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A qualitative study of resiliency factors among gender and sexual minority students in schools without known protective factors

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A Qualitative Study of Resiliency Factors

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Without Known Protective Factors

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Abstract

Gender and sexual minority (GSM) students are one of the most vulnerable populations in schools today. Current research identifies numerous protective factors known to positively impact students' overall outcomes. However, it is still common to find schools that do not allow these protective factors to exist. This study seeks to gain a better understanding of the patterns and pathways of resiliency within the GSM community when known environmental protective factors do not exist. Interviews were conducted with five participants who shared their experiences of access to supports in high school. The goal of this study is to document and describe GSM students' experience in schools and thus provide teachers, school psychologists, and other school staff with resources for supporting GSM students in schools.

Introduction

The lives of people who identify outside of the heteronormative binary of straight and cisgender have been marked by stigma, discrimination, and health crises over the past several decades. For the first 18 years of their life, young children and adolescents spend the majority of their time in the school setting. Developmentally, school-age children experience a multitude of factors which may have an impact on their physical and mental health. Gender and Sexual Minority (GSM) youth experience all the same challenges, compounded with additional difficulties directly related to their gender or sexual identity. While education and understanding has increased in recent years, Hazel et al. (2018) argue that gender and sexual minority students are one of the most vulnerable populations in schools.

In today's society of technology and social media, the use of language encompassing the identity of students who do not identify as straight or cisgender is evolving at an ever-increasing rate. While the colloquial term, "LGBTQ+" is often used as a way to encompass people within the queer community, the acronym continues to grow and adapt at a rate that makes it difficult to use in research. For the purposes of this paper, we will use the term Gender and Sexual Minority (GSM) students to encompass all identities within the queer community. Hazel et al. (2018) define GSM students as, "school-attending youth whose gender expression is atypical, who identify as transgender or gender variant, or whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual" (p. 1).

There is a significant body of research surrounding GSM youth that identifies protective factors for students within school buildings. However, there are many school communities that still do not allow for open support of GSM persons and within which

the identified protective factors may not be present. While education, advocacy, and policy change are vital to the safety of these students, it is relevant to consider the current experiences of GSM students in schools which do not provide a safe space for students to explore or celebrate their identity. This study seeks to gain a better understanding of the patterns and pathways of resiliency within the GSM community when known environmental protective factors do not exist.

Review of Literature

Identity Development

When considering the well-being and safety of GSM students in schools, it is vital to consider the process of identity development from a developmental perspective. In recent years, many scholars have shifted from understanding identity development as primarily an aspect of adolescence to an ongoing process that occurs throughout early adulthood. While sexual identity exploration and development varies significantly between individuals and cohort groups (Martos et al., 2014), positive identity development in regard to one's sexual identity has been associated with psychological well-being (Ghavami et al., 2011) and a greater sense of control over the individual's life, health, and well-being (Greenaway et al., 2015).

Sexual orientation and gender identity development is not defined by a specific age or developmental stage. However, GSM students commonly self-identify as GSM during adolescence and disclose their identity in their teens or young adulthood (Martos et al., 2014). As they come to explore and understand their identity, GSM students must shift away from an often-assumed majority identity and integrate their gender or sexual identity within themselves and the larger context of their world (Cass, 1974). It is

important to acknowledge that, while identity development is constantly occurring for GSM students, these students are not defined by their GSM identity alone; rather, they are a complex formation of multiple intersecting identities which create a unique and individual experience for each student (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020).

Existence of GSA (formerly known as Gay Straight Alliance)

A significant aspect of individual identity development for any minority group includes a feeling of group identification among peers who identify with the same minority identity. Positive connection with peers within the same identity group can create a buffer against the effects of discrimination and harassment that GSM students experience, potentially giving them the support needed to better understand and process the negative experiences (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020). Additionally, previous research has found that identification with a group of similar peers provides a space where students are able to be open about and accepted for their gender or sexual identity, which is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being (Kosciw et al., 2015). Group identification promotes resiliency and is a protective factor for GSM students as they grow and develop their individual identity (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020).

When identities are not inherently visible, established settings for peer interaction can be vital for students to have access to a group with which they identify. GSA Clubs, formerly known as gay straight alliances, are school-based organizations intended to "create school communities where all students can be safe from discrimination, harassment, and violence based on their sexual orientation or gender identity" (GSA Network, 2020). While they began exclusively to serve as safe spaces within schools for

GSM students, they have since evolved into spaces which can advocate for and enact social change (GSA Network, 2020).

Numerous studies have clearly pointed to the existence of GSA clubs as the primary place in schools that promotes group identification, and research suggests that the existence of a GSA is a protective factor for GSM students because it increases a sense of peer support and belonging. Even when students did not actively participate in the GSA, the mere existence of the club has been correlated with higher levels of resilience among GSM students (Poteat et al., 2017). The protective factor of resiliency can then be connected to students' perceived access to peer and faculty relationships, social and emotional support, and validation (Poteat et al., 2018). Additionally, the presence of a GSA has been linked to a higher probability that faculty will intervene in harassment based on sexuality or gender (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Although active participation in a GSA is not necessary to experience the protective benefits of its existence, students who establish relationships with peers who share the same identity experience increased psychological well-being (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020) and a decrease in the negative associations and stigma often associated with GSM identity. As students begin to transition from adolescence to adulthood and begin to experience deeper identity development, students often experience rejection by peers, friends, and family members. Positive relationships with GSM peers and supportive adults can help to mitigate the grief of broken relationships by decreasing isolation and increasing moral support and affirmation (Rivers et al., 2018).

