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Emily Walsh

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Exploring Perceptions and Needs of Rural Teachers to Enhance School Psychologists'  
Advocacy and Support of Gender and Sexual Minority Students

Emily Walsh

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Education Specialist

Department of Graduate Psychology

August 2021

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## **Abstract**

Gender and Sexual Minority (GSM) students are at a disproportionate risk for victimization in schools. They are especially vulnerable in schools that lack protective policies, have limited access to resources, and exist within conservative and unaccepting communities. These schools may be more common in rural communities. The purpose of the present study was to explore rural teachers' perceptions of school climate and their readiness and willingness to support GSM students. Recommendations are provided for school psychologists to be able to understand and address their own schools' needs in providing a positive school climate for GSM students.

*Keywords:* Gender and Sexual Minority Student Support, Rural School Climate, LGBTQ+ Student Support, Rural Teacher Support

## Introduction

Domain 8 of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Practice Model calls school psychologists to promote social justice within their schools. A major social justice issue in schools is the disproportionate risk of victimization for Gender and Sexual Minority (GSM) youth (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Skalski, Minke, Rossen, Cowan, Kelly, Armistead, & Smith, 2015). Protective factors such as school policies, Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) groups, and supportive teachers can increase feelings of school safety for GSM youth (Day, Ioverno, & Russell, 2019; De Pedro, et al., 2018). The presence of teachers is the only consistent factor across rural schools with the potential to increase feelings of safety; however, school policies, community climate, administrative pressure, knowledge, and resources all influence whether a teacher is able to provide such support. Additionally, rural areas may have fewer community outlets for GSM students, increasing the need for schools to provide these resources.

Depending on background and access to professional development, some school psychologists may have little knowledge about how to best help their teachers become a resource for GSM students. The following study investigated the perspectives and needs of rural teachers in supporting GSM students. This investigation appeals to Domain 2 of the NASP Practice Model, which calls school psychologists to use consultation and collaboration to help teachers support their students (Skalski, et al., 2015). The information gathered informed the development of a guidance document for school psychologists to determine the needs of teachers in their school communities in supporting GSM students in rural schools.

## **Rurality**

This study addresses issues that are unique to rural populations. The definition of rural varies throughout the literature. For the purpose of this study, rural refers to small towns with populations of fewer than 25,000 people. Such small towns may differ from truly rural areas in that small towns may have fewer agricultural spaces and a larger variety of businesses, but still tend to reflect the stereotype of conservative climates and closely knit communities. In contrast, urban areas are much more likely to have GSM-affirming spaces, businesses, and resources, and naturally allow for more anonymity due to large populations (Valentine & Skelton, 2003).

School psychologists may have specific rewards and challenges in rural areas. Survey data indicated that rural school psychologists reported having positive relationships with students and staff in the schools and felt connected to the school and greater community (Clopton & Knesting, 2006). School psychologists can be a valuable resource for teachers supporting LGBTQ+ students due to the prevalence of these positive relationships. However, the research also found limited outside services for students in the community and shortages of other school mental health providers. Having finite outside services places responsibility on the schools to support students' mental health, which may create stress for the limited mental health staff.

Schools in urban and rural communities differ in a variety of ways. Stanley, Comello, Edwards, and Marquart (2008) studied whether school adjustment differs for adolescents in urban versus rural schools. They defined school adjustment as a combination of a student's perceived school success and the degree to which they enjoy

school. Their survey data indicated that rurality itself has no direct influence on school adjustment; however, the typical makeup and functioning of rural communities makes the correlation clear. First, researchers highlighted that the percentage of free and reduced lunch, which was negatively correlated with school performance, was significantly higher in rural areas. This finding indicates that there may be a greater percentage of low socioeconomic status students in rural communities than in urban or suburban communities. Stanley and colleagues also found that income and parents' level of education are both typically lower in rural communities and that these factors are related to school enjoyment. This suggests that although rurality itself is not directly correlated with decreased school adjustment, factors related to rurality are correlated.

According to data gathered from the 2015 California Healthy Kids Survey, the presence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) affirming policies was moderately more likely in larger schools as well as somewhat less likely in schools that have a high percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunches (Day, Ioverno, & Russell, 2019). There is no research on the rate of SOGI policies in rural schools, but due to the correlation between rurality and the percentage of free and reduced lunches, it is likely that SOGI policies are less common in rural schools (Stanley, et al., 2008). This data implies that rural schools have decreased school adjustment in combination with a lack of SOGI policies, which may lead to decreased feelings of school safety for GSM students.

Stanley, et al., (2008) also found that the percentage of students in remote communities participating in school activities was significantly higher compared to students in urban communities. Students in rural communities may rely more heavily on

school for extracurricular or social activities because there are fewer community-based options in these areas. This finding is particularly important in considering GSM students' access to social support. Research indicates that GSM students are already likely to avoid school functions and activities due to feeling uncomfortable in those spaces (Kosciw, et al., 2018). Therefore, while school may be the only place in rural communities for GSM students to access social support, they are also less likely to receive such support.

Another study utilizing The California Healthy Kids Survey found that peer intervention and teacher intervention were the most effective protective factors for GSM students in rural schools (De Pedro, et al., 2018). In the survey, students rated school climate including supportive teachers and staff, school sponsorship of GSM support groups/clubs, and representation of GSM people and topics within the school as important factors for feelings of safety. Surprisingly, the presence of Gay-Straight Alliances was predictive of decreased feelings of safety for GSM students in rural school systems. This suggests that having a GSA in schools that have a negative climate regarding GSM issues is not enough to make GSM students feel safe at school and could even result in increased victimization if the students are open about their GSM status.

Researchers Hulko and Hovanes (2018) interviewed GSM youth who grew up in rural towns and small cities to identify themes within individuals' experiences. The GSM youth reported a typical lack of resources such as support groups and a lack of role models within the community. They also reported a lack of acceptance which led to feeling the need to hide their identities, which is difficult in areas with very low populations. These results show that a lack of support and the risk of being outed to



everyone in the community could very quickly result in students in rural school systems feeling unsafe sharing their identities at school. For GSM students to feel safe at school in small or conservative communities, they need to be able to trust that their teachers and other school personnel can provide support and confidentiality that they may not have access to elsewhere in the community. Increasing teachers' comfort level and competence in supporting GSM students could be one of the most beneficial ways to increase GSM students' feelings of safety in rural schools.

### **GSM Policies and Climate**

In a national survey on school climate for GSM students, over half of the students surveyed reported feeling unsafe at school (Kosciw, et al., 2018). Over two-thirds of students reported verbal harassment, over half reported sexual harassment, and almost one-third reported physical harassment at school. The results of this survey indicate a significant need for intervention and support for GSM students in schools.

A sample of 14,071 students from schools throughout Colorado echoed