all 12 years of my schooling and still one of the most welcoming people I have ever met. While I never actually talked to him about anything like that in specifics, he had signs...about acceptance and love regardless of who you were and he made it very clear that no matter who you were, as long as you were not harming yourself or others, that you would be loved and accepted and welcomed. (Q, personal communication, December 31, 2020)

They also stated that their high school had “a wonderful LGBTQ club” which they “did not join because of fear of ‘what if this accidentally outs myself?’” (Q, personal communication, December 31, 2020). But they did note that they kept an eye on it “and they were really good, and really supportive, and really welcoming” (Q, personal communication, December 31, 2020).

Sexual Minority Representation at School

When asked to think about how sexual minority issues or people were represented in the school, participants struggled to come up with examples. Even Q, who had the most positive responses about support service available commented, “aside from the club, they weren’t [represented]. There’s not too much more I can expand on that” (personal communication, December 31, 2020). Similar to Q, Taylor stated that “there was no representation, other than the Equality Club, that provided some representation, but other than that there really was none” (personal communication, October 24, 2020).

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All of the participants recalled the absence of any representation within their schools, particularly when it came to curriculum. Brice noted how “everything was cis/het....there was more or less a complete absence with the curriculum” (personal communication, October 18, 2020); Kelly recalled how it was a “hush-hush topic” that the school did not bring up and if a student did “the conversation was shut down” (personal communication, October 18, 2020); and Mark shared that he did not “remember anything. Not anything in history or literature class or anything like that....to my memory, I really don’t remember anything along those lines” (personal communication, January 5, 2021). Similarly, Jordan bluntly stated, “There was zero representation” (personal communication, December 2, 2020). He then explained further that:

We didn’t read any books with gay issues in them....there was never any representation in grade school, K through 12. All the stories were usually white people, white straight people with their kids....there weren’t even books for silent reading options in libraries....and there was never an option in Health class...it was always man-woman, man-woman, or you can be by yourself. (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020)

Taylor expressed frustration at the lack of coverage in her school curriculum, recounting how:

It was just not talked about, at all. I don’t remember learning about LGBTQ issues. All the knowledge of LGBT history that I had learned in high school, I learned on my own. And, you know, I was taking college-level courses in high school, where I would expect a broader curriculum. Something more all-encompassing, you know?...I don’t understand why public schools wouldn’t have

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LGBTQ history in their curriculum, but I know that a lot don't. So, I would think that these college-level courses would have them, but it still didn't, and I still didn't learn anything about LGBTQ community from my school. (personal communication, October 24, 2020)

Aligned with Taylor's frustration, Q lamented how:

especially in history and Civics and stuff like that, anything having to do with the LGBT community, any accomplishments that any gay person made it just didn't exist....there's a lot of history that was erased and that's a huge shame. I didn't know about Stonewall until after I graduated. I had no idea that the Pride movement was led by trans people of color. It's just not something you find out about...they're definitely not cis and definitely not white, so that's something that's going to be erased. That's a huge shame because there are so many amazing history moments that were pioneered by the gay community that just get left out. (personal communication, December 31, 2020)

For all of the participants invisibility of sexual minorities within the school curriculum was noticed to varying degrees at the time they were in school, and even more acutely as they thought back on their experiences.

Another form of representation that a few of the participants commented upon was that of people within the school that were out. Brice believed the only representation that he saw in his school were "the few kids that were comfortable enough to be themselves" (personal communication, October 18, 2020). While Mark was not aware of any representation at the time he was attending school, he commented that "in retrospect, there might have been a few teachers who may have been....it just seemed like something

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that was just not very open about. I don't know if it was just the school culture or if it was the time period or what" (personal communication, January 5, 2021). But he also thought that maybe it was something more than just the time period realizing that he knew some currently practicing sexual minority teachers "and they don't talk it over with their students in any way. It's just not the sort of thing that you're open about" (Mark, personal communication, January 5, 2021). None of the other participants mentioned being aware of any teachers that identified as sexual minorities in their school either. Jordan commented that he was currently working as a teacher in a high school in the greater St. Louis area and he did not feel like it was safe for him to be out in that context.

Advice for Improvements

After thinking about their personal K-12 experiences and observations, participants were asked for any advice they had for changes that would better meet the needs of sexual minority students. Overall areas that were common themes in participant responses were:

1. Curriculum—increase positive sexual minority representation and inclusion
2. Clubs—make sure there is a GSA club available
3. Counseling—improve training and outreach to sexual minority students
4. Responses to bullying—more active in acknowledging and addressing incidents

The most overarching theme that emerged was the idea of increasing sexual minority representation within the school curriculum. Kelly did not have specific ideas on how to achieve this, but rather presented a general desire for inclusion, replying that "I think it should be regarded just like heterosexual issues are treated; make it part of the

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normal curriculum, cover all bases” (personal communication, October 18, 2020). Mark expounded on this noting that he thought this could be done in a subtle fashion, “like if you can have some content that almost doesn’t even draw attention to itself--like if you have stories that involve some sort of LGBT characters, but that’s not the focus of the story, they just happened to be that way....Mostly just some sort of context to normalize it all” (personal communication, January 5, 2021). Q also focused on the idea of normalization, stating “I think if it’s starting in the classroom and in the curriculum, it will get pushed out to just general everyday acceptance” (personal communication, December 31, 2020).

Three areas of curriculum were mentioned by multiple participants. These curricular areas were history, English, and health or sex education. Mark, Jordan, Q, and Taylor all thought inclusion in history classes was important to help put things in context. Mark believed that talking “about what life was like for LGBT people” in the past and “why it was that way....and how we’ve gotten to where we are today” would be one way of providing such context (personal communication, January 5, 2021). Jordan also thought that seeing that “there’s a gay person in the past” could send the message to potential sexual minority students trying to sort out their feelings that “this didn’t start with you, you’re not the epicenter of the rainbow flag” and provide context and normalization for what they were experiencing (personal communication, December 2, 2020). For Q and Taylor, the inclusion in history classes served as an avenue to increase awareness of and acknowledge the valuable contributions sexual minorities have made. Taylor also saw English classes as an opportune place to incorporate “literature that was written by people from the LGBTQ community or about the LGBTQ community”

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(personal communication, October 24, 2020), and Brice saw opportunities for such inclusion all the way down to the elementary levels where teachers could, for example, introduce “the idea of gay parents and ‘oh look a brother of this character’s gay’ and that type of stuff” (personal communication, October 18, 2020).

Health and sex education was also mentioned by two-thirds of the participants as a key area that needed to include sexual minority information. As Taylor explained, “it’s important that in health classes that there is education, sex education for LGBTQ students as well because that’s so often neglected and it’s just targeted towards heterosexual stuff. It’s not all encompassing” (personal communication, October 24, 2020). Q agreed with these sentiments, stating that:

in sex ed, we were only ever taught one perspective....and they didn’t dare even think about expanding their ideas and their teachings on heteronormative sex....if they even just opened that up and didn’t make any other changes, but actually taught gay relationships in sexual education, I feel like that would do leaps and bounds toward understanding. (personal communication, December 31, 2020)

Participants believed incorporating these aspects into the general curriculum would increase not just of sexual minority students’ understanding of themselves, but also increase the majority’s understanding and acceptance of others as well. Remembering a painful experience where someone he worked with told him “that I’d enjoy prison because I would enjoy being raped,” Jordan thought that maybe covering “common myths that you want to destigmatize” as part of Health class could reduce people from making such untrue and hurtful comments (personal communication, December 2, 2020).

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Some of the participants focused on the sex ed at the high school level, but Q and Brice both thought that it was important to introduce some things even earlier. Brice noted that he thought in middle school “they should at least slightly include LGBTQ+ type stuff” when they start sex ed because he thought that was when kids “typically start questioning stuff like their gender and sexuality and it would be nice for them to have” that understanding and “be allowed to ask questions” (personal communication, October 18, 2020). Additionally, Q saw changes to sex ed and inclusion of sexual minority information at earlier grades as important due to their own negative experiences in middle school. They shared:

I had sex education in either 6th or 7th grade, seventh grade is what really scared me into the closet sex education-wise....A lot of people will say that middle school is too young for them to learn, but it's not because kids are discovering themselves in elementary school....I knew that I wasn't straight in 4th grade. I also knew I wasn't monogamous in 4th grade, it didn't make sense to me. If somebody who's in elementary school can know without a fraction of a doubt that they are not a straight cis-person, then you can be teaching them about themselves in middle school. (Q, personal communication, December 31, 2020)

Jordan added that even before sex ed was a focus, perhaps there could be “some form of health class where it's focused on social health, the world around you, things you might be exposed to and why things are like that, maybe how you as a human can react....understanding what healthy relationships are” (personal communication, December 2, 2020).

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Two other changes were noted by participants that could better meet the needs of sexual minority students: having GSA-type clubs, because for half of the participants their schools did not have one; and improvements in the counseling services available. Both Taylor and Jordan felt their counselors were good in the work that they had done, but that there was room for improvement. Taylor acknowledged:

I know that every school counseling system is different in how they function, but I think a lot of schools need to be more open about the fact that, and talk more about the fact that, LGBTQ issues affect students in high school no matter what high school you're in and that there needs to be some kind of system set up in place; if they're not safe, they can go somewhere within the school and the counseling system to find refuge and be okay and talk about what's going on for them. I think the counseling system could definitely use some more support in that aspect. (personal communication, October 24, 2020)

Jordan shared that he loved “counselors because a lot of the ones I work with are well-trained,” but he thought there could be improved protocols “if you see a kid who doesn't fit in” or “is having issues” (personal communication, December 2, 2020).

However, Brice was critical of the actions engaged in by the counselors at his school. He felt that the counselors should “treat all the students the same” but that was not the experience he had, explaining that “one of the counselors was told from a student that she was not treating him the same, and she didn't care. She started treating him worse because he expressed his feelings on it” (Brice, personal communication, October 18, 2020). Another of the counselors “wouldn't give anyone another option for the bathroom...to use a bathroom that wasn't the one assigned at birth....She was

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discriminating against them too, all the students that weren't cis" (Brice, personal communication, October 18, 2020). The discrimination Brice described could be considered by some a bullying situation, the abuse or mistreatment of someone vulnerable by someone more powerful.

Brice's situation with the counselors at his school, may depict the acceptance of mistreatment or bullying by persons of authority within the school rather than an issue of counseling services available themselves. However, it is difficult to separate the person from the position, and it would be hard to imagine Brice trusting or feeling comfortable sharing with any of the counselors he described in his school. From Brice's story and others shared by participants, how a school responds to bullying situations emerged as the final area of improvements in the school setting to provide for the safety of sexual minority students. While they thought there were pretty decent resources at their high school, Q shared that in "seventh grade there was a rumor that got started" about their sexual identity and when they went to the school, "all they did was offer me three counseling sessions with a counselor on how to deal with the emotions that I personally felt after being bullied" (personal communication, December 31, 2020). Q did not believe that:

there was any investigation into who might have started the rumor, to have any sort of discussion with them. There was no huge school-wide meeting on bullying and acceptance of people who are different than you. There was nothing other than, "oh, you seem pretty upset about that, how about you fix it?" (personal communication, December 31, 2020)

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They saw this response as a failure and unacceptable, noting that the school did not “try to get to the bottom of it and try to fix the problem, they just tried to fix my upsetness about it,” and that was “not something that’s going to solve anything, so it will just go on and happen to the next person” (Q, personal communication, December 31, 2020). From the time he was 8 through his entire time in high school, Jordan recalled instances where he was punched and called “faggot,” remembering “I just had a bunch of really tough experiences with other people putting it in such a negative connotation and physically assaulting me or verbally assaulting me” (personal communication, December 2, 2020). He recounted one “day in high school where juniors teepeed the sophomores” and he woke up to find signs in his yard that said things like, “go away, no one likes you faggot, die” (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020). He said that “that wasn’t a big thing apparently, it wasn’t offensive enough,” as there was no response from the school (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020). For Jordan, there was “no one out there contextualizing that it was okay to be” the way he was, so with “all these incidents of bullying” coming out was “telling those people, ‘oh you’re right, you nailed it, I deserved those things because that’s who I am’....saying ‘these people, who said these worst things about me that I’ve ever heard in my life, they are all correct’” (personal communication, December 31, 2020). He further acknowledged that “those incidents probably added time to my acceptance of who I am” (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020), displaying how important responses to bullying are in creating safety for sexual minority students.

Overall, the advice presented by the participants aimed in one way or another to contextualize what sexual minority students may be experiencing and to create more

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awareness and acceptance by others who interact with them. Some of the participants' suggestions were targeted at responsive services to support sexual minority students directly when incidents occur or they are working through issues around their identity. However, the majority focused on more global changes directed at the school systems and curriculum aimed to increase sexual minority representation, awareness, and acceptance. As Q explained, "You can't fix a systemic problem if you are only focusing on the minority. It's gotta come from the majority....nothing is going to fix the systemic issues unless it comes from the people who are in charge of it" (personal communication, December 31, 2020).

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of Results

The process of gaining awareness and acceptance of oneself is a lifelong journey. Along the way people are bombarded with a multitude of external messages about what they should be like. For all people trying to navigate their way in the world these messages could be affirming or negating of various aspects of their identity. Unfortunately, the messages sexual minorities receive are predominantly the latter. Participants in this study all shared various experiences where they felt sexual minorities were at best invisible in their predominantly cisgender and heteronormative institutions and environments. At their worst, participants experienced physical, emotional, and at times even physical assault due to their own sexual minority status, or viewed it perpetrated on others. These messages came from family, friends, institutions like church or school, their communities, and society at large. Some of the participants shared that they regretted how long it took them to come out, or about the things that they did or said as they tried to navigate themselves before they were open about their non-heteronormative identities. However, when one feels like they are trying desperately just to keep their head above water, attempting to find a sense of self-acceptance or self-worth while wading in a sea of negating messages is a herculean task. One participant pondered how his life may have taken a different trajectory if the messages he received had been different, wondering “That’s something that I always ask myself--What if someone had told me how great I was as a kid?” (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020).