School Climate and School Engagement

While a lack of visibility, support, and representation is a risk factor for GSM students, research has shown that a supportive school climate may act as a protective factor, decreasing risk and increasing positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes. Affirming school climates provide school-based support groups and clubs, promote anti-bullying policies that specifically address sexual orientation and gender identity, provide access to resources for GSM students, and depict positive representation of GSM individuals in the curriculum (De Pedro et al., 2018).

A supportive school climate has been shown to increase positive perceptions of safety among GSM students within schools (Kosciw et al., 2013). Peer and teacher intervention are important factors in the perception of a supportive school climate. Additionally, GSM support is shown to be one of the primary indicators of a positive school climate. De Pedro et al. (2018) measured support by asking students to rate what extent they would go to numerous people in their life if they wanted information or support related to sexual orientation or gender identity issues. These people included school counselors and school psychologists, teachers, principals, other adults at school, friends at school, older siblings, parents and guardians, and their friend's parents and guardians. The results indicated that affirming and knowledgeable school staff create an important foundation of safety within schools, leading to a positive and supportive school climate (De Pedro et al, 2018).

When a positive school environment exists, students show an increased level of school engagement. Research within school settings has been consistent in acknowledging that school engagement is a protective factor for all students, as engaged students are more likely to achieve academic success and graduate with their cohort

(Balfanz et al., 2007; Conner, 2008). While there is not an agreed upon operationalized definition of school engagement, Hazel et al. (2013) define it as an interaction between the student and the environment, including their aspirations, belonging, and productivity. School engagement is multidimensional, integrating emotions, behaviors, and cognitions. For GSM students, the potential lack of belonging is particularly relevant and sensitive as they navigate their identity development.

School engagement is both reciprocal (Hazel et al., 2018) and plastic (Christenson et al., 2012). This means that engagement can both cause positive outcomes and be caused by other positive factors. Additionally, because it is plastic, it can be targeted with interventions, further enhancing positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Hazel et al., 2018).

Statistics

Despite better understanding of protective factors and the fact that representation of GSM people in popular culture and media has increased in recent years, students who identify as not heterosexual or as falling outside of the socially accepted gender binary continue to be at significantly higher risk than their majority peers to experience violence, discrimination, and harassment. For the past 20 years, GLSEN (formerly the "Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network), has conducted a National School Climate Survey which regularly documents the experiences of GSM students nationwide. The most recent survey, conducted in 2017, polled 23,001 students between the ages of 13 and 21 and found that nearly 60% of GSM students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation. Nearly 45% of students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their gender expression and 35% because of their gender (Kosciw et al, 2018).

Meyer (2003), who is credited with the development of the minority stress model, posits that individuals in a perceived minority group experience chronic stress which is above and beyond universal stressors. This is exemplified in the overall lack of school safety for GSM students, which can be further identified through language usage, harassment, assault, and discriminatory practices that take place in schools. The National School Climate Survey found that 95% of GSM students heard homophobic remarks in school and nearly 57% reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff. Over 87% of GSM students experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender. Of those students, 55% did not report the harassment or assault to school staff, often because they doubted or feared the response. Sixty-two percent of GSM students reported experiencing discriminatory policies or practices at their school (Kosciw et al., 2018). GSM students miss four to six times the amount of school as their peers due to feeling unsafe. Due to these hostilities, GSM students are at an increased risk for negative social, emotional, and academic outcomes, including academic failure, mental health problems, difficulty with relationships, risk-taking behavior, and suicidality (Hazel et al., 2018).

Even when overt discrimination and harassment is not present, a lack of visible or explicit support can also be a risk factor. Many GSM students have shared stories of feeling a lack of visible support from school personnel, even if they have not experienced direct discrimination. Dennis (2018) shares a story from several years ago, when a young student in one of his classes shared that she had been completely unaware that GSM people existed in the world until just prior to her high school graduation. Despite the recent increase in representation in popular culture, this student shared that her parents

had forbidden any movies or TV shows which showed a GSM character, and she had never heard or learned about it in school (Dennis, 2018). While this is an extreme example, it is clear many schools still do not provide support, visibility, or education for GSM students and their peers. Rivers et al. (2018) offer the story of a young woman who was in a same-sex relationship while at her boarding school. When her partner graduated, the student reported extreme social isolation, self-loathing, and loss which led her to attempt suicide. This, she shared, was made significantly more difficult by having "no one [she] could turn to" (Rivers et al., 2018, p. 3).

It is clear that all GSM students experience exposure to risk factors which can impact their life experience (Tobin et al., 2018). While these barriers are necessary to consider, it is important to note that GSM students are not inherently at risk for greater negative outcomes; instead, the increased risk comes from being a GSM student in "heterosexist, homophobic, sexist, and transphobic environments in which youth are more likely to experience harassment, bullying, discrimination, and oppression" (NASP, 2017, p. 1). Similarly, it is important to note that not all GSM students experience mental health problems. Much of the research surrounding GSM students focuses specifically on risk factors and negative outcomes. Schreuder (2019) argues that, while important in understanding their experience, this deficit focus simply "perpetuate[s] the fallacy of LGBTQ youth as only victims and not as agentive participants in resistance to oppression" (p. 2). Cooke and Melchert (2019) instead call for a "shift from a pathology focus toward a more holistic understanding of LGB health and well-being" (p. 242).

Purpose of the Current Study

This study seeks to gain a better understanding of the patterns and pathways of resiliency within the GSM community when known environmental protective factors do not exist.

While there is a growing body of research that addresses protective factors for GSM students in schools, limited research has been done to consider resiliency factors that students' exhibit in school environments that do not permit known protective factors to exist. As the existence of GSA's have shown to be one of the strongest protective factors for GSM students, this study considered the patterns of experience among GSM students who have been successful in the absence of systems of support. This study focused on a resiliency narrative rather than a victim narrative in order to best understand the patterns of experience from a strengths perspective.

In order to document and describe these experiences, research questions were focused on experiences with adults, relationships with peers, access to resources, and indicators of safe or unsafe spaces. This research hopes to give insight into GSM students' experience in schools without the primary protective factor of a GSA and how they found and accessed safe spaces and people within the school building.

Research Questions

1. When known environmental protective factors (eg GSA club) are not present, what supports within the school community are identified by GSM students?

2. What are the communication and/or behavioral characteristics of people or other indicators that allow GSM students to recognize safe spaces/supports within the school community?

3. What impact does group identification or affiliation have on GSM students'
    experience in school?

Methods

Participants

Participants included five current or recently graduated college students in their
20s. Each participant currently self-identifies as a GSM student and graduated from a
high school that did not have a GSA or equivalent club. Each participant was asked to
share their gender identity and sexual orientation, which is summarized in Table 1.

Procedure

This study was approved by the James Madison University Institutional Review
Board. Initially, the researcher identified connections on local college campuses within
the GSM student community by reaching out to campus clubs and organizations with
specific connections to the GSM population. A specific blurb was used to contact each of
these organizations (Appendix A). By sharing information with the leaders and advocates
within the organizations, the goal was that they, in turn, shared the information with
group members, allowing willing participants to contact the researcher directly. After
limited responses, the researcher then reached out to personal and professional
connections within the local community and shared the same request. Individuals willing
to participate in the study then contacted the researcher directly.

After individuals volunteered to participate, the researcher contacted each person
by email to briefly explain the process and set up a date and time for a 30- to 60-minute
interview. Participants were offered the choice between completing the interview over the

phone or setting up a Zoom call. All five participants responded and agreed to a Zoom call. The researcher then emailed a Zoom link for the agreed upon time and date.

At the start of each interview, informed consent was read aloud to each participant. Additionally, the researcher used Zoom to share her screen so that the participants could also see and read the consent form (Appendix B). Informed consent also included consent to audio record the interview. Verbal consent was obtained from each participant. After each interview, each recording was transcribed with all identifying information removed and the audio recording was destroyed.

As topics of personal sexuality and gender can be sensitive, the researcher conducting the interviews was a qualified mental health professional with counseling and crisis intervention training. In case any participant indicated that they were unsafe or required additional support, follow-up information was available which identified resources, including but not limited to The Trevor Project Hotline and the GLAAD national resource list.

During the individual interviews, the researcher asked a series of open-ended questions, designed to allow the participant to share their personal experience in school. A sample of the interview questions is provided in the Appendix C. Additional follow-up questions were asked as appropriate to the information being shared. Participants were encouraged to share additional experiences they believe helpful or relevant to the questions at hand.

Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher used constant comparative analysis to systematically compare similarities and differences within the participants'

experience and to make connections within the shared stories. Main themes and topics were identified within and between each participants' responses. Then, each participants' responses were placed in a table by theme, which allowed the researcher to identify similarities and unique differences among the interviews (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008), and it is believed that saturation of the data was reached. Results were analyzed based on exact quotes from participants without examiner judgement. The main themes are presented in the results below.

Results

Demographics

Of the five participants, three attended a private Christian school and two attended a public high school. Four participants attended school in a very rural area in the United States. One participant attended an international, American-education college prep school located in an urban area.

Each participants' gender identity and sexual orientation is summarized in Table 1. It is important to note that not all participants identified as GSM in high school. Specifically, two participants were publicly out in high school, one identified as gay but was not out publicly, and two did not come out, personally or privately, until college. Participants who did not come out until after high school reflected still answered the same questions about access to resources. They were then also asked to reflect on how their school's environment may or may not have impacted their identity development and their coming out process.

Table 1: Demographics: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Participant	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Pronouns	Out in High School?
1	Cisgender male	Gay	He/him	Out, Not Public
2	Cisgender female	Bisexual	She/her	Not out
3	Cisgender female	Pansexual	She/her	Out, Public
4	Gender-nonconforming	Queer/Asexual	They/them	Not out
5	Cisgender female	Queer	She/her	Out, Public

Through theme analysis, it was apparent that there were several common themes about which many or all of the participants spoke. Within each theme, some participants shared similar experiences while other shared unique or opposing experiences. The results below are presented by theme. Within each theme, the unique comments from participants are quoted in the first column. The common or shared comments are placed in the second column separated by sub-theme. Each common comment is identified by the participant number in parentheses.

Scaling Question

At the start of each interview, each participant was asked to rate how supported they felt in school on a scale from one to ten, with one being the least supported and ten being the most supported. Answers ranged from two to seven, although four of the five participants rated their support as a five or below. Commonly, participants answered through the lens of comparison with other stories they've heard or other friends' experiences. Participant three, who rated their support at a five, shared that they chose that rating because there were other students in the school who had it worse than they did.

Several participants mentioned that they chose the rating they did because they were never explicitly bullied, but each also clarified that they also never felt specifically supported. Participant two noted that their peers engaged in microaggressions, and participant three indicated that the overall atmosphere in the school did not feel safe. Participant one, who rated their support at a seven, shared that they felt safe because they had a very close group of peers but later clarified that they felt supported in spite of the school environment, not because of it.

Participant five, who rated their support at a two, was the only participant who shared that they had an explicitly negative and unsafe school environment. The school administration made it very clear that they did not support GSM students and teachers were unable to be supportive at the risk of losing their jobs.