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Taking on all the areas of oppression sexual minorities experience would require multiple research projects. This study focused on one area, asking participants to think particularly about their K-12 public school experiences. All of the participants chose to conceal their non-heteronormative identities in those settings. For most this was an extension of the way they kept that part of themselves hidden in other areas of their lives at that time as well. One participant did share that they did a little exploration of that part during high school, but made sure they kept that outside of their school setting. The strategies participants described engaging in to conceal their sexual minority identities in their school settings fell into one of four categories:

1. Trying to be invisible—being quiet and not drawing attention to self
2. Finding safe people—selective friendships
3. Active avoidance—avoiding conversations, relationships, or activity participation
4. Active denouncement—straight personas, relationships, homophobic comments

Hiding parts of themselves is a connection that spans all strategies across these categories. Participants hid from themselves by trying not to think about or explore aspects of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Some participants were able to hide from others they thought would be unaccepting by finding safe people to surround themselves with. Participants also hid by limiting engagement with others and by avoiding or redirecting certain conversation topics, effectively creating invisible spots in participants' lives at school. Some also hid behind facades they created, providing responses they thought would be common of a straight person or making homophobic comments themselves. All of these strategies were ways they felt would enable them to

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navigate their heteronormative school environments more safely because they felt they could avoid criticism or negative backlash if they simply were not fully seen.

This strategy was similar to previous research on sexual minority students (and non-students), that found that the concept of passing, concealing their nonheterosexual identity, or presenting a heteronormative persona could be strategies to maintain their own safety within environments deemed unsafe to be out or open in (Johnson, 2017; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Lugg, 2016). One of the participants noted that at the time he was in school he felt “lucky” that he “was straight passing enough” that he “could go under the radar” because for some kids “there's no way they can hide, and they shouldn't have to hide obviously, but there's no way that they could” (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020). Another recalled the worry they felt for students who could not pass; remembering one in particular, they shared, “I can't imagine what her school life was like at all because she was not passing, and if I had problems in middle school with being closeted and definitely passing, I can't imagine the torment that she went through” (Q, personal communication, December 31, 2020).

Altogether these strategies, that helped them navigate through these periods of their lives, paint a picture of severe loneliness. Even if they were able to conceal and pass, that cut off their ability to be seen and accepted as who they were in their entirety. “Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty” is a quote often attributed to Mother Theresa. The United Kingdom considered loneliness as such a major factor affecting the mental and social health of their citizens that the British government established a Minister for Loneliness in 2018 (Matthews, 2019). Loneliness

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appears to be something affecting many people on a large scale, and societal factors can increase this sense for minority populations. A very basic human need is to see ourselves reflected in our world and for those who are a small percentage of the larger population, they do not see themselves reflected very often (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Racial and cultural groups often have at least their immediate family that they can connect with, but sexual minorities often find themselves as a minority within their family as well. Especially in their immediate friends, family, and surroundings, they may not only not see themselves, but what they do see may consistently negate or invalidate their existence or identity.

Lack of positive representation of sexual minorities within the school was expressed by all the participants, with the majority sharing examples of the overall cisgender and heteronormative environment and curriculum. Only half reported any sort of support services available to sexual minorities in the form of diversity clubs (two were specifically described as GSAs, and the other was a more generic equality club). They also mentioned that counseling services were available, but any of the services noted required the students to seek them out and to a degree self-disclose their sexual minority status to gain support from them in that area. The other half of participants reported no support services available to sexual minority students. The participants who reported no support available were the two oldest and the youngest respondent, showing the lack of support was not only a product of past educational practices.

The lack of what they considered adequate support structures and curricular inclusion of sexual minorities in their school experiences factored into participants' difficulties in accepting themselves and choosing concealment of their own sexual

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minority identities; however, it also fueled their desire to participate in this research project. One participant shared “I think this is really important and just had a lot to say. I was very excited somebody was doing something like this” (Taylor, personal communication, October 24, 2020). And another noted, “I think what you're doing, this whole project, is fantastic, which is why the second you asked if I wanted to be a part of it, I was like ‘F*** yeah! Let's go change something!’” (Q, personal communication, December 31, 2020).

Participants were excited not just for the opportunity to share their personal experiences in and observations of their K-12 public school settings, but also for a chance to share their ideas for changes that could be made to better meet the needs of sexual minority students. Their advice was directly connected to areas they found lacking in their own personal K-12 public school experiences. Overall areas that were common themes in participant responses were:

1. Curriculum—increase positive sexual minority representation and inclusion
2. Clubs—make sure there is a GSA club available
3. Counseling—improve training and outreach to sexual minority students
4. Responses to bullying— more active in acknowledging and addressing incidents

The most overarching theme that emerged was the idea of increasing sexual minority representation within the school curriculum. All the participants indicated a desire for schools to look for ways to normalize sexual minority persons and issues and presented ideas for curricular inclusion from elementary level through high school. While participants also thought that having opportunities for safe and affirming responsive

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services like counseling or the way bullying incidents were handled, mostly they desired systemic changes that would universally change the heteronormative structure they experienced in their public school educational institutions. They thought this could be achieved by not only having visible GSAs in schools, but also through efforts to include more representation and discussion in classrooms and curricula of sexual minority persons, history, current issues, health and sex education, and characters in stories. One unique response also brought up the idea of inclusion within career education, stating:

Show people of different backgrounds being successful in all fields. I know it sounds obvious, but try to think about gay mathematicians or gay successful scientists, because a lot of times people are like “oh you’re gay, you should be doing this or that,” like become a hair dresser or become this because this field is not meant for you. Try to show people in STEM classes at a young age that you don’t have to be this stereotypical straight white male to be successful as an engineer or be successful as anything. (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020)

While none of the participants explicitly brought up the role teachers play in any such initiative, it is important to acknowledge that teacher training and buy in, as well as administrative support, would be important for any such curricular changes to be effective, as portrayed in *The Every Teacher Project on LGBTQ-Inclusive Education in Canada’s K-12 Schools* (Taylor, Peter, Campbell, Meyer, Ristock, Short, 2015).

Limitations

The small sample size and variability in demographic data for each participant limits the generalizability of results to other populations. While all of the participants

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self-identified as sexual minorities who attended K-12 public schools located within the greater St. Louis area and concealed their identities in those settings, they came from different backgrounds, identified in different ways in regards to sexual orientation and/or gender identity, attended different schools and, for the most part, attended those schools at different times from each other. Each participant's responses came from a cross section of their unique personal factors, providing a narrative of one person's experiences at particular moments in the settings they found themselves. One participant even acknowledged that his experience could have been different from other sexual minority students that attended school with him. He shared that in his high school there were allegedly "some teachers who were really cool and open and helpful" but he did not have them, and that the high school he attended "was known at the time for being one of the better schools for gay kids," but that was not his experience (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020). To him, "there wasn't that much support, there wasn't that much help for anyone" (Jordan, personal communication, December 2, 2020).

Given the 25 year span of participants' high school graduation years from 1995-2020, and spread of schools attended across North, West, St. Charles, and Jefferson Counties, it is interesting that, while their individual stories and experiences differed, similar themes still arose. These themes indicate some degree of common experiences for sexual minority students who have been, historically and may still be, hiding within predominantly heteronormative educational institutions found in the greater St. Louis area. Previous research has noted differences in experiences based on sexual minority students' regional location, with those in the South or Midwest expressing more negative experiences than those in the Northeast or West (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, &

Truong, 2018). Future research could look closer at how the qualitative experiences of students in other geographic regions compare to those reported in the current study.

Recommendations

A phrase often used by the disability rights movement is “nothing about us without us;” however, this phrase “is a centuries-old political slogan asserting that no policy should be created without the full and direct participation of those it affects” and could be applied to any oppressed group looking for more inclusive practices (Levinsky-Raskin & Stevens, 2016, p. 18). Sexual minorities are one such group, and, as with some disabilities that may not be visually apparent, a person's sexual orientation or gender identity may not be easily observable. Taking into account the voices of persons who have managed to navigate society and institutions like school in a manner where they pass for the norm does not negate their existence or the effect oppressive systems like racism, ableism, heterosexism, or any other ism has on them. Opportunities for future study by focusing on the experiences of persons at the intersections of various forms of oppression could build upon current research.

The current research project sought to gain insight from and give voice to a segment of the sexual minority population that is often overlooked and not considered because they were not loud, proclaiming their outness, or the discrimination they experienced. They engaged in various strategies to hide that part of themselves, to pass within the heteronormative structures that they found themselves. Their stories provide valuable information as to the experience of students who may be unaware of, resistant to, and/or concealing that part of their identity. Their advice can also be useful for educators and educational systems to consider in working to become more inclusive,

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equitable, and better meet the needs of all students in their charge. Of particular importance is the need to look at universal curricular and systemic changes to work to dismantle the heteronormative nature of these institutions.

Previous research has looked at the history of queer erasure within school systems in the United States (Lugg, 2016), and the overall heteronormativity of those school institutions in the U.S. and abroad (Baricevic, 2016; Biegel, 2018; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Grigsby, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Moffat, 2016; Taylor, Peter, Campbell, Meyer, Ristock, & Short, 2016). When I began thinking about my research topic in 2019, the St. Louis Missouri History Museum had begun an LGBTQ collection initiative to gather artifacts showing local LGBTQ history. I contacted them inquiring if they had received anything related to school or curriculum and I was provided with a 7-page document that listed “a broad overview of each of our processed collections with items pertaining to the LGBTQ community in St. Louis;” however, the archivist noted that they could not “think of any that have information about LGBTQ issues and curriculum in schools” (M. Kodner, personal communication, July 13, 2019). Each of these examples demonstrates the global to local invisibility sexual minorities have experienced and continue to experience within educational systems.

Currently the United States does not have a federal policy related to sexual minority inclusion in K-12 curriculum (Crary & Saltler, 2019; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Lugg, 2016; Rice, 2019). Some individual states have passed their own laws requiring such inclusion, but Missouri is not one of them at this point in time (Human Rights Campaign, 2019; Movement Advancement Project 2021; Wittich & Issa, 2019). As noted above, increased sexual minority representation and curricular inclusion was the most

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cited area for improvement by participants in this study and the United States has limited federal regulation providing inclusive educational experiences for sexual minority students. Even though laws and policies in schools are only as effective as the way educators are employing them (Meyer, Quantz, Taylor, & Peter, 2019; Peter, 2018; Shipley, 2013), the absence of such policies shows either a lack of awareness or lack of concern regarding the experiences of sexual minority persons in public schools. The creation and implementation of such policies is an important step in moving toward application of curricular changes and sexual minority representation.

Rosiek, Schmitke, and Heffernen (2017) noted that “even in circumstances that are favorable to gender and LGBTQ advocacy, the heteronormative discursive context of our broader culture can undermine efforts to this end by rendering such advocacy invisible to important stakeholders and decision makers” (p. 13). Due to the pervasive nature of our heteronormative culture, direct and intentional instruction of GSD topics is necessary to counteract its effects (Gibbs, 2018; Moorhead, 2018; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016). School level, state level, and national level policies could subsequently increase inclusion of sexual minority issues and topics in teacher training programs and curriculum design. School leaders and educators can also make themselves familiar with current policies and educational laws to work toward sexual minority inclusion (Lewis, & Kern, 2018).

Personal Reflection

Listening to the participants who were brave enough to share their stories and give voice to their experience, gave me time to reflect on my own experiences and actions within educational institutions that for the most part have unintentionally reinforced and perpetuated the heteronormativity within these settings. I have spent a majority of my time in education, both as a student and later as an educator, avoiding, deflecting, sometimes passing as straight, oftentimes passing as cisgender when questions arose around my own sexual orientation or gender identity.

Similar to concerns noted by participants, the lack of representation and fear of rejection were key factors in my concealment of these parts of my identity. For many years I did not have a sense of what my thoughts or feelings meant or an understanding of how to be open in the environments I found myself. It was not until my junior year of college that I shared that information about myself with my family and friends on a large scale. Having some sort of personal interaction with other sexual minorities proved essential in moving me to a place where I felt I could do that. That year I transferred to a state university and joined their women's rugby team, where I met a handful of open sexual minority players. Having this small community helped me to see that part of myself reflected in others and explore what being a sexual minority could look like. To this day, I still think of a couple of them as my gay parents, as they provided me with a positive and accepting example of people being out. After having been around them for about a semester, I began living more openly as well and I recall they even gave me a coming out gift. Without the representation and modeling they provided for me, I am not sure when I would have reached a level of self-acceptance.

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After they graduated, I suddenly found myself as the only one on the team who was openly gay. Once, the school newspaper listed our upcoming game as an event to attend for the Pride celebration at the school, and this was apparently a cause for distress among the rest of my teammates. One asked me to write a letter to the editor of the school's newspaper to defend their heterosexuality. They said that the listing made it seem like everyone on the team was gay and only I was so I needed to write a letter sharing that information because none of them could do it without making them look homophobic. So I—the lone out sexual minority—had to clarify for the rest of the university that just because they played rugby that did not mean that they too were gay. If we were in a place that truly valued sexual minorities the same as the heteronorm, I wonder if there would be such an innate need for straight people to make sure that they were not mistaken for sexual minorities.