Table 2: Scaling Question Responses

Participant	Number	Unique Comments	Common Comments
1	7	"I went to school with literally the same people this entire time. So, in a way you do have…that support system"	**Explicit Bullying** (1) "I never was, like, bullied…"
2	3 or 4	"I had friends who…would drop comments about, you know, being bisexual isn't real….Hearing comments like that from people I was close to didn't necessarily prompt me to explore those feelings any further"	(1) "I never experienced any of those typical things that I think, like, gay people experience in high school, in, like, a nightmare-ish kind of way…" (2) "It's not that I ever felt like I had an…unsafe or unwelcoming setting with my friends"
3	5	"Once we left it [the music wing], the whole atmosphere was different."	(5) "I wasn't really bullied, but I wasn't supported"
4	4	"…my cousin was out. I had a couple of friends that weren't straight. But there was no one that I knew that was trans or,	-

		like, outside of the gender binary anywhere…. I didn't necessarily know, like, other identities and stuff. I knew that there was gay and lesbian. That is all I knew that existed."	**Comparing Experience** (3) "I know, in my experience, because I'm more feminine presenting and everything, it wasn't as bad as my friend, Jane, who is more masculine presenting. And she just had a little bit harder."
5	2	"…every teacher started questioning if they were also going to get fired if they came out in support of anything. So, students stopped telling teachers things because they didn't want teachers to get in trouble." "The school just really made known and cracked down on the stance on sexuality, on gender, on everything. And I had accidentally come out kind of in the middle of all that." "I knew [I was queer] pretty early on, I just didn't have the vocabulary for it. I went to private school my entire life and, in middle school, I remember thinking, 'Oh, this might actually be a problem in this environment. But this is not something I want to deal with now." "Teachers very much at my school could have gotten in a lot of trouble if they had presented books that had LGBTQ+ people in a good light. They could have very much gotten in trouble for that."	(3) "…my friend, John, he was a black gay man. And…I think he was the only black man at our school. So it was extra extra hard for him."

		"A lot of people that I know that came out after high school…We always have the conversation of our school environment… We could have had a chance to flourish in high school and we were not given that chance."	

Visibility

One common theme among participants' responses was a lack of visibility and how that impacted their experience and identity development. Three participants shared a very similar perspective. All three indicated that their school wasn't explicitly unsafe. They weren't bullied. They didn't often hear slurs or homophobic teachings. Overall, their experience wasn't specifically negative. But, there was no positive representation either. Each shared that there were very few, if any, openly GSM students or teachers in the school and there weren't any identifiable resources available for students to ask questions or learn more about gender or sexuality. People simply didn't talk about it.

These three participants are the same participants who were not out in high school. All three participants individually identified that the lack of visibility and representation likely had a significant impact on their personal identify development and coming out process. Several shared that they didn't know that being anything other than straight was something they could be. They didn't have the language to ask questions or to explore anything beyond the heteronormative culture by which they were surrounded. Another shared that they were only exposed to gay and straight and that anything other than those two binaries felt taboo. All three agreed that the lack of visibility and representation was detrimental to their own identity and experience.

Table 3: Visibility

Participant	Unique Comments	Common Comments
1	"…it wasn't part of the curriculum…but there were definitely instances specifically in, like religion classes…where teachers would not necessarily make it a lesson but would bring it up in an informal or formal way."	**Invisibility** (1) "You just didn't talk…it just wasn't ever a thought." (1) "There weren't any…nobody who was out. That just wasn't a community that existed there."
2	"It felt very taboo. Like, bisexuality in particular felt taboo."	(2) "The fact that there weren't other girls around me who were out… it was like there wasn't anyone to ask, anyway. It didn't feel like there was anyone to explore with or, you know, who do I talk to?"
3		
4		
5	"Why are we even bringing up homosexuality in chapels? In school classrooms? Like, if you can't say anything nice and supportive, why are you bringing it up in the first place? So that would have made a difference, I think. Because it's one thing to have to unlearn everything negative you're taught. It's another thing to go explore something that you haven't been taught negatively about."	(2) "The thing about my school was just, nobody ever talked about it. Nobody ever talked about different types of relationships that you could be in." (2) "I didn't even know what to look for as far as resources…It didn't feel like there was much in my immediate environment to look for or people to talk to." (4) "…my cousin was out. I had a couple of friends that weren't straight. But there was no one that I knew that was trans or, like, outside of the gender binary anywhere…. I didn't necessarily know, like, other identities and stuff. I knew that there was gay and lesbian. That is all I knew that existed." - **Impact of Visibility**

		(1) "Maybe I would have come out earlier if I grew up in a more accepting and liberal environment." (2) "I'm sure that environment, you know, contributed to the fact that it just never occurred to me that could be something I could act on or would have been an identity that I could have had." (2) "I think it's easy to connect those dots and say, 'oh, well it's because there was nothing in my school that…' You know, I wasn't really in an environment that would have encouraged that [coming out]." (2) "I don't know how things would have turned out differently if I had found out that maybe somebody else in my class felt that way or I had just had a generally wider social circle that I could have met other girls who were attracted to girls and did something about it. But it just never felt like something to legitimately pursue because - it scared me honestly because I had no frame of reference for it." (2) "I do think that, because there are so many more things that a student may think about themselves other than, 'I am gay or straight, I am a lesbian or I'm not…' I think not talking about it at all can sort of stunt their acknowledgement. I think not talking about it at all is very detrimental." (4) "I needed them [signs] to be overt and obvious. At least small signs that are seen and visible. And

		I feel like it would have helped me realize who I am faster."