Moving from being mostly out in college to an internship on an army post and then working as a school counselor in a rural Northwest Missouri, was an operation in returning to concealment. I remember at that first job as a school counselor in Northwest Missouri, in senior class a student shared that everyone thought her friend was gay and he was not, and I responded that even if he was that did not mean he should be treated differently or without respect. Subsequently, I got talked to by the high school principal and superintendent for reports that I was preaching gay and ended up without a job the next year. More recently, I have been told that bringing up other forms of oppression that people or students may face watered down the discussion of race, and as a White person I did not want to take away from that discussion because it was and still is incredibly important and prominent within our society. I think about these incidents and others that

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conditioned me to go along with the heteronorm and suppress my voice on matters of oppression and discrimination sexual minorities face.

This project was a journey for me on a very personal level as it helped me find my own voice in advocating for those whose struggles are missed, neglected, and made invisible. Thinking about those who figured out how to survive by blending in, I realized that I too had tried not to be too vocal or stand out too much for years. I also realized that if I continued to hide and never bring voice to these issues, I would be complicit in allowing sexual minority oppression within the public school system to continue indefinitely, leaving the burden for change to others. Hearing each participant share, going back and rereading their words multiple times, noting time and time again how each one called for representation and normalization within the school system and curricula, emphasized the importance of bringing sexual minority issues to attention. Throughout my research and continual personal evolution, I have realized that bringing up any aspect of oppression can add to and deepen the work for equity for all people and not something that detracts from others unless those voices are silenced or not considered in the process.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Coming out about one's sexual identity is a process where students/people share or externalize a sexual identity that is an alternative to what society considers the heterosexual norm. What does being out mean to you?
2. Coming out about one's sexual identity is also not a singular process, but often something that is repeated with different people or in different settings. What did it feel like when you first thought about coming out about your sexual identity?
3. Who did you first think about sharing your sexual identity with?

For the next questions, think about your K-12 schooling experiences.

4. What did it feel like when you thought about coming out about your sexual identity in your educational setting?
5. How did you navigate your school experiences before you were publicly open about your sexual identity? What was that like for you? What factors contributed to this?
6. What support services were offered for students who may identify as sexual minorities? How did you think about or interact with these services?
7. How were sexual minority issues/people represented in the school? Classroom? Curriculum?

Follow up questions

8. What advice do you have for changes in K-12 curriculum, support systems, resources, safety, etc., to better meet the needs of sexual minority students?
9. Is there anyone else you think I should talk to and can refer me to?

Appendix B: Punctuated Narratives**Brice--White trans male, Graduated 2020****Interview Date--October 18, 2020**

KC: To start, just thinking about coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is a process where students/people share or externalize an identity that is an alternative to what society considers the hetero norm or gender binary. What does being out mean to you?

Brice: Good question. I guess trying to be myself.

KC: Ok, and what does that kind of look like in practice?

Brice: Going by my preferred name and he/him pronouns

KC: Coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is also not a one-time event, it's not a singular process, but often something that is repeated with different people or in different settings. What did it feel like when you first thought about coming out about your identity?

Brice: My first thought about it?

KC: And what did it feel like when you first started thinking about doing that?

Brice: I got really anxious. I was really anxious to think about it, thinking about it and when it would happen.

KC: So, what do you think tied into those feelings of anxiousness?

Brice: Probably how I thought my friends and family would react.

KC: What were you maybe expecting? Like what reactions did you think they would have?

Brice: Well, I knew my mom was going to be like "oh, okay, cool." My little brother could have gone either way, like "ok cool" that's practically what happened, or I could have gotten a black eye--because he's 9 and autistic and struggles to control himself at times. And my siblings on my dad's side don't know because they say I'm not allowed to tell them. That probably gives their reaction too, my dad's like "Hey, no," my step-mom's like "ehh" I don't know how to put it in other words.

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KC: Not very receptive with some of your family

Brice: Yeah

KC: Or open

Brice: Yeah

KC: So, thinking about that, you said that there was kind of mixed reactions

Brice: Yeah

KC: Who did you first think about sharing your sexual or gender identity with?

Brice: Do you mean family or do you mean friends?

KC: How about both?

Brice: Family, my **plan** was to tell my aunt first, didn't go that way, but that was my original plan.

Um, friends, that's difficult because I told different people at different times for different reasons.

KC: Mm-hmm, so you said your aunt was your plan as far as a first person

Brice: Yeah

KC: What was it that made you feel like that would be a good place to start?

Brice: Well, she's not straight, yeah, she's also polyamorous, I think. So that kind of and she's always been like "hey you can talk to me about it no matter what, about anything the matter what" that type of thing.

KC: so, feeling like she doesn't quite fit with that heteronorm herself?

Brice: Yeah

KC: So, she could be more supportive and open to what you had to share?

Brice: Yeah, yeah

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KC: Alright, so for the next questions, can you think about your K-12 schooling experiences?

Brice: Ok

KC: What did it feel like when you thought about coming out about your sexual/gender identity in your educational setting?

Brice: I was terrified. Because I went to what people describe as a farm school and most people there are not supportive in any way, shape, or form. Some of the teachers are, I think a few teachers knew by the time I graduated, where I told them or they figured it out. And some people I went to school with knew, but not very many because I was terrified. I think the counselor figured it out without directly saying it, so did the principal.

KC: So, what did you think might happen if people did find out?

Brice: Bullied in any kind of way possible

KC: So, then how did you navigate your school experiences before you were publicly open about your sexual or gender identity?

Brice: I went through a lot of headphones because I would break them playing music too loudly--to ignore other people. I would avoid going to the bathroom at all costs. I was always about to pee myself. And I kind of stayed around the people that I was friends with all the time.

KC: So, what was that like for you?

Brice: It sucked. I wasn't able to be comfortable at school then. Or now really. In college. It sucks.

KC: It hasn't improved, huh?

Brice: No, ah, really it, no. Classes over Zoom, I didn't realize how bad it was going to be.

KC: So, thinking about some of those things you said you did, and I know that you said that you were terrified, I'm thinking about what... I think you kind of already answered this because the next was just about what factors contributed to your experience and I know that you said kind of a fear of being bullied. Were there any other factors?

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Brice: I didn't wanna be left out of anything too. Because they did that to other kids who came out in anyway sort of form

KC: So, what things were they left out of?

Brice: Whenever teachers were like "Hey, get in groups," they wouldn't get a group. If they were playing in PE, they would get picked last or not picked at all. That sort of stuff.

KC: So, left out by peers?

Brice: Yeah. Teachers didn't really do it, a few did, not very many

KC: So, what support services were offered for students who may identify as LGBTQ+?

Brice: I don't know if there was any. I don't think there was.

KC: So, then I'm guessing that you didn't personally make use of any services, if you're not even sure that there were any services available to you

Brice: Yeah, no. I don't think there were any. Yeah, there's not any.

KC: So then thinking about how LGBTQ people or issues were represented. How were they represented within your school setting?

Brice: Um, I guess they were represented by the few kids that were comfortable enough to be themselves. They didn't really talk about it in any way, shape or form.

KC: So just by a few students, but they didn't really talk about it either, they just kinda were there?

Brice: Yeah

KC: So, what about thinking about things within the classroom, like curriculum or things like that. How, how are things represented there?

Brice: Everything was cis/het, like nothing was not that

KC: Everything was what?

Brice: Cis/het- cisgender heterosexual type stuff

KC: So just kind of like an absence of anything being like covered it all?

Brice: Yeah

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KC: So, there was a void, were there any negative things that came up, or just a complete absence?

Brice: I think there was more or less a complete absence with the curriculum type stuff that I can remember

KC: So then really what advice do you have for changes in a K-12 curriculum or support systems, resources, safety? There was a lot of things that you brought up, so really just anything related to any of it to better meet the needs of LGBTQ students

Brice: I would think like in middle school to high school when they start the health class and Sex Ed stuff, I think that they should at least slightly include LGBTQ+ type stuff, because kids around then I think is when they normally, not normally that's not the right word,

KC: typically?

Brice: Typically start questioning stuff like their gender and sexuality and it would be nice for them to have, like, "hey, this is that, that's this," like that kind of stuff...And they should be allowed to ask questions

KC: So, you're saying, at a minimum you think middle school to high school, what about at the elementary level? Do you think that there's anything that would be helpful starting earlier than that?

Brice: I think they can be introduced, I don't know how to correctly say it, but like introduced to the idea of like gay parents and "oh look a brother of this character's gay" and that type of stuff.

KC: What things do you kind of wish that you had had or had been in place as you were going through school that would have maybe made things a little bit easier for you and your process?

Brice: For like high school level, I think they should have a GSA. At least a high school level. I think one of the kids that graduated with me tried to start one. He did, he tried to start one, but school practically turned him down. I think their reasoning might be there's not enough kids to do it, even though there's plenty of kids that would do it.

KC: So, I was just thinking that GSAs typically aren't exclusive to just gender and sexually diverse people like cisgender and heterosexual people could also participate as allies

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Brice: Exactly

KC: I was just thinking that's an interesting reasoning.

Brice: In general, the school is still homophobic in every way possible. Like for marching band one year we wanted to do, I don't know what the theme they wanted to do was, but they wanted to do something that involved a couple that was not straight, but then the school board said "no, there is no way you're doing this. We will cut all funding," like if marching band had money to begin with, "we will cut the funding that you already slightly have if you start to try to do this."

KC: So, using threats to suppress

Brice: Yeah. The other thing the school did was, um, have this fancy-dancy bathroom key. If you're not just cisgender and you're open about it within the school, they say either you're allowed to use the bathroom of the gender you were assigned at birth, or not use the bathroom at all, but this year they added, they have a SPED bathroom they added a few years ago, and they have a key to that and apparently you had to fight for months to get it to use the bathroom that you were not assigned at birth

KC: So, what do you think would be a more supportive policy around bathrooms?

Brice: Um, maybe have some sort of gender-neutral bathrooms in the schools, like if you were going to Wal-Mart, they have the family bathrooms, like that type of situation. Have a gender neutral bathroom so you don't have to have a specific key to get into, it just opens like a regular door and then you lock it from the inside

KC: So, thinking about, you have quite a lot up here...curriculum, bringing things up, it kind of sounds like at different levels there's different depths you think that it could be addressed

Brice: Yeah

KC: Like even down to like really young ages

Brice: Yeah

KC: Just kind of starting to introduce and then as they get older having more, um, coverage in like particularly Health Ed classes and talking more in an inclusive way about things outside of the cis/het normative system

Brice: Yeah

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KC: And then support systems, at a minimum you said having a GSA

Brice: Yeah

KC: Available and functioning, then kind of a safe, would you say that it's kind of a safety thing with the bathrooms?

Brice: Yeah

KC: Or resources available and anything else that you think would be beneficial or helpful, um, for students who are not of the heterosexual or cisgender majority as navigating through?

Brice: I think the counselor should treat every student the same

KC: What does that mean?

Brice: Outside of just LGBTQ+ and kids with different disabilities, but that's not what we're talking about, they should treat all the students the same because they don't, they pick favorites really

KC: So, what would, I'm just kind of wondering what that would look like, like what could they do differently?

Brice: Like what could they do differently to treat all of us the same or how do they not treat all of us the same?

KC: Well, both, but what would that look like, how could they make sure that they are doing that?

Brice: Well, one of the counselors was told from a student that she was not treating him the same, and she didn't care. She started treating him worse because he expressed his feelings about it.

KC: Ok, so kinda, maybe if someone expressed that, then having a conversation with them about how they would like to be treated?

Brice: Yeah

KC: Because I'm just thinking on some things, like the bathrooms and other things that are unfortunately not the most inclusive set up right now, it seems like it can sometimes be harmful if everyone is treated the same, like "you were assigned this at birth, so you have to use this"

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Brice: Yeah

KC: So, in certain situations it seems like that could also be harmful?

Brice: With one of the counselors, she practically, practically wouldn't give anyone another option for the bathroom, like he wanted to use a bathroom that wasn't the one assigned at birth, especially this year with the different SPED bathroom that they built

KC: yeah?

Brice: You had to fight for months to get it and it was not a good situation, yeah. She was discriminating against them too...all the students that weren't cis.

KC: That sounds like a really terrible experience, I'm sorry for anyone having to deal with it

Brice: Yeah

KC: And I really appreciate you taking time to talk with me about all of these things

Brice: Yeah

KC: Because I really think it's important to listen and get voices of minorities heard by the majority

Brice: yeah

KC: Because otherwise as you said it's just continuing to either not address at all or keep it suppressed

Brice: Yeah

KC: So, I do want to thank you for sharing with me today

Brice: Yeah, no problem

KC: And is there anything else that you would like to share, or think that I should know related to this topic?

Brice: Not that I can think of

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Kelly--Black cisgender female lesbian, Graduated 1995

Interview Date: October 18, 2020

KC: Coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is a process where students/people share or externalize an identity that is an alternative to what society considers the heterosexual norm or gender binary. What does being out mean to you?

Kelly: Basically, just being open and honest about who I am

KC: Alright, coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is also not a singular process, but often something that is repeated with different people or in different settings.

Kelly: Right

KC: So, what did it feel like when you first thought about coming out about your identity?

Kelly: It was scary at first, but after a while I kinda got used to it. It was just like second nature. It became normal for me.

KC: So, who did you first think about sharing your sexual or gender identity with?

Kelly: My Grandmother

KC: Then for the next questions I want you to think specifically about your K12 schooling

Kelly: Ok

KC: What did it feel like when you thought about coming out about your sexual/gender identity in your educational setting?

Kelly: I didn't hear the first part of the question

KC: So thinking about your K-12 schooling experiences, what did it feel like when you thought about coming out about your sexual or gender identity in your educational setting?

Kelly: I was really really scared. I thought that I would never have any friends anymore

KC: Can you tell me more about that?

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Kelly: I just was worried about that because a lot of my friends were really traditional religiously and I just thought that once I told them who I really was that, uh, they wouldn't like me anymore

KC: So how did you navigate your school experiences before you were publicly open about your sexual or gender identity?

Kelly: I just tried to avoid

KC: What was that like for you?

Kelly: I just tried to avoid any conversations that had anything to do with dating or anything like that

KC: And what factors contributed to this?

Kelly: Just fear of rejection. And also, I was brought up in a pretty traditional Lutheran Family so...

KC: What support services were offered for students who may identify as LGBTQ+? How did you think about or interact with these services?

Kelly: None. None were. None. There were none.

KC: So then, there were none for you to interact with?

Kelly: No

KC: Then, how were LGBTQ+ issues/people represented in the school?

Kelly: Negatively, there was like, hush-hush topic, and if you brought it up the topic was shut down. The conversation was shut down.

KC: Ok, and that was in the school as a whole? Do you remember anything specifically?

Kelly: Nothing specifically, just in general class discussions, like in social studies or things like that.

KC: You said like in the classroom, thinking like curriculum, did anything show up in the lessons?

Kelly: No, like if it was brought up in civil rights or anything like that was brought up it was pretty much...the conversation was veered away from that topic

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KC: Ok, so it wasn't planned, like they didn't plan any lessons?

Kelly: No

KC: And if something did come up it was shut down or veered away from talking about it?

Kelly: Yeah

KC: So, then what advice do you have for changes, in like, the K-12, like as far as curriculum, or support systems, or resources?

Kelly: I think it should be regarded and treated just like heterosexual issues are treated; make it a part of the normal curriculum, cover all bases. You don't have to pick any specific literature, or any topics specifically related to it, but if it comes up then just include it.

KC: Ok, thinking about safety, is there anything that needs to be considered for the safety of our LGBTQ+ students in our school systems?

Kelly: There definitely needs to be some sort of safety precautions as far as openness and safety of students. I think, how to go about that, I'm not sure, maybe to have it like a closed after school setting, or if it comes up have a special discussion at another time about it or something. But there should definitely be some authority supervision.

KC: Alright, is there anything else that you can think of that you think would be beneficial, um, in the K-12 setting as far as changes?

Kelly: Nothing I can think of really off the top of my head

KC: Thank you for your time

Taylor--White cisgender female lesbian, graduated HS 2018

Interview Date--October 24, 2020

KC: The first question that I have really has to do with coming out about one's sexual or gender identity because I'm trying to get an idea of what that means to people because it can mean some different things. So, it's typically a process where students or people share or externalize an identity that is an alternative to what society considers, as like, the hetero norm/gender binary. What does it mean to you?

Taylor: For me, coming out really meant being able to be myself, I think. It also meant being able to say that I was different from the normal, to what society says is normal. But it really meant being able to be myself and not have to fear a life of being closeted and not being able to love who I loved. It just, to me, meant being who I am and not having to fear living my life in an unhappy way.

KC: What would you say that that kind of looks like in practice?

Taylor: Like how coming out looks like?

KC: Yeah, what does it look like, because for different people it may mean some different things like, perhaps, going by different pronouns or something else, so, I'm just wondering for you, what that looks like?

Taylor: So, for me it was just being able to date who I wanted to date and be in a relationship with who I wanted to date. I personally continue using the same pronoun so that wasn't something for me, but just being able to openly be with who I wanted to be with and not have to hide this feeling that I had towards women and that was really what it looks like for me

KC: Okay, thank you. Tying into that, coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is not a singular process, but often something that is repeated with different people or in different settings. So, what did it feel like when you first thought about coming out about your identity?

Taylor: Could you repeat the question? It cut out just a little bit

KC: Yes, coming out, it's not like a one-and-done thing, it's often something that you have to repeat with different people or in different settings, so the question was really just what did it feel like when you first thought about coming out about your identity?

Taylor: When I first thought about coming out, I was under the impression that I was bisexual because I really was afraid to open up and think that I could be a lesbian. I was

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scared. I had all this internal homophobia and it was messy for me. It was scary to even think about coming out as bisexual, but it was also exciting to think that I could do that. And once I came out, the first person I came out to was one of my closest friends and once I did that, I realized that like 'yes this is scary, but if I do this at the right time and, if I feel it out with, you know, each person I could do this, I could go forward with it'

KC: You said that the first person you came out to was one of your friends. Was that the first person you thought about sharing your sexual identity with? Or was there someone else that you thought of sharing with first?

Taylor: I think she was the first. She was part of the LGBTQ community, so she had some insight on like what coming out looks like to her and I was curious about that; so, she was kind of like my first thought because I knew she could provide me with some insight and some advice on navigating life when you're figuring out your sexual orientation and when you're trying to go through this what feels like really messy in your head. She did help me a lot and provided a lot of advice and insight. So yeah, she was definitely the first person that I thought about coming out to.

KC: So, it sounds like you went to her because you saw her as kind of like a resource that could be supportive and help you through the process as well.

Taylor: Yes, yes for sure

KC: And non-judgmental

Taylor: Yeah. Of course, yeah, I knew she would not judge me. That was a big part of it, like I knew for sure she was not going to judge me, so that fear was just erased, compared to other times when I came out when I did have to fear the judgement

KC: Okay. So then for the next questions, thinking about your K-12 schooling experiences. What did it feel like when you thought about coming out about your sexual identity in your educational setting?

Taylor: That would just be so scary to me. That was very, I was very very scared. There was only one teacher that I think ever really kind of knew about my sexual orientation in high school and I was okay with her knowing, but I was from a very small conservative town where it was just everyone thought it was wrong. I would have thought it would be very scary to come out in an educational setting and I think I would have faced a lot of backlash if I would have come out in an educational setting, which I chose not to in high school.

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KC: So then how did you navigate your school experiences before you were publicly open about your sexual identity?

Taylor: Truly, I really repressed my sexuality and denied it a lot. And so even when I knew that I was gay, I still was trying to deny it so much. I'm going to be honest. I probably said a lot of homophobic things that we're just not nice to deflect these feelings I had and just make sure that nobody would ever think 'oh my God, she's a lesbian.' Like I wanted no attention drawn to my sexuality. I just acted in ways that I don't find appropriate, but at the time that was my defense mechanism and I wish it had been different, but yeah, that's the truth

KC: And what was that like for you?

Taylor: I think it was very, it was very hard and I felt, it's like this pull. Like I knew what I was doing and what I was saying was wrong and I knew that I had these feelings, but I also knew that everyone around me had this idea of homosexuality and how wrong that was and I grew up in the Catholic church and I've been told that that it is a sin, so I wanted to fit in with all these people who are thinking these things so there was just a big pull in between it-- like what do I do? I'm struggling between wanting to fit in and wanting to be myself and wanting to treat people with kindness, like, how do I figure that out? And, ultimately, for most of that time I chose to just fit in and make myself look better. And now looking back on that time, at the time that really didn't-- it affected me but not as much as it does now because I look back on that and I think 'why did I choose to do that? Like why? Why was that the path that I chose?' But I'm not going to be hard on myself for choosing that because I think I was really trying to protect myself in many ways.

KC: I think that is very insightful of this idea of thinking back on our previous selves and that idea of, well really a younger you was doing the best that they knew to try and survive in the situation she found herself. It sounds like that there were different pulls that you were feeling based off of your internal feelings, from external messages that you were getting, and that they were not in alignment. Do you think that there were any other factors that contributed to your experiences at that time?

Taylor: I really think the biggest part of my experiences just came from those external messages. I very much cared about what people thought of me, as many kids in high school do. I think that's pretty normal. But, I really internalized these external messages. I took them very personally and I just let them get to me on many levels and I think that was really the biggest part of what contributed to pull because there were these external messages, because it wasn't just from the church, it was from family members, it was from peers, and those are some of your biggest support systems at the time when you're

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in high school--your friends and family--and that just makes you think, "What can I do? If my support systems are saying all these things that are homophobic, I can't come out. I can't do that because then they're just going to push me to the side." So, I think that external messages had the biggest effect on my coming out.

KC: It sounds like a sense of needing to belong, a sense of safety

Taylor: Yes

KC: Like where would you be if you were rejected?

Taylor: Yeah, for sure. I knew that I would fit into, like I was part of theater and that's kind of where I felt most accepted as a member of the LGBTQ community, but I had a bunch of different friend groups and I was on a dance team and I was like "if I come out, I know this group will have my back, but what about all these other groups that I want to fit into so badly, that I want to be a part of still? What if they don't accept me?"

KC: Still thinking K-12 school experiences, so what support services were offered for students who may have identified on that spectrum?

Taylor: They had, obviously, our school system had like counseling, and we had an Equality Club, but other than that there was no real support system or anything that reached out to students who were part of the LGBTQ community. Like it was just not talked about, it was not spoken about. It was like you'd see someone and be like "ok they're gay." Like you would know it, but then like you wouldn't talk about it.

KC: What was the Equality Club?

Taylor: It was kinda like a Gay Straight Alliance Club, but a little, you know, more broad. They wanted to promote a more accepting environment in our small town and they received backlash for making the club in the first place, and then they eventually got to get off the ground and go.

KC: You mentioned counseling and this Equality Club, how did you think about or interact with either of those services?

Taylor: I absolutely would not have gone to counseling at our school because it was, it was really more like they were more focused on academic counseling. They could handle other things, but they were more focused on academic counseling. I was really close to some of the counselors in that school because I worked in that area with them, so that was just like off of the books for me because I was thinking "these people can't know about me." But with the Equality Club, I attended a few meetings. I was pretty involved, so I

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didn't have a lot of time to be a part of every club, but I did attend a few meetings and I noticed that it did feel very accepting and I think that if I hadn't been in theater maybe Equality Club would have been a good place for me to kind of explore who I was and be okay with being open to who I was in that setting, but theater was really the place for me. A lot of people in the Equality Club were also in theater, so maybe theater, in my specific school, could have been a resource as well

KC: So how were LGBTQ+ issues or people represented in the school? Or classroom? Or even the curriculum?

Taylor: They weren't. Like I said earlier, it was just not talked about, at all. I don't remember learning about LGBTQ issues. All the knowledge of LGBT history that I learned in high school, I learned on my own. And I was taking college-level courses in high school, where I would expect a broader curriculum, something that is more all-encompassing, you know? I don't understand why public schools wouldn't have LGBTQ history in their curriculum, but I know that a lot don't. So, I would think that these college-level courses would have them, but it still didn't, and I still didn't learn anything about LGBTQ community from my school. There was no representation, other than the Equality Club, that provided some representation, but other than that there really was none.

KC: So then what advice do you have for changes in K-12 curriculum? Let's start there. Any advice for changes in K-12 curriculum to better meet the needs of LGBTQ students?

Taylor: I think that it's really important that in history, history classes specifically, that we're teaching LGBTQ history, and in English classes we're learning, or we're reading literature that was written by people from LGBTQ community or about the LGBTQ community. It's important that in health classes that there is education, sex education for LGBTQ students as well because that's so often neglected and it's just targeted towards heterosexual stuff. It's not all encompassing, and that is a really big one to me. LGBTQ sex health education is really big to me. So that's some of the advice I have. All this stuff that you can learn about the LGBTQ community and different facets of it is there; it's there and it just needs to be incorporated into these lessons and it really isn't that hard. We're here, we've existed for years and years and years, so you can, you can make us a part of the curriculum.

KC: So how early do you think that should start being incorporated into curriculum?

Taylor: Honestly, I would say as soon as kids start getting into, you know, splitting into like history classes in English classes. That was like fourth grade when we started having different classes going and I think that's a good time to start and to learn about that. Even

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young, when you're learning about the basic history things like the Civil Rights Movement, why not add Stonewall in there? Why not add something, you know, big and monumental that happened for the LGBTQ community that the kids can remember like they do remember other big monumental historic movements?

KC: So, what about support systems? Do you have any advice for changes to K-12 support systems to better meet the needs of LGBTQ students?

Taylor: I definitely think that, and I know every school counseling system is different in how they function, but I think a lot of schools need to be more open about the fact that, and talk more about the fact that, LGBTQ issues affect students in high school no matter what high school you're in and that there needs to be some kind of system set up in place if they're not safe then they can go somewhere within the school and the counseling system to find refuge and be okay and talk about what's going on for them. I think the counseling system in my school could definitely use some more support in that aspect

KC: So, you have any advice for resources or, I know you mentioned safety, like different resources or policies or anything to make things safer or better meet the needs of LGBTQ students?

Taylor: Yeah, I think, really having counselors who are knowledgeable about resources, about specific resources to help LGBTQ, the LGBTQ youth, and being knowledgeable about the LGBTQ community. I think that could be a very big resource for a lot of children because they need somebody, they need representation, they need somebody that they can look at and see and say "this person can understand me in some way, and this person can hear me out in some way," and having an adult that can be that person for you when you're younger is life-changing because maybe that's the only adult you see and you ever find trust in. So, I think having somebody more knowledgeable about LGBTQ issues in a counseling system would be a really, really good resource for a lot of students

KC: Sometimes I feel like educators have gone through trainings or things and so that sometimes they have knowledge, but how would you like to see that transfer from just like "I'm aware of these things" to like how they show that, like what actions they take?

Taylor: I think taking action after you learn something is really important. Something that I would say is, it can be like those little things too like using the correct pronouns, correcting yourself if you made a mistake, like it's okay to make mistakes, but if you spoke wrong and you just say, you know, "I'll do better next time," or incorporating LGBTQ issues into what you're teaching, even if that's not like the exact curriculum, you can talk about them, and you know bring awareness to these issues even in your teaching, and just letting students know that you're there for them in every way is really important

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to me. I can think of one specific teacher that I had in high school who, she never just flat-out said her views on anything, but she was so welcoming and so accepting and you just felt that in her that you truly could have gone to her about anything and she would have been there. I think having that mindset; she was so open-minded and just thoughtful, and having that overall welcoming energy and inviting energy and open-mindedness, willing to learn and accept students and learn about students--I think that is really really important

KC: Thank you so much. So, the last question is there anything else that you thought you wanted to share or that I should know and you haven't had a chance to express yet?