Peer Relationships

All five participants identified their friends and peers as their most consistent form of support in high school. Some participants specifically found that identifying with other GSM peers was particularly important to their feeling of safety and support. Participants two and three both reflected that their connection with other GSM students was unintentional but vital to their own experience of resilience. Specifically, they shared that knowing that their friends and peers understood their experience without having to explain it to them made them feel safe and free to explore their identity. Other participants found that a shared GSM identity was not necessary to feel safe and supported by their peers. Participant one reflected that his small, private school cohort was so close and supportive that it felt like it gave him what he imagined a GSA provided to GSM students in other, larger schools. However, he acknowledged that the closeness of his cohort was an unusual experience, even compared to other classes of students in his high school.

While every participant mentioned that their peers were a significant source of support, participant five had a unique perspective about connecting with other GSM students. Their school was so explicitly unsafe that GSM students often intentionally stayed disconnected from each other to avoid assumptions or rumors. She also felt that the unsafe environment of the school limited her peers from being as openly supportive as they may have been under different circumstances.

Table 4: Peer Relationships

Participant	Unique Comments	Common Comments
1		**Peer Support**
2		(1) "My class just happened to be a really pretty unique group of people…. That was a community that existed just without, like, the title of, 'Hey, 'we're all in this group [referring to GSA]'"
3		
4		
5	"My senior year of high school I did know of a couple other people [GSM students] and we did have conversations during everything that happened, but it also wasn't like we were going to hang out together…because we didn't want any assumptions that we were together. And we had different interests anyway." "That environment also prohibited my friends from being as supportive as they could have been."	(3) "I guess what made it so safe was how close everybody got there [in choir/theater]. Not even just the gay people in the class but the straight ones and everybody else." (4) "Friends are amazing. My friend…she's the one who helped me set up my bank account. And if I wanted to dye my hair, she's the one who did it. She's completely supportive. (5) "They [my peers] kind of formed their own group of people to help pull them through that couldn't really rely on the teachers or the therapists." - **GSM Community** (2) "I wanted to be friends with them [other GSM students]. I wanted for them to like me and approve of me, I think in a way that I didn't necessarily feel with other students." (2) "I felt a similar identity [with other GSM students] but didn't understand it and didn't acknowledge it…I would not have been able to identify it that way at the time."

		(3) "I don't think we meant to draw together. I think it was just, a common experience of, 'Oh, hey, you get me. You understand what nobody else does.'" (3) "…you have these people [GSM peers] that are like, you know, I'll back you up and everything….It was that, I guess, like alliance, per se, was like, he has my back. He's family, you know."

Teachers/Staff

While each participant identified peers as one of the most consistent forms of support, teachers and staff were rarely identified as supportive by any of the participants. Some participants identified teachers and staff as explicitly unsafe while others shared that they didn't have any way of knowing if their teachers were supportive or not. Several participants indicated that they assumed there were probably a few supportive teachers in the school but that they had no way of identifying them within an inherently unsupportive system. Commonly, students felt like the process of figuring out if a teacher was or wasn't supportive was too much of a risk to take unless they knew beyond doubt that a teacher was supportive.

Of all five participants, only participant three could identify a teacher who was both openly supportive and accessible. This teacher was, for her, one of the most important people in her school experience and was the only safe adult she connected with, at school or at home. Participant five shared a particularly unique perspective about accessing supportive teachers. She was easily able to identify several teachers she either

knew or assumed were supportive of GSM students. However, during her time in high

school, one openly supportive teacher was removed from her position after facing

backlash from parents and administration. First, this obviously stopped other teachers

from publicly supporting students. Additionally, it also stopped students from seeking

support from teachers. The teachers they knew would be supportive, she shared, were

also their favorite teachers, and students weren't willing to put their favorite teachers'

jobs at risk by reaching out for support. This led to GSM students worrying both about

protecting themselves and concurrently worrying about protecting their teachers.

Only two participants mentioned school and/or guidance counselors in their

responses, and neither shared that the counselor was a form of support for GSM students.

Participant one noted that the guidance counselor did not provide mental health services;

she only worked on class schedules and college admissions support. So, he never even

thought about whether she would be a support or resource. Participant five shared that the

school counselor did technically provide mental health services to students. However, it

was well-known that she did not respect confidentiality and often shared private details

with teachers, staff, and parents. In that school, the school counselor was one of the most

explicitly unsafe and unsupportive adults in the building.

Table 5: Teachers/Staff

Participant	Unique Comments	Common Comments
1		
2	"There were definitely teachers who expressed frustration with the way that certain things were done in the school."	**Lack of Teacher/Staff Support** (1) "I wouldn't really say the school really provided that [support] in space or in staff… I had plenty of teachers I felt generally supported by in the way that they were a teacher, but not in a way that was like, 'Oh, I can come to this person
3	"Everybody there [in the music wing] was always accepting, including the faculty members. Their office doors were always	

	open. They were like, 'If you need to come talk to me, you can.' They always made sure that door was open."	as a gay youth…' That did not exist at my school." (1) "My guidance counselor wasn't somebody who I ever thought was somebody who I could, like, go to with a problem."
4		
5	"There was one teacher who was very progressive. And then his wife, she was the only person that was willing to talk to girls about sex ed. So she was kinda the go-to…. Somebody asked her point blank her thoughts on the LGBTQ+ community. And her sibling is non-binary. So she ended up saying, 'Hey, the school believes this, but I believe differently.'" "Guidance counselors would walk around and tell girls that were platonically holding hands that they were leading people astray and quoting bible verses and saying that people would think that they were lesbians. That was the kind of environment they ended up creating. Where, you know, teachers can come into classes and compare homosexuality to marrying dogs." "I distinctly remember a conversation we had with the superintendent who said that, "Just like students are allowed to be Hindu and go to this Christian school, you can still be gay and go to this school. It just might not feel welcoming." "My learning support teacher didn't make us feel othered. And helped create a sense of solidarity between everybody in her learning	(2) "I don't know if I felt close enough to any that that could ever come up." (4) "For the most part, there would have been a good bit of teachers that weren't necessarily going to be the safest." (4) "Because, with my high school, if you didn't know the teacher was supportive, it may not have ended well. It was a big deal. It could have made it so much worse." (5) "Our guidance counselor and our school counselor didn't have any kind of confidentiality…One of my friends, another teacher found out that her parents were getting divorced from the counselor at a dinner party she'd had with the counselor and she brought it up after class one day."

	support classes. And she helped mitigate stuff with teachers."	