Taylor: I think something I would like to say before we part is coming from a small conservative town, I think it's really important that teachers in those settings do have an open mind and do, even if they don't agree with my lifestyle, if that's what they want to say, but have an open mind that just because I'm gay doesn't mean I'm not a good student, doesn't mean I'm not a good person, doesn't mean that I'm any less than other students in your classroom. I think that if I would have felt that from more teachers, I would have been more okay with being who I was and I think that I would have had a happier experience; a happier and healthier experience in high school.

KC: Thank you so much for saying that

Taylor: No problem. I had so many teachers that had to be so careful about what they were saying all the time, not just LGBTQ stuff, but then there were other teachers saying stuff all the time about what their thoughts are why can they? It was a lot.

KC: It's a very interesting dynamic of the things that get shut down hard and other things but just apparently are not a big deal to say in those environments

Taylor: yeah, I do want to share this little story with you, if you don't mind. So, in my town we have, or close to my town, we have this other school district and they do like a homecoming and you know there's different girls on the court and they, the football players, draw names for which girl they get to walk out from the court onto the football field, and this year a girl who is gay was part of the court and the football player who drew her name said he wouldn't walk her on the field because she was gay. That really, I like I read this the whole thing and then another high schooler made this huge long Facebook post about how it's so sinful to be gay, and we're just trying to help you by shedding Jesus into your life, and that really hit me hard because it made me realize that this stuff is still going on in my small town and you know we're so close to the city, that's this big city, that's so, it looks so accepting and so wonderful. I know that coming to St. Louis was so different and beautiful for me because I could be who I was, but like an

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hour away this hateful language is being spread and, you know that poor girl, I just can't imagine what she was going through, and I don't know, it's just so disheartening to see it still continue after I've graduated and moved on, I just really think a lot about the LGBTQ youth in my hometown and like what they're going through.

KC: That's why I think that it is really important for people like you and other people whose voices have not been heard to try to create a forum in which we can try to at least bring some of these things to other people's awareness

Taylor: Yeah. I think this is really important and just I had a lot to say I was very excited somebody was doing something like this

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Jordan--White cisgender gay male, graduated HS 2010

Interview Date--December 2, 2020

KC: Coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is a process where students or people share or externalize an identity that is an alternative to what society considers the hetero norm or gender binary. What does being out mean to you?

Jordan: To come out?

KC: Yeah. What does coming out mean to you?

Jordan: To me that just means being open with your gender identity or sexual orientation and saying this is who I am. For me that meant you know, are you asking for me to talk about me coming out or...

KC: Just about how you think about that and what it means to you

Jordan: OK, it just means being open about who you are. It's a very vague answer, but it's like letting people know. It's not like yelling it to the world, but saying if someone asks you or if someone asks you saying "hey, I'm gay" or just saying who you are as a person

KC: What does that look like kind of in practice or daily life? Like being out, coming out, what does that kind of look like?

Jordan: Well, it's such a weird thing because no one else has to do it, so it's very much like a very specific thing, it's very personal, so every person kind of differently. For me it was quiet, like over time just saying, like bringing people around and saying, "oh, this is who I'm dating right now" or that sort of thing. It was a very calm, quiet, not a big hoopla. For some people it has to be. It's such a tough experience because everyone goes through different levels of struggles with how other people interpret their sexual orientation, how other people try to classify them, and for me coming out was more of letting people into my world because for me it was very much internalized. I chose who was close to me and the whole coming out with more of a not letting the whole world in rather than just the people I know. I think coming out is a very vulnerable thing to do and it's very scary.

KC: Tying into that, coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is also not a singular process, but often something that is repeated with different people or in different settings. So, what did it feel like when you first thought about coming out about your identity?

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Jordan: Well, my first thought was that I had a friend who I found out was gay. I really didn't have any gay friends up until then, well that I knew about because it turned out we were all gay. But there was just one person that kinda opened the floodgates, because I was like "it's okay man, I have thoughts like that too sometimes," and it was very like gradual in my friend group. Then it came from my friend group in High School, then my friends in college just being a new group--there weren't any expectations. Because I feel like a lot of times people who are trying to come out, it's a letting people down type of thing or feeling a level of shame because people think it's a bad thing, or there's a resistance because you spend so much time saying "I'm just like everybody else. I'm just like you." It's kind of a vulnerability to say that it's okay to be different and it's not a bad thing, it is just who I am. I just started very small.

I think one of the first people I came out to when I was in college was actually someone from work because, for me, I think actually a lot of people just assumed and knew and no one ever wanted to say anything and I didn't want to say anything because when you grow up in the closet you don't want any type of extra attention to yourself because you just want to blend in. So, it was a very personal small groups and then after a while it became like when I would meet strangers it was much easier to tell them because with strangers it was like 'this is the first chance you have to get to know me and who I am' rather than people who already know me and you have to like rewire their brain, like, 'I'm the same person, but this small detail may confuse you.'

And the hardest was the family. I think that was the hardest one because my dad even still has weird hopes, but you just have to have sit down conversations with those folks. You just said it and hoped that it didn't turn terrible. My extended family doesn't know because I don't talk to them, so they don't need to know. But mostly it was selective. For me choosing people I was comfortable with, who I wasn't afraid of getting ostracized or attacked. You kind of at first choose people you think are going to be affirming and then like after you get done with the affirming people you think 'alright what tough choices am I going to make? Is this a battle I need to fight or is it not a battle I need to fight?' and then you move on from there. You know that's the cool thing about coming out and accepting your own gender identity because you get to decide who is in your life and who is not anymore. It's great. I enjoy that part of being an adult.

KC: When you first thought about coming out, what did it feel like? Like if you try to think back to when you were first thinking about coming out to someone, coming to terms with your identity, what feelings did that bring up?

Jordan: Well, I think this all goes back to first accepting it yourself because there's a coming out moment to yourself too, where you tell yourself "this is who I am." I mean, I

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knew for a while when I was younger that I was different. I knew that for a fact and I was like, "okay I'm different," and then I was like "oh, that's why I'm different. That's why the kids do what they do," and then I had to accept the fact. My first thought was like when you realize that you're gay, especially like late 90s early 2000, your thought is 'there's no lane for me.' No one's telling me about what people like me have. It was things like 'there's no such thing as marriage, there's no such thing as happiness, you're an outsider, you're a weirdo;' and so you kind of expect when you decide to come out you kind of, at least at that time, accepting a life of just being on the outskirts of society. The only gay people they talked about was like Jeffrey Dahmer, actually just a bunch of serial killers were the only gay influences I had until like Nip/Tuck. So that's all I had when I was first coming out, the whole thing was like you say this and--you know the toothpaste in the toothpaste bottle where you push it out and you can't put it back in? And so, for a while I just never thought I was going to. I thought, "I can just sit here and just be happy with myself and just never explore that part of life because that's the easiest out for me." Because a lot of times, in my mind, coming out was a selfish act. Where it's like, "oh this is selfish, I'm going to put my parents through this, I'm going to put people around me through this;" it's easier to like suck it in and say "I don't deserve that.' It was more self-pitying and self-hate, and then the actual process of coming out was more fearful because when you say this you have no idea what's going to happen. You don't know if the person across the room is just going to lunge across and hit you because they don't want to hear that, or they're going to tell you how bad you are, or say you need to go to this person or that person, or they are going to send you a bunch of random biblical scriptures just so they know you're aware of how they feel but with someone else's voice. And then there's just a bunch of different feelings, fear, mostly fear and sadness. Just like "why do I have to do this? Why is it on me?" and a little bit of jealousy of other people who didn't have to do it, like "oh they can just live their lives." Then by the time I was coming out, there was also a sense of regret like "I'm out of high school, I feel old to be doing this." Like I felt not only had I wasted time, but regretted it because other people were younger when they came out and they were probably happier because they were true to themselves earlier. There's also a sense of weakness, where I felt like I was being weak, like admitting to yourself that you're not the normal is a weakness, that it's a sign of flaws. So, there were a lot of emotions that came with coming out. Being able to say that I'm okay with all these consequences and ripping the cord.

KC: You've talked some about things that contributed to your feelings, you mentioned things like images, family, expectations, is there anything else that you would want to add as far as what do you think contributed to you feeling that way?

Jordan: Oh, there's lots of things. I come from a religious background and my parents are both very big into The Church. My parents were both conservative, my mom now not so

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much, my dad's conservative, my mom's more liberal. That was tough because I was going to church and you only get to see one perspective of things and then when gay things began coming up more in pop culture, I had the voice of my dad going "that gay guy, he seems nice, but I can't accept that." And you hear that voice in your head and you're just like, "oh God, he doesn't accept me." When I was in grade school, I would get bullied a lot, I got physically assaulted a couple of times by other kids because they were like "oh he speaks with a higher pitched voice, oh he walks weird, oh he's more feminine." I remember, we were at a track meet in second grade and one of the sprinters comes up to me and goes "so you're gay, right?" and I was like, "what does that mean?" and he was like "oh, you don't know? that means you're happy," and I was like "well yeah, I'm happy," and that became a whole thing "oh, he's gay!" and that was fun. I remember I was walking home from school when I was like eight and this kid punched me and called me a faggot and tried to beat me up after school. I didn't really get what that meant, I just knew I wasn't supposed to be proud of it, and so I didn't even tell anyone about it, so I would just get hit and I'd be like "oh, it was a gym class incident." I just had a bunch of really tough experiences with other people putting it in such a negative connotation and physically assaulting me or verbally assaulting me.

One time in high school, there were a lot of times in high school actually, we were playing badminton in gym class and I beat the kid, he threw his racket at me and yelled "faggot," and no one did anything about it, the teacher saw it and no one said anything. I just kind of went in the corner and then I became a target in that class every day. We had a day in high school where juniors teeped the sophomores and I woke up that night in my yard in signs that said "go away," "no one likes you faggot," "die," and that wasn't a big thing apparently, it wasn't offensive enough. So, all these incidents of bullying, and coming out was also this thing of me telling those people "oh, you're right, you nailed it, I deserved those things because that's who I am." Because there's no one out there contextualizing that it's okay to be this way, it's not a negative thing. Because everyone around me, the feminine qualities of myself, things that were not atypical for someone who's not heterosexual, they were never praised or viewed as positive and so I just, it just became me coming out was a sign of weakness. Me defeating myself. Me saying "these people who said these worst things about me that I've ever heard in my life, they are all correct." So that was a big part of why it probably took longer than it should have, not should have, there's no timeline or timetable, everyone is different, but those incidents probably added time to my acceptance of who I am.

KC: You had mentioned that you thought a coworker was possibly the first person that you thought about sharing that with. What reasons led to that being the first person that you shared with?

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Jordan: I don't know. It's such a weird thing because I was 19 at the time, I was working in this new environment, and as a gay man, especially as one who is closeted, you go into every new situation and you kind of hide yourself as much as possible. You don't want the attention. You don't go into a room and start talking. You don't say anything, you're quiet, because speaking can give you away. Having different interests gives you away. Everything about you is a dead giveaway, for me at least, not for everyone. For a lot of people, the more you obscure yourself the better chance you have at surviving. So, I didn't talk to most people at that job for probably the first few months because I was just trying to figure out situations and also, I had a really bad experience my first semester of college where I got isolated badly and it was terrifying to expose myself that way. So, I spent a lot of time quietly trying to figure out the dynamics of the system, figuring out who I could talk to, figuring out who I felt like genuinely liked me and trying to make friends. And he was a person who would always make an effort to talk to me and he was nice and I have this weird thing where if I'm around guys who are more macho, more sportsy, or stereotypical people who were popular in high school, I get scared because I've had incidents in the past where those were the ones who were most likely to come at me. Like in college if I'd go to certain parties, I'd be scared out of my mind because more athletic types would be in the room, and I'm like "oh God, what are they going to do?" because I'd had incidents in the past where people like that had really gone after me. So, someone like this coworker, who was more of an artsy type, who was more around diverse backgrounds, who would go out of his way to talk to me and be kind to me and kinda took me under his wing, I felt more comfortable around someone like that, and I think he asked me. He asked me the questions and I was like "I'm gonna say yeah and see what happens." And I think it also helped that he was outside my normal circle. It was a different circle. It wasn't my high school circle; it wasn't my parent's circle. It was a circle where, worst case scenario, I could just leave that job if things went badly. Apparently when I first got that job, there was a kid that told the owner that he shouldn't hire me because I was gay and it was a family friendly restaurant. So apparently everyone in the shop was already talking about how gay I was ahead of time. But this guy was the one that instead of doing that would make conversation directly, so I felt comfortable enough to tell him that. And he asked, and when you get older you realize that once you say no to that it just becomes a problem down the road because then you have to add one more person that you'll have to have a conversation with later, add that to my mom, my dad, my siblings and everyone else in high school. It's like having that conversation straight up so people get to know you as you want to be known, so I saw that option and I took it and it felt really good.

KC: So, thinking then about your K-12 schooling experiences, which you've talked a little about. What did it feel like when you thought about coming out about your identity in your educational setting?

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Jordan: Like when I was in K through 12, then?

KC: Yes.