Identifying Safe Spaces

For GSM students, especially those in schools without explicitly identified safe spaces, determining whether a person or space is safe is particularly challenging. Throughout the interviews, each participant identified different ways that they identify if a space is safe. Interestingly, the most common answer was that they relied on unquantifiable feelings, gut reactions, and vibes. Even when pressed to think specifically about small things that they noticed, each participant found it difficult to identify or describe why they felt the way they did, good or bad, about certain people and spaces. Participant five stated it particularly well when she said, "She told the truth. She didn't mince her words. But she never made us feel bad about being ourselves."

Several participants were also able to provide more specific, identifiable ways they determine if a person or a space is safe. Some identified specific, explicit signs they look for, like pride flags, pronoun identification, and explicitly affirming statements in syllabi or during introductions. Another mentioned less explicit representation; she noticed the acknowledgement of queer historical figures, authors, and artists within the classroom setting, even if their inclusion in the curriculum wasn't specifically related to their gender orientation or sexuality.

Table 6: Identifying Safe Spaces

Participant	Unique Comments	Common Comments
1	"It is explicitly said by the leaders [of my business] that they explicitly support… you know… pride and everything. It is just helpful."	**General Feeling** (1) "Well I think the most general identifiable thing that I look for in a person is just a general openness and warmth."
2		

3	"I guess, those first days… you know, syllabus week, where you're kind of getting the vibe for the teacher and the class? I guess that would have been a great place to be like, 'hey, you know, if you need anything, I always have that open-door policy.'"	(2) "I guess the way to figure out about those safe spaces, it's such a weird thing, but I guess, you know, the vibes of it." (4) "It's interesting looking back [on touring colleges] because, like, did it feel slightly off for a reason? And I just somehow wasn't able to say that."
4	"One of my friends said they saw a small pride flag on another one of the teachers' desks. It was very small and not super visible." "One thing I know that I want to do as a teacher to, kind of, show that…when I'm starting to teach…I'm not going to follow gender stereotypes. I want to have a pronoun sheet and it's something that only I'm going to see as a teacher."	(4) "One of the teachers I had a really strong connection with…There were just safe vibes from her that I couldn't completely explain….You just have to get the vibes…I don't think I can really quantify it."
5	"She told the truth. She didn't mince her words. But she never made us feel bad about being ourselves. She didn't make us feel bad for who we were and what was happening to us. But it was more like, 'Things will be different. You're not at fault for how people are treating you in a bad system.'" "She pushed life skills on us in a way that made us prioritize ourselves… She really just took a wholistic view of our lives and said, 'There's more to life than not only schoolwork, but this school in and of itself. There's more to life than how you're treating in this space. But while you're here, what can we do to make it easier for you?'" "Representation goes a long way. Who they bring to even reference,	

	you know, like in books, maybe in movies that you watch…You know. You talk about a poet, or, you know, 'Hey, this is a science person who made this groundbreaking thing, who introduced this and they are also queer.' That would have opened the door to having a conversation in which they could be supportive…And not just a one-time thing, but continuously making an effort." "Trust has to be earned…It wasn't like I would have picked out a teacher and tested the waters to see if they were safe."	

What do you wish would have been different?

At the end of the interview, each participant was asked what could have been different that would have increased their feeling of safety and support in high school. Each participant had at least one unique answer that was different than other responses, but there were two common themes. First, several participants specifically said that it would have made a difference if they had someone who was clearly identified as a safe, confidential person to whom they could talk. Second, two participants would have liked to know that the teachers and staff at their school had received some training in how to support GSM students. One participant shared that, even if her teachers still didn't fully understand, she would have felt safer if she had known they had at least had some training.

Along with a clearly identified safe person and teacher training, each participant shared unique ideas about things that would have made them feel more supported in high school. Participant one would have liked to have had seen similar emphasis put into the

arts programs as compared to sports, allowing and encouraging students to pursue

different opportunities. Participant two would have liked her parents to be less connected

to and involved with the school, so that she would have had more of an opportunity to

explore and ask questions. Participant three shared that she would have wanted to see

more respect between the students, even if acceptance or understanding wasn't possible.

Participant four would have liked gender-neutral bathrooms to be accessible to all

students, instead of students' having to go to a separate space (i.e. office or nurse).

Finally, participant five would have liked access to a sex-ed curriculum and an

environment where teachers were free to express their support to students.

Table 7: What do you wish would have been different?

Participant	Unique Comments	Common Comments
1	"What I would have changed about my experience was just the religious element of it…. It ultimately didn't do anything positive for someone who didn't identify as a cis, straight person." "I would also just say more informal conversation about what it's like out in the world… I never had a teacher who stepped away from the textbook for, like, five minutes." "There was a lot of emphasis on sports…conversely, there was basically no emphasis on things like the arts. I think that if there was equal opportunity put into the success of all of those programs… to know that there were those opportunities to know that those opportunities were there could have been helpful. I think that just allowing that openness and those opportunities to be known and just	**Safe, Confidential Person** (1) "Something that I could have benefited from in high school was just having, like, a guidance counselor or some sort of person in a similar position." (4) "Someone that's there to genuinely listen. And that you know going in will be supportive." (5) "Having a school counselor that was confidential. That would have made a difference." - **Safe Zone & Training** (3) "This [safe space training] would have been great in high school. If faculty members had had that it would have been amazing. Just some training. Even if they don't fully understand, at least they have some education."

	encouraged to pursue would have been really helpful."	(4) "More inclusivity and having a safe space…Or a designated safe teacher. And trying to get people to go through safe zone training. Having those safe spaces can be so crucial and I didn't realize that until college."
2	"My parents were heavily involved in the school. You know, they knew all my teachers. If there had been a GSA…well I would have gone as an ally. I think if I had ever figured out that I could have come out, I don't know if I would have come out at school."	
3	"I guess just more acceptance. I understand that not everybody is going to fully accept everything. But I guess just kind of, like, a common decency. Or, I guess, not the word accepting, but respect."	
4	"It felt weird to have never been in a relationship or anything by the time I was a senior in high school. Because so many people have already had their first kiss or their first relationship and stuff…It never happened for me. I was just oblivious to my own feelings. Where I'm from is so heteronormative." "And gender-neutral bathrooms – at least one. Having one that isn't in the office or the nurse's office – or one that isn't a designated teacher bathroom."	
5	"Any kind of sex education curriculum… that might have made a difference. It really would have depended on who taught it, but it might have made a difference." "Having teachers being free to be affirming of LGBTQ+ students would have been huge. Because	

	maybe if teachers hadn't felt like it was their job on the line…they would have felt more free to speak up in more support. Or at least we would have known that we could have known that	

Discussion

Peer Support and Visibility

One of the most common themes identified by all five participants was the importance of peer support. Several identified their peers as their most important form of support. Interestingly, participants' answers differed in regard to whether or not a shared GSM identity was an important factor in those relationships. Research suggests that the presence of a GSA is a protective factor for students in part because they promote a sense of group identity, which in turn can create a buffer against the effects of discrimination and harassment (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020) and create a space where students are able to be open about and accepted for their gender or sexual identity (Kosciw et al., 2015). Only two participants shared that identifying with other GSM students was important to them. Participant five, who was in a particularly unsupportive environment, shared that she was intentionally cautious about interacting with other GSM students out of fear of discrimination. Participants who did not indicate an importance of a shared identity did not indicate regret or wish that they had identified more with GSM peers. Regardless of whether or not they shared a GSM identity, participants found most, if not all, of their support in school from their peers.

Despite varying opinions on the importance of identifying with GSM peers, several participants shared that they believe their high school experience may have been different, specifically related to their personal experience of their sexual or gender

identity, if they had seen other students openly identifying as GSM. Commonly, participants made statements indicating that they simply were not aware that certain GSM identities existed and were therefore possible for them to explore. Poteat et al. (2017) found that the mere existence of a GSA club is correlated with higher levels of resilience among GSM students, even for students who did not actively participate in the GSA. It seems likely that this is partially due to an increased level of visibility for GSM students, encouraging them to explore their own identity, even if they do not actively participate in the GSA.

The issue of visibility was further identified by participants through the lack of conversation, language, or recognition of GSM identities or issues by teachers and administration. Rather than hearing negative or discriminatory comments, most participants indicated hearing nothing at all. "You just didn't talk [about sexuality or gender]…it just wasn't even a thought," participant one shared. Participants two and four had similar experiences. Unsurprisingly, these three participants were the same three participants who were not out in high school. All three indicated that their journey of identity development and their coming out process would likely have been different if GSM identities and issues were more visible in high school. However, one participant disagreed. Participant five is the only person who experienced regular, open homophobia and discrimination, and she would have preferred hearing nothing at all. "…it's one thing to have to unlearn everything negative you're taught. It's another thing to go explore something that you haven't been taught negatively about," she shared.

Teacher Support

Of all five participants, only one identified a teacher as a specific, consistent support through high school. Most participants indicated that, although they assumed there were teachers in their school who would have been supportive, they did not connect with them. There were several different reasons why participants didn't connect with teachers as forms of support. Several simply didn't have a safe way of identifying who the supportive teachers were and figuring out which teachers were safe and which weren't was too risky. "…It wasn't like I would have picked out a teacher and tested the waters to see if they were safe," participant five shared. Participant four noted that, "I needed them [signs] to be overt and obvious… Because, with my high school, if you didn't know the teacher was supportive, it may not have ended well. It was a big deal. It could have made it so much worse." Participant five, however, knew exactly which teachers would have been safe and supportive but didn't connect with them for another reason. Early in her time at the school, an affirming teacher was fired for supporting a GSM student. "…every teacher started questioning if they were also going to get fired if they came out in support of anything," she said. "So, students stopped telling teachers things because they didn't want teachers to get in trouble."

Implications for School Psychologists

School systems and employees are in a unique position to provide vital, potentially life-changing supports to GSM students (Hazel et al., 2018) during critical times of identity development (Ghavami et al., 2011). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) 2020 Professional Standards state that, "[School Psychologists] use their expertise to cultivate school climates that are safe, welcoming, and equitable to all persons regardless of actual or perceived characteristics,

including…gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression…" School psychologists are in a unique position to support GSM students both directly and indirectly.

When participants were asked what they wish would have been different, several stated that they wished they had access to an adult they knew would be safe, supportive, and affirming. However, based on participants' previous statements, it is important that students don't have to wonder or guess if a person – even a school psychologist – will be safe. Especially in schools that aren't inherently affirming, students may not seek out support if a teacher or staff member does not clearly and explicitly indicate that they are a safe space. School psychologists need to intentionally work to identify themselves as a safe space and person within their school buildings. This may include displaying safe space signs, facilitating gender and/or sexual identity affirming groups, or even identifying pronouns in their email signature.