Jordan: Well, I didn't think about coming out until probably middle school because, K through 5, K through 4, I was still trying to figure out what was wrong with me, not wrong with me, but whatever everyone else thought was wrong about me. All my friends at that point, we all ended up being gay because everyone who wasn't us was like "we don't like you because you're different." Because when you're a gay man, like K through 5 the guys and girls are so split because it's like "oh they're gross" and you kind of have like those inborn cliques. It's like guys versus girls, but the guys don't want to be a part of you because they think you are weird and the girls are like "you're a guy, you don't get our problems" and I ended up in a very small clique of little kids who were definitely gay but no one is going to say it. We had some lesbians in our group because we were in like that, and we had a trans kid in our group, that was pretty cool too. We were very inclusive, yeah it sounds great, but probably when I started to figure out, I was gay was in middle school. It took me a while to accept that fact and then it was terrifying, genuinely terrifying. Any time I thought about it I would think that I would end up like--Because we didn't have that many out kids. We had kids that we all knew were gay, but they were so disparagingly talked about by other people. I was lucky enough that, yes everyone knew I was gay, but I was straight passing enough that it wasn't... I could go under the radar at least when I wanted to. Some kids, like there's no way they can hide, and they shouldn't have to hide obviously, but there's no way that they could because that's just their personalities. I was not lucky, but in my mind at that time I was lucky because I could be like "okay, I'm not the biggest target here." But then me conforming, like me not saying it out loud made me a bigger target because it was more entertaining for other people to like try to crack me, I guess. There's this weird thing High School where they're like "oh we think that kid is gay, we got to figure out how to, not get him to say it, but let him know that we know," weird manipulative bullying like "we know he'll never say it, but we want to push him to the edge." So high school, middle school and high school, middle school gay was just bad and it was just a joke that people made fun of like "oh they're gay" and in high school it just turned into like gay kids are like open season. It's weird because I'm not that far removed from high school, my 10 year reunion is coming up this year, I'm not going obviously for obvious reasons, but they were just like, a lot of the guys would just like go out of their way to let you know that you don't conform to their idea of manhood and they wanted to make you as uncomfortable as possible and just... so it was never, for me, it was never going to happen in high school. I was too afraid, and for decent reasons, they gave me reasons to be afraid; and I don't think I had the emotional maturity to say that my happiness was worth it. I think the thing about coming out is telling yourself that you deserve happiness, you deserve to be able to

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be yourself and not whatever everyone else's perspective is. I was very focused on being what other people wanted me to be at the time. I wasn't caring about myself and I put myself way down the list and I should have valued my strengths ahead of time. That's something that I always ask myself--What if someone had told me how great I was as a kid?

KC: Wow. That's amazing. I had a follow up of what do you think contributed to you feeling that way? I kinda feel like you talked about that throughout, but is there any other things you wanted to mention as contributing to your feelings of fear, being terrified, and like coming out wasn't even an option at that time?

Jordan: I mean, not to reiterate, but I definitely think that, and it sounds so cliché, but the lack of representation in general and that anytime you did see someone gay it was always labeled as the other and there was no real pathway for me so I thought that if I said it that would have taken myself out of a line of happiness and brought higher ostracization. I think lack of self-worth was one of the biggest things contributing to my closeted years because I just wasn't happy and I didn't think I deserved happiness. You know when you're other and you're just like, especially in a religious household where they're like "God has made in this way," and you're like "why would God make me this way?" and I stopped being religious in like 8th grade, or 7th grade, or possibly 6th grade, it was pretty early on. But, you kind of had those ideas, even if you're not religious, or raised in that way, a lot of those ideas kind of linger in the back of your mind even if you don't hold them, they're still part of your core values even though you don't subscribe to the same books. I was just trying to ask myself "why would I be this way?" and I look around and don't see myself anywhere so why do I deserve to be happy? I knew I didn't choose this life, like most people wouldn't choose to be this way, but, well I say that I don't really know. In retrospect I wouldn't change anything, I would change a lot but not that.

KC: How did you navigate your school experiences before you were publicly open about your identity?

Jordan: Well, it was kind of how I did my entire existence before I came out and I still kind of live the same way. Anytime I go into a new space, whether it be a new room, a new job, a new anything, I am dead silent. I do not talk. I see the situation around me and I figure out 'where do I fit in here?' because when you don't think you fit; you have to figure out where you can fit in. I feel like I'm actually a very loud enjoyable person. I'm pleasant, but I don't want to put myself out there just to get shut down immediately; so, I usually waited until the second week of school to start talking to people, trying to figure out classes. If I have a friend in the class or multiple friends, I can weigh out the pros and cons, like I would open up more, but every place I went, I had to be afraid.

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I used to play ice hockey in middle school and I got bashed the hell out for being obviously homosexual on the middle school ice hockey team. I remember one day the kids being like “hey can you go in the other room while we change?” and I was like...I felt seen in that moment. But whenever I joined cross country in high school, I was afraid to talk because it was a new environment. First intro to high school and when I would try to talk it would be like less than a sentence and it would be like a really deep low voice cause that's when your voice is going to give you away. I had to think about every word I said because there's the chance for someone to call me out, so I wanted to say less words and the words I said were very specific because I didn't want to feel as if I was exposing myself to any form of criticism or intense judgement. So pretty much every place I went, I was just like that, quiet and I was so selective about the words I would say and when I would say it. I was terrified because I wasn't really embraced by a lot of people up until that point because I didn't really have a really strong middle school friend group because I didn't really fit in anywhere. I don't think anyone really feels that way in middle school, it's probably a very universal experience of just feeling rejected the middle school, but I was very selective about who I spoke to, and then I had my one friend, my same friend from grade school and we both ran cross country, so on the bus we would sit by each other and talk and it was kind of like a safe space but it was a person I could talk to and not be afraid of saying something about my interests and being judged down. Someone I could talk to and feel comfortable with.

KC: What was that like for you?

Jordan: Being closeted, it can be exhausting. Especially when you feel like it's a life or death thing, like your whole world is going to end if things fall apart. I mean even when I was a young adult trying to balance like trying to date people and still be in my family all the stuff of trying to have two separate spheres of keeping a balance, coming up with funny excuses, keeping my stories tracked--making sure that the person was talking to who I said I was going to be with Monday nights. But being closeted as a youth, it can be an exhausting experience and just really unsatisfying. Where the highlight of your day is going “well, I didn't get called out today;” or “no one was unnecessarily cruel to me today, that's a highlight.” What else was it like? It was really depressing because a lot of times and in a lot of my classes, like English class and classes of more expression, I really felt like I had to hold back or play it cool. There were some opportunities I could have taken, that I refused to take, like I never took a theater class in high school because I said “if I take theater, game over.” I remember in third grade there was a choir audition, I'm a terrible singer, I really should never have auditioned and I didn't because I realized how “oh man, choir, that's gay.” And all these things that if you associate with it, like I played ice hockey because if I did figure skating- gay. I was more interested in figure skating, I would always watch it with my sister, we would pretend to be figure skaters in

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the basement, but I had to do ice hockey, because, you know. And then she did ice hockey too, we were a cool family. But there's all these opportunities that you see go by you and you want to take, you want to try these different clubs, you want to try theater, you want to try... I didn't take French because French was too gay. But I did German which was just as gay, if not gayer, everything is gay though. All these certain interests you have, like I really love pop culture. I liked watching reality tv, I liked pop music, but if someone asked what my favorite song was, I was like "oh yeah, Journey is great" or if someone asked what your favorite song was, I'd say "I love that Fifty-Cent song" because that's the straight person answer not like "oh man, Hollaback Girl is so much fun!" because you say that one, it's over. So, you kinda had to create this persona and it was exhausting trying to remember the things you say because when they're not true it's hard to keep track. So, it was just unsatisfying and a lot of friendships you made in high school we're just deeply unsatisfying because you're like "I don't like anything you're doing, I hate, I kind of hate you because you clearly would hate me if I was my real self" and you just put yourself through it and you just hope. Then there was a weird sense of resentment against kids that were more openly gay and got to do more things, like get fun haircuts or kids that could do things that you wanted so bad and you're like "ugh, I wish I could be you, but I don't." I wish I could have that sense of freedom and just...yeah. I really wanted a mohawk and my mom was like "no, you can't get a mohawk." I could never dye my hair, which in retrospect I'm happy about. I'm really happy I never dyed my hair.

KC: Still thinking K-12, what support services were offered for students who may identify on the LGBTQ spectrum?

Jordan: When I was a kid K through 12, there really wasn't anything until high school because apparently gay kids don't exist until you're in 9th grade. And not that there wasn't any, but there weren't any good clubs in general or support services. If you needed help with something like that you probably were at a counselor and it was all done in private because I think for a lot of people talking about gay things for people who are less than like 14 is a no-no; like "oh no, we can't perverse the kids because if they don't know about it, they'll never figure it out." You know, you don't want to be pushing that on them, so there's nothing to my knowledge until high school. There was a GSA at my school cause the school I went to was known at the time for being one of the better schools for gay kids, and I guess if you were openly gay it was better, but if you weren't openly gay... because like we had some teachers who were really cool and open and helpful, allegedly, I didn't really have them. Yeah, there wasn't that much support, there wasn't that much help for anyone, there was never like counselors reaching out to kids and talking to them about anything like, "oh, you seem reclusive, you seem a little bit off like what's wrong? what's going on?" There's never anyone trying to help the kids that

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were just hiding. I'm not sure if that's like a job position, but there's a bunch of kids that are clearly, at least from my perspective, suffering on the inside, trying to figure out what was going on, but there's no one ever trying to reach out to them. I do get that counselors have a lot of jobs, for sure, but there's not anyone out there helping, and there weren't any gay teachers, I don't think, if they were, they were on the DL, which as a gay teacher now I fully get why. But the GSA at our school, if you showed up to that, you had the kids who wanted to seem like they were with it, and a bunch of republicans that would show up just to cause problems, our young republicans club just wanted to cause problems. There wasn't really a safe space, like with school things, you just hoped the kids would find the right group of kids and other people around them that would give them support and would be supportive.

KC: So, how did you think about or interact with these services?

Jordan: I didn't touch them. I was too afraid to touch those things. You know, certain things if you pick them up it's like a red flag and you're like "I don't want the attention." I mean I didn't do any after school activities other than running track and cross-country because everything else there was kind of loaded, like exposing yourself more than necessary. What are your interests? I don't have any. That's how I had to pretend to be in high school, like if you start saying you're more than generic, they start asking questions, then you're like "oh gosh, it's all coming down around me." Because there were some weirdly cruel people in my grade that went out of their way to make sure you knew where you existed in the hierarchy

KC: How were LGBTQ+ issues/people represented in the school? Classroom? Curriculum? Like any representation you can think of.

Jordan: None. There was zero representation. We didn't read any books with gay issues in them. I don't think, I'm trying to think, yeah, no books with gay issues in them. We didn't have any info in health class. I was a kid in the 90s, so we had to learn about AIDS a lot. AIDS was transferred through needles that's what we learned about was how it was transferred through needles. We learned that if someone had AIDS you don't treat them different, it was very coded...that was probably the closest we got to learning about gay people at all, which it really wasn't, they really tried to hide that in there, like AIDS is mostly needles...it was sharing used needles, they didn't explain why. There really wasn't any representation. History we didn't cover any gay aspects of people. Maybe if I had taken honors English as a freshman with the Greek Gods, they would have hinted at it, because they all seem kind of gay, Hercules just seems really gay, but there wasn't every any...You know another problem in History class was we never made it passed Vietnam. We never made it to Civil Rights Movement, so, and if we did it always started with

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Black and proud, and then Women's Issues, and then if we made it passed that, which we never did, we barely got to that, but they would go to disabilities for civil rights and that would be the deepest we would get into, which we never got to that either, we really should have, but...But there was never any representation in grade school, K through 12. All the stories were usually white people, white straight people with their kids. If you were lucky you got people of color, and if there were people of color it was like some really stereotypical story where you went "umm." I mean there weren't even, to my knowledge there weren't even books for like silent reading options in libraries. I think a lot of those books are probably heterosexual narratives because you know how it is in schools when teachers put out a gay book that kids aren't even forced to read, it's just put up there, parents get mad now. There was no, there was no representation. And there was never an option in Health class like "oh, that's a thing that can happen," it was always man-woman, man-woman, or you can be by yourself.

KC: What advice do you have for changes in K-12 curriculum, support systems, resources, safety, really anything at all in our K-12 schools, to better meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students?

Jordan: Oh, this is a loaded question

KC: I can break it down to each one of those things you want to think about like in K-12 curriculum 1st

Jordan: I think in general, overall, for just diversity in general with what we're working with and that needs to obviously include LGBT people, but like it needs to include diversity, it needs to show like different types of ableness. We need to just show people, not tokenism because that's different, but we need to show different types of, especially when kids are growing up, different stories than they are used to seeing. I mean luckily now TV is getting a little better with showing different groups of people, but we want to see representation to show kids that there is an element for them, and that how they are is acceptable and they don't have to be anyone that...they don't have to be what they expect to be. One of the happiest things for me in the last 10 years is seeing the level of diversity increase so that people are closer to feeling like they are accepted. But that's the first thing, make sure that there are some books for our kids that have LGBTQ issues, more children-friendly programming with LGBTQ issues. In the school system specifically, including them as part of history because I know I had to learn about LGBTQ history in general as an adult because you don't learn about it. I'm not saying teach the kids like "oh this is Stonewall," which they should, they really should, but show people like "oh my God, there's a gay person in the past, this didn't just start," or a person who may have had tendencies, like "this didn't start with you, you're not the epicenter of the rainbow

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flag.” Include that kind of information in history class. Show people of different backgrounds be successful in all fields. I know it sound obvious, but try to think about gay mathematicians or gay successful scientists, because a lot of times people are like “oh you’re gay, you should be doing this or that,” like become a hair dresser or become this because this field is not meant for you. Try to show people in STEM classes at a young age that you don’t have to be this stereotypical straight white male to be successful as an engineer or be successful as anything. And tell kids if they have interest in English and Literature make sure that you support that and tell them it’s not a sign of weakness. Maybe normalizing coming out in stories, put that in there, have those types of stories in there too because showing kids how to properly do it and modeling would be nice because when you try to create that situation on your own, it’s tough. In high school levels, for counselor supports, I love counselors because a lot of the ones I work with are well-trained, but make sure that we have protocols, not protocols, but if you see a kid who doesn’t fit in, not doesn’t fit in, but you know, is having issues, you know, be accepting. Come up with a list of teachers, it sounds sad to say, but teachers who are more open and friendly and understanding you want to have to help kids. Let’s say you’re in a high school math class and your math teacher is clearly unaccepting and you don’t feel comfortable talking with them and they’re just focused on your math and not your mental health. Find some teachers who are open, helping, and want you to be successful beyond just as a student and be successful as a human. Just finding ways to let those kids know that there are people out there that want them to be successful as humans and having good GSA clubs, or whatever they call them Rainbow Alliances now. Maybe doing something to represent Pride for schools, it’s in June and obviously in Missouri we don’t have school in June. You know something to celebrate that, not just National Coming Out day because I’m not sure if that’s still a thing because they don’t have it where I’m teaching, but in high school they had National Coming Out Day and National Day of Silence was the other one. The problem was, when I was in high school, those days had huge stigmas to it. Especially the Day of Silence was like the really theatrical weird kids would just like put tape on their mouths and do these over the top displays and while I love them for self-representing, it made it really weird for people having to hear in the background “those gay kids are so weird” and your like “oh God, I don’t want to be one of them.” You understand why they’re doing it because that’s who they are, but just finding ways to celebrate, having a good LGBTQ club, just setting up good training for teachers, so teachers know how to properly react to things, not that there’s a correct way, but tell them how not to react. Because I work at a school and I hear some teachers say things that they clearly do not understand. My school, not to break off, our teachers get really upset with kids who are trans and they get really angry at the fact that “oh I’m sorry I keep messing up your name” and they get really upset at the kid for that. Just tell the teachers that no one’s perfect, just do your best and be open and understanding, you

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know, teacher training to get them to understand that it's not an attack on them, a kid being trans is not an attack on them. Tell them that being trans isn't like a cry for attention, they might be crying for attention, but it's not because they're trans, it's because they want attention anyway. You know and all these things about myths, like maybe having that be part of Health class, common myths that you want to destigmatize. Or having a class where it's like "social interactions as an adult," like 'don't assume this,' 'don't tell people that gay people are going to enjoy prison because they love rape'-- that's what someone told me once, that I'd enjoy prison because I would enjoy being raped. I don't know, like some form of Health class, like in my high school we had a Sex and Human Relations class. I didn't take that one because I didn't want to watch a live birthing sequence, but just some form of Health class where it's focused on social health, the world around you, things you might be exposed to and why things are like that, maybe how you as a human can react and that could be modeled a lot in middle school or grade school because you have a lot more leeway with how you get kids to write or how you get kids to think and you can have good dialogues, and we used to have counselors who would push into our classrooms to do like peer mediations and stuff like that. You could get kids understanding what healthy relationships are or healthy discussions. I think that's it. And it shouldn't all be put on the counselors, I think the main teachers of these kids need to, especially like K through 5, I know I don't want to put it all on them too because they do so much too, but they should be able to find ways to get that into their curriculum, like find ways when they are doing writing or reading. Find ways to incorporate like these thought provoking questions to get kids develop, because the problem in high school a lot of the time is that the other students are still cruel, or in schools in general, because they don't understand because they don't have exposure to these things, especially like I'm in a predominantly white community right now and they lean very conservative so the only thing that they know is what's around them and so they are very judgmental to other groups of people because they don't understand it because it's the other, so we need to be finding ways to expose them, not expose, I hate to be saying exposed, but expose these kids to different types of people through any way possible and obviously you can't import a group of people and say "oh, look at these gay people, they're normal just like you" but you have to kind of find ways through stories and thought provoking questions; and the sooner we can get that done the better. Although I do feel like it's been better for kids since I've been in high school, it's not perfect and we can still be constantly growing and teaching.

KC: an overarching theme I was hearing from you was this idea of humanization of education

Jordan: I have this internal debate right now of wanting to start a GSA club but also wanting to leave the school in like 6 months. Feeling of abandoning kids but also taking

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the perspective of “I need to take care of myself a little bit” Not being in line with what’s around me is not helping those kids. I am one person; I should not put that pressure on myself.

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Q--White agender pansexual, Graduated HS 2010

Interview Date--December 31, 2020

KC: The first question is about coming out about one's sexual or gender identity, it is a process where students/people share or externalize an identity that is an alternative to what society considers the hetero norm/gender binary. What does being out mean to you?

Q: To me it means that I can live my authentic self, which is the most basic definition of out; but it also means that I have the ability to be a voice in the community and represent who we are, obviously not over the entire spectrum because I can't relate to a trans man or a gay man or a lesbian. But it also means that I can teach my kids about respect and about the freedom to be who you are as long as you're not hurting anybody from the perspective of being inside that group.

KC: What does that look like in practice/daily life?

Q: I am pansexual, that started off as bisexual until my wording grew, and then recently I came out as agender. I have a very heteronormative appearing life-- I'm engaged to a wonderful man, I have kids, so walking down the street I'm "passing." I also have not made any body modifications yet. I do have plans to either completely chop off my boobs or get a breast reduction. For the moment it doesn't affect the public's perspective of me, but my name changed and I'm very adamant about my pronouns-- the only time I use she/her is in my house as it relates to my more feminine side of myself, if there is that, to the kids. There was some pushback on the pronouns and from some people there was push back on the name and I got to shorten my friends list, but so far, I am very passing, so I don't get the outright discrimination just walking into a store.

KC: Coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is also not a singular process, but often something that is repeated with different people or in different settings. What did it feel like when you first thought about coming out about your identity?

Q: My coming-out story is an interesting one. I never really came out to my friends or anything. I think the first time I publicly said it was after I came out to my adoptive family in a fight. It was actually one of the last vocal conversations I had with my adoptive mother. They were extremely, extremely toxic and had this white picket fence idea of their house and I was not fitting into that because I refused to go along with the lies and their bullshit and so in a moment of anger I said, "Your family is not so f***** perfect because I'm bi!" I yelled a couple more things and then hung up, and then a couple days later posted, "When you come out to your family in an argument..." And all my friends were like, "Wait, you didn't come out yet?" "I guess not officially, but here we are!" Because people who have known me for years, even internet friends were like,

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“Yeah, we kinda knew. I didn't realize that this was like a closeted situation.” I’m like, well I mean I never really liked fully hid, I just didn't say the words, and so a lot of people just kind of got it. Luckily, my generation is a lot more open-minded about that kind of thing as a whole. I got on a tirade; did I answer the question?

KC: Well, I didn't hear an exact feeling, like you said that for pretty much people just kind of knew or assumed different things

Q: I guess, the feeling in the moment when I officially came out was anger, but then after it was just like a relief, like I finally kicked down that barrier. I guess technically I had a second coming out because I came out as agender. That was a lot more of a peaceful process. It was kind of slow communication with my fiancée and my best friend about “Hey, so I’m kinda feeling like I'm not a woman, but I don't know what it is.” Then lots of research and lots of talking with them, and a ton of support from them that I never really experienced before since I came from a Christian household originally, like a super strict Christian household. There wasn't anger or sadness or fear or relief really with that, it was just pure joy of “I can finally be who I am”

KC: For the next questions, think about your K-12 schooling experiences.

Q: Okay

KC: What did it feel like when you thought about coming out about your sexual/gender identity in your educational setting?

Q: So, I was lucky enough to go to school where the teachers were all pretty on board with the LGBT community, but even for my freshman year I remember there was a guy two grades above me, I will call him John for these purposes. And John was very out, very gay, very flamboyant, and he had a small circle of people who were amazing, and just so on board, and so loving. Then I would notice just walking through the cafeteria with him, or down the hall, that there were a large number of people that would kind of form a bubble around him and would give him looks and so that plus the homelife kind of scared me to stay where I was. With my friends I was able to be a little bit more authentic. I had a couple of not real serious relationships, some flings with some girls and stuff, and some people who knew me well, even though I hadn't said anything, they at least knew that I was curious. Then I kind of considered it my senior year, as the world as a whole kind of grew more accepting, but then there was another flamboyant gay man, who was even more into pushing across the boundaries of what's acceptable society-wise

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for what women wear and what men wear and he had it even worse than John, and that kind of scared me back away from doing anything.

I also remember that, and this isn't necessarily school-related, but my sophomore year is the year that I stopped going to church. I quit the church because one of the junior pastors actually ended up losing his job because they found out that his son was gay. I saw him just looking completely beaten down and I pulled him aside and told him, "Okay f*** service, let's go talk," and he was just heartbroken and he didn't know what to do because the church essentially said, "There's no way in hell that you can preach to our congregation because you have failed as a good Christian father and your son is this piece of trash." So, I talked to him for probably the entire first service and maybe a little bit into the second service and got him calmed down, grabbed my car keys, got in my car, and never went back. So, it wasn't just school that was keeping me from vocalizing who I was, it was homelife, it was the church that I was raised and grew up in. While I think I would have had a really good community around me, I still was so afraid of having to deal with any kind of backlash for it because I had enough going on at home that I just didn't want to lose one more safe space, as safe as high school can be.

KC: How did you navigate your school experiences before you were publicly open about your sexual/gender identity?

Q: Well, any relationships that I had with people who are not male were 100% out of school. They were only with very, very select friends who obviously themselves were queer in one way or another, but also not necessarily vocally out. I never really got into anything committed, just because I didn't want to have to hide a relationship. I didn't feel like that was fair to me, I didn't feel like it was fair to them. I was scared to the person that I would be in a relationship, and so I never actually had a girlfriend in title it was more just very short path of flings

KC: What was that like for you?

Q: I had a lot of other stuff go on in high school in regards to trauma, and so one of the coping mechanisms I chose was addiction and that was specifically because of some of the sexual abuse that I have faced, so any other problems kind of got minimize because of the drug use. So, I didn't really think too much about it at the time, that was just kind of like a side problem for me as opposed to trying to recover from the things that had happened.

KC: Very understandable. So, what support services were offered for students who may identify as LGBTQ+?

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Q: We had an amazing student counselor, we had a couple, but there is one in particular that I really, really liked, he was the most supportive person I had in my life at that time, especially when I came to school. He was the most non-judgmental, welcoming, and warm person that I had met throughout all 12 years of my schooling and still one of the most welcoming people that I have ever met. While I never actually talked to him about anything like that in specifics, he had signs, like posters that you would normally see in a counselor's office, but it was about acceptance and love regardless of who you were and he made it very clear that no matter who you were, as long as you were not harming yourself or others, that you would be loved and accepted and welcomed. So he was, most likely, a really great resource to people who were thinking about, seriously thinking about coming out, or who had come out already. We also had a wonderful LGBTQ club, which I did not join because of the fear of "well, what if this accidentally outs myself." But I kind of kept my eye on it and they were really good, and really supportive, and really welcoming, and I also kept my eye on who was in there because then I knew who it would be safer to talk to if I ever did decide to.

KC: How were LGBTQ+ issues/people represented in the school? Classroom? Curriculum?

Q: Aside from the club, they weren't. There's not too much more I can expand on that. No, especially in like in history and like Civics and stuff like that anything having to do with the LGBT community, any accomplishments that any gay person made it just didn't exist. I mean, that wasn't necessarily specific to my school, I think that was more a general thing. The United States does not like to give its accomplishments to anyone other than cis/het white men. It's getting better, but there's a lot of history that was erased and that's a huge shame. I didn't know about Stonewall until after I graduated. I had no idea that the Pride movement was led by trans people of color. It's just not something you find out about. They're not straight, well I don't know how they technically identify sexually, but they're definitely not cis and definitely not white, so that's something that's going to be erased. That's a huge shame because there are so many amazing history moments that were pioneered by the gay community that just get left out.

KC: So, what advice do you have for changes in K-12 curriculum, support systems, resources, safety, etc., to better meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students?

Q: Awareness. It all boils down to awareness. There are still so many misconceptions and stereotypes and stigmas around the LGBTQ community that are really, really harmful. We made a huge step forward with the bathroom legislation, but some places are so scared to implement it, because God forbid a cis man puts on a dress and tries to pretend, he's a woman so that he can go be a creeper in the bathroom. Stupidest argument I've ever

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heard, I'm not even going to start getting into that. But that comes from the lack of awareness and understanding. In Sex Ed, we were only ever taught one perspective. It was always "Oh, women can get these infections, guys can get these infections. Here's how you put on a condom. Here's P and V sex." And they didn't dare even think about expanding their ideas and their teachings on heteronormative sex, it was very much like, "This is missionary position and the penis goes in the vagina." And that was it, nothing else happened, except you get pregnant, because God forbid, we talk about birth control. But if they even just opened that up and didn't make any other changes, but actually taught gay relationships in sexual education, I feel like that would do leaps and bounds toward understanding. There's obviously going to be critics everywhere, "Well, you can't teach that kind of stuff in sex education! You're just supposed to teach them on how not to get pregnant," but it's like that's not the point of sex education. And your kids are old enough to be doing it anyway, they're doing it. Not all of them, obviously there are exceptions, but they need to be aware. They need to be aware that there's more than one right way to do it. I think from there, acceptance and understanding would grow and a lot of the stigma would start to die off because it's not this taboo subject that's just swept under the rug and not talked about. If you don't talk about things, you can't understand it, and if you can't understand it, you can't help it, and if you can't help it nothing gets better.