Just as importantly, school psychologists are also in the perfect position to help increase other teachers' awareness of GSM issues and provide guidance and training to school administrators and teachers. Several participants shared that they wish their school would have had a GSM affirming training like Safe Zone training. Participant three stated that, "This [safe zone training] would have been great in high school. If faculty members had had that it would have been amazing. Just some training. Even if they don't fully understand, at least they have some education." Additionally, school psychologists should work on increasing visibility and GSM representation. For several of the participants, simply increasing GSM representation may have impacted their personal coming out journey in positive ways. School psychologists can advocate for increased

representation in the classroom and inclusive policies. They can also increase visibility by providing access to community resources, creating groups, and encouraging affirming language use.

Limitations and Further Research

One limitation to this study is the sample size. Although each participant provided rich qualitative information, the data are not necessarily assumed to be representative of the majority of students' experiences. Of the participants who volunteered to participate in the study, three attended a private Christian school, which very likely impacted their overall experience as compared to participants who attended a public school. Additionally, two of the five participants were not out in high school, even to themselves. So, while they were able to reflect back on their time in high school to engage in the interview, they were likely not seeking resources in the same way that students were who were already out.

The goal of this study was to document and describe the experiences of GSM students who attended schools that did not have a GSA or other similar ally club in order to understand if and how students' accessed resources and support. Currently, there is a significant amount of research that identifies known protective factors for GSM students in schools, including inclusive policies, anti-discrimination policies, and the existence of a GSA. However, there is limited research on where and how students access resources in schools where those known protective factors don't exist. Continued research will be important to better understand what supports students actually access and what GSM students need in schools to increase resilience and access to supports. Additionally,

additional research could investigate the impact of intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and

religion and how they impact GSM students' experience in school.

Appendix A

I am in training to become a school psychologist in a program at James Madison University. Topics of interest to me include LGBTQ+ student safety in environments where environmental protective factors do not exist and students' patterns of resilience. While LGBTQ+ students are faced with countless challenges daily, they also exhibit patterns of resilience and strength in unsafe environments. I would like to interview LGBTQ+ students who went to a public school that did not have a GSA club in which they were able to participate. Participation is voluntary and any information shared will be kept confidential. Please contact weave2am@dukes.jmu.edu if you are interested in participating in this study.

Appendix B

Consent to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Anna Weaver from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the patterns and pathways of resiliency within the GSM community when known environmental protective factors don't exist. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her Ed.S. thesis.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants in at James Madison University. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your experience as a GSM student in public school. The interview will be audio recorded for accuracy. If you are uncomfortable consenting to audio recording, the interview will be terminated to respect your privacy.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require 30-60 minutes of your time.

Risks

The investigator perceives the following are possible risks arising from your involvement with this study:
- Discussion of potentially sensitive topics that may be triggering for some students. You have the right to choose to not answer any questions in the interview and have the right to stop the interview at any time. If the conversation becomes triggering or the investigator becomes concerned about your well-being, she will check-in with you and provide resources and follow-up to ensure your safety.

Benefits

There are no direct potential benefits to you from participation in this study. Benefits of the research as a whole include a better understanding of GSM students' experiences of safety in public schools and their patterns of resilience when known environmental factors do not exist.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented at JMU conferences and other professional conferences. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers including the audio recording will be destroyed.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Anna Weaver, M.A.   Tammy Gilligan, PhD
School Psychology Program   School Psychology Program
James Madison University   James Madison University
Weave2am@dukes.jmu.edu   Telephone: (540) 568-6564
                                                      gilligtd@jmu.edu

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

Dr. Taimi Castle
Chair, Institutional Review Board
James Madison University
(540) 568-5929
castletl@jmu.edu

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

☐ I give consent to be audio recorded during my interview. _____ (initials)

_____

Name of Participant (Printed)

_____   _____
Name of Participant (Signed)   Date

_____   _____
Name of Researcher (Signed)   Date

Appendix C

"I am in training to become a school psychologist in a program at James Madison University.

Topics of interest to me include GSM student safety in environments where environmental

protective factors do not exist and students' patterns of resilience. You have a unique perspective

and I would like to hear your story. While GSM students are faced with countless challenges

daily, they also exhibit patterns of resilience and strength in unsafe environments. Today I am

going to ask you about your experience of safety and support in school, your relationships with

adults and peers in your school community, and access to resources."

1. Demographics

    a. What is your gender?

    b. What is your sex?

    c. How do you identify?

    d. What else would you like me to know about your identity?

2. School information

    a. How large was your graduating class?

    b. Did you go to a rural, suburban, or urban school?

    c. Did you school have a GSA or other equivalent student club?

3. Were you out in school? If so, how old were you when you came out?

4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how supported did you feel at school? Tell me why you chose that

number…

        a. What made you feel safe?

        b. What made you feel unsafe?

5. What supports did you have access to in school regarding your sexual and/or gender identity? What supports did you use?

6. Was there anyone in your school community who provided support to you? How did you know that person would be safe?

7. Was there anyone in your school community who you knew was not safe? How did you know?

8. Tell me about your relationships with other GSM students in your school.

        a. How did you connect to those peers?

        b. Did you have a physical space to be together?

        c. Was it important to you to have friendships with other GSM peers? Why or why not?

9. What do you wish had been different in your school?

10. Earlier we talked about how supported you felt in school and you chose (_____). What could have been different that would have changed that number so that you felt more supported?

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