KC: Do you think that there is anything, because a lot of that with the sex education is that has to do with the sexuality side of the spectrum not necessarily gender identity

Q: They go over the reproductive organs of a female and a male, but they don't go into the fact that women can have scrotums, men can have ovaries, people can have reproductive systems as well. They go into what makes a man a man and what makes a woman a woman, but it's very cis focused. I mean it's all cis focused. And so, it is more than just sex, sex ed doesn't just talk about you know "here is how you f***, here's the horrible complications that can come from it, let's just forget that it's at all a pleasurable act. We're going to make this as uncomfortable a lesson as we can give you, so that hopefully you will never ever ever want to have sex," and that's just brainwash fuckery on its own, but they do go in to the anatomical differences between a cis man and a cis woman, and there's so much room they could expand that into. They could talk about HRT and how hormones are what make a person the way they are. They go into hormonal stuff when it comes to women in their reproductive cycles... that might be a better class for biology, but normally you're learning about plants and animals. But if we can go over the reproductive system of a woman, a cis woman, then you can cover how hormones affect and change a person's body to do what they need to do to not feel dysphoriated, to feel like their true selves.

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KC: I was just wondering is sex ed is a very much like getting into those things High School level stuff and I'm just wondering if there's anything prior to high school that needs to be changed in order to kind of like set up the ability to do those things at that level

Q: I had sex education in either 6th or 7th grade, seventh grade is what really scared me into the closet sex education-wise. We had sex education, granted it was like a small portion of our Home Ec class, we also learned how to bake and sew and stuff like that, but they did have a segment about sexual reproduction, so you can start the ball rolling there. A lot of people will say middle school is too young for them to learn, but it's not because kids are discovering themselves in elementary school. I knew that I was not straight, I didn't have a word for it then because I was not only in a Christian household, but I was in a private Christian school, but I knew I wasn't straight when I was in 4th grade. I also knew I wasn't monogamous in 4th grade; it didn't make sense to me. If somebody who's in elementary school can know, without a fraction of a doubt, that they are not a straight cis-person, then you can be teaching them about themselves in middle school, and from there you know expand on it and in high school and if people want the ability to learn more than obviously colleges have really great courses if a person goes to college. But the facts that the majority of the classes are taught on anything that's not heteronormative or cisgender, outside of the college experience, is horrible because like I couldn't go to college. I was not in the position to gain anything useful from it and then I had kids, so I don't have the time, unfortunately. I also don't have the money cause it goes to the kids and the house. But it's just, it's gatekeeping, you have to start at an earlier age.

KC: Outside of curriculum around sex ed and that, is there any other changes as far as safety, resources, support systems you would suggest

Q: I think, at least at my high school, we had pretty decent resources, like I said we had that wonderful counselor, who had a slew of pamphlets for actually really informative organizations on any topic including the LGBTQ community. We had the wonderful club for LGBTQ and their allies, again I didn't really go to any meetings, but the people that I talked to said it was really, really warm and welcoming. I think if it's starting in the classroom and in the curriculum, it will get pushed out to just general everyday acceptance.

One thing I will say is bullying. Seventh grade there was a rumor that got started and I don't necessarily know who, but I think I do, by a more popular group, if not the most popular group of people. I previously had been good friends with a couple of them, but they started a rumor that I had taken a foreign exchange student that I had befriended into

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the bathroom to give her the USA welcome in lesbianism, and I had never done anything sexually with this person. But I got home and I was just crying and my adopted mother was asking what happened and instead of asking with love and understanding, like, "is this something that happened? is this something that you would want to have happened?" It was, "Who would spread such vile and nasty rumors about you?" So, I didn't even get acceptance at home, but then I went to the school and all they did was offer me three counseling sessions with a counselor on how to deal with the emotions that I personally felt after being bullied. I don't think there was any investigation into who might have started this rumor, to have any sort of discussion with them. There was no huge school-wide meeting on bullying and acceptance of people who are different than you. There was nothing other than, "oh, you seem pretty upset about that how about you fix it? Here is like 3 resources on how to do it. Do you need to go get a professional counselor?" And that doesn't cut it. You're failing children at such an important developmental stage. That is unacceptable.

The counselors were there to help you work through it, but they didn't want to help me work through it. They wanted to just pass it off to "oh you're just dealing with bullies, here's how to fortify yourself against them." They didn't even begin to ask, "Oh do you want LGBTQ resources?" And they didn't pass it off to the administration to try to get to the bottom of it and try to fix the problem, they just tried to fix my upsetness about it. You can't just brush it off as "oh this kid got their feelings hurt." It's not something that's going to solve anything, so it will just go on and happen to the next person.

In 8th grade there was a person, she was very butch, she like to play hockey, she like to wear men's clothes, she like to have her hair short, whether or not that's just an expression that she put her or if they turned later into a gender identity, I don't know, but I'll never forget I had a friend who came to me and confided "I have a crush on a 6th grader, is that weird?" I was like, "no, who is it?" and she pointed her out, and I was like-- made-up name-- "Oh, yeah, that Sarah," and she goes "Wait, that's a girl?" And I go "well yeah, she's cute though, you wanna go for it?" And she was just so taken aback that she could be anywhere near close to attracted to a female. I just kind of kept my eye on Sarah just to see how things were going for her and there was no understanding of somebody who wouldn't want to dress in cute tight clothes and wouldn't want to have their hair long so we could braid it. I can't imagine what her school life was like at all because she was not passing, and if I had problems in middle school with being closeted and definitely passing, I can't imagine the torment that she went through.

KC: Thank you a lot, again. I hope that something comes from this that looks towards that awareness and normalization.

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Q: You can't fix a systemic problem if you are only focusing on the minority. It's gotta come from the majority because, I mean while there is still, unfortunately, a lot of misunderstanding and judgement and gatekeeping within the LGBTQ community, especially when it comes to trans people and people of color, and bisexuals. Omigod the hate that bisexuals get! But we're working on fixing that within our own community, so that we can lead and be better examples to the rest of the world, but nothing is going to fix the systemic issues unless it comes from the people who are in charge of it. But I think what you're doing, this whole project, is fantastic, which is why the second you asked if I wanted to be a part of it, I was like "F*** yeah! Let's go change something!"

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Mark--White cisgender gay male, graduated 2002

Interview Date: January 5, 2021

KC: Coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is a process where students/people share or externalize an identity that is an alternative to what society considers the hetero norm/gender binary. What does being out mean to you?

Mark: I actually think there are a lot of layers to it because you can be completely in the closet, then you can be out to a group of friends, you can be out with your close family, or you can be kind of generally out to most people that you know, or you can be say completely out-like there's nobody that doesn't know about it. So, there's not one single definition that would apply to everyone.

KC: For you specifically, some people have different labels they apply to themselves within the LGBTQ Spectrum. Are there any labels you use, as far as how you identify?

Mark: I just say gay. I really use gay

KC: As you alluded to, coming out about one's sexual or gender identity is also not a singular process, but often something that is repeated with different people or in different settings. What did it feel like when you first thought about coming out about your identity?

Mark: What did I think? It was really kind of a process over time, probably the course of a few years because I didn't know exactly how people were going to react to it or even if they were going to be supportive. Is it something that they're not really going to care about or is it something that it's going to change something about how they see you and how they define their relationship to you? So sometimes even talking to people very close can be kind of stressful, so there can just be times you just have to just blurt it out or just to get it out there at some point.

KC: That sounds like anxiety, like a lot of nervousness wondering about how people might react

Mark: Yeah

KC: What things do you think contributed to you feeling that way?

Probably to some degree it's just kind of my personality because overall I'm really kind of a private person for the most part. It's not as much as I used to be, but it's not something I like to talk about very much. Sharing this part of my identity can be kind of stressful, because it doesn't just Define exactly what I'm like. Also trying to begin opening up

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about a part of my life that most people don't really know about that...you don't know exactly how people are going to react to that because you got the expectation about what kind of man you are. And sometimes when you go along with it...

KC: you were cutting out a little bit as you were talking so I heard that one thing you felt was just in general you're kind of private about things related to yourself, but then also the idea of expectations of others and how sharing yourself, of being open can be difficult because you feel like you don't fit with their expectations and not necessarily knowing how they might react if you did share is stressful. Was there anything that I missed?

Mark: That was pretty much it

KC: Who did you first think about sharing your sexual or gender identity with?

Mark: My parents were the first

KC: What reasons led you to thinking about sharing with that person?

Mark: I'm not sure if anybody knew it before them. But I wanted them to know before anybody else. I really didn't want them to learn it from some other source without me telling them. They were ones that I was extremely close with, and probably the closest people in my life, so I wanted them to know before.

KC: So that feeling of them being the most important and closest people to you. I know that some of the things you said earlier had to do with not knowing how people might react. Did you have any thoughts or ideas of how you thought they might react to you sharing that?

Mark: My expectation was there weren't going to be any problems or any issues with it. We didn't talk about it much growing up; they didn't say anything positive or anything negative about it either. It was like basically a non-issue when I was a kid, so my expectation was really that they wouldn't have any negative issues; but it's like I said, it's something that completely changes the way that people think about you.

KC: So, you weren't afraid that they were going to have a negative reaction, but unsure of exactly how it might change the way that they viewed you or change your relationship with them in a way you didn't even expect

Mark: Yeah, pretty much

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KC: For the next questions, think about your K-12 schooling experiences. What did it feel like when you thought about coming out about your sexual/gender identity in your educational setting?

It wasn't all that big of an issue for me. I did have a sort of a girlfriend in high school and we didn't go out much but like a couple times to homecoming. It was like something that I just didn't want to really push or show in any real way. It wasn't something that was really much, it wasn't like anybody thought that about me [being gay], and really within our school, it was not like they had any sort of anything that was tied into that

KC: What things do you think contributed to you feeling that way?

Mark: Well, let's see. I'm not sure about that. Like I said it wasn't exactly something that schools focused on. It wasn't something that schools focused on. At least to my knowledge. There wasn't a gay-straight alliance or anything like that. Anything like that in my school was really just something that wasn't mentioned. It was just like my own private little thing and I didn't talk over it with anybody else really. I'm sure I probably knew some other people who were LGBT in some way, but I didn't really know it at the time. It's just sort of was not really much of a thing, you know this is like late 90s, early 2000--it wasn't anything like what it is now with the internet and there just wasn't the opportunity to talk much with other people on it

KC: How did you navigate your school experiences before you were publicly open about your sexual/gender identity?

Mark: I mean really, I just went to homecoming with a girl and I basically just hung out with friends--boy scouts, church things, went to the dance things. I didn't really focus much on any sort of romantic relationships or anything. I didn't really see myself trying to date anybody or see anybody else. I think my primary focus was trying to get through school because I was focusing so much on all my college credit classes and getting through bad things, getting through any extracurricular activities. I just really didn't want to focus on it so much.

KC: What was that like for you?

Mark: As far as that, I know if I would say it was negative, I think it's more just like I was kind of pushing it down, like keeping it out of, keep it out of my primary focus and just wanted to focus more on trying to advance in school and maintaining my grades, maintaining any of my advancements, trying to get ready for the ACT, trying to get ready for college and everything. I think it just wasn't something that I was prepared to focus on

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KC: You said earlier that you don't recall any gay clubs or anything like that. What support services were offered for students who may identify as LGBTQ+?

Mark: To be honest, I really don't remember any. There may very well have been some, perhaps some counseling services or something along those lines might have been available. I really don't remember any sort of public services being mentioned, at least not through the school or through any sort of extracurricular activities. If there were, I don't really remember.

KC: How were LGBTQ+ issues/people represented in the school? Classroom? Curriculum?

Mark: Like I said, it just seemed like it just wasn't a very big focus in the school. I'm sure I knew some, but it just wasn't something that was really public or really out there as far as other students or as far as a few teachers. I think in retrospect there might have been a few teachers who may have been. Currently I know some teachers who are LGBT and they don't talk it over with their students in any way. It's not the sort of thing that you're open about. I know, I think to me it just seemed like something that was just not very open about. I don't know if it was just the school culture or if it was the time period of what it was. It's just something that you don't discuss out in the open unless you know that somebody's going to be more open and willing to talk about it. So that sort of representation I really don't remember very much at all.

KC: so that that's in the school as a whole. Do you recall anything being represented in the curriculum or in classes?

Mark: In the curriculum. let's see. I don't remember anything specific. To my memory I don't remember anything. Not anything in history or in literature class or anything like that. I mean if there was like maybe some subtext in like some sort of literature course, in novels or short stories; but to my memory, I really don't remember anything along those lines

KC: What advice do you have for changes in K-12 curriculum, support systems, resources, safety, etc., to better meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students?

Mark: Maybe if there was like--I know this seems like really broad--but if you can have some sort of content, just sort of, it is kind of a weird word, but to normalize it. Like if you can have some content that almost doesn't even draw attention to itself--like if you have stories that involve some sort of LGBT characters, but that's not the focus of the story, they just happened to be that way. Or if you can make it clear, say through having counseling services or having some organizations, like some sort of a straight gay

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alliance club. I know even nowadays that might be kind of controversial. I'm sure it's not, granted it's been a long time since I've been in any school, I don't know what it's like now. Mostly just some sort of context to normalize it all. Also get someone to talk about what things used to be like. History classes that put what the past was like in context. Talk about what life was like for LGBT people like in the 50s, in the 60s, and why it was that way. What happened in the 30s that lead to the 50s and like how we've gotten to where we are today. A lot has happened even just in the past five years. Things have really changed.

KC: Is there anything else you would like to share or want to cover? I want to make sure that there's an opportunity if there's something that you want to share and didn't feel like it came up

Mark: I think that's really the big things that I wanted to focus on. You know, like I said it's like, especially when I was really young, it's almost like it just didn't exist, it was like it wasn't a thing, you never heard of it before, being gay wasn't a thing, not even a possibility. So, if you can just in some way normalize it so that if you are that way, you don't feel like you're an outsider, but also anybody who isn't some sort of LGBT person can see it as something that's normal and not something that needs to be opposed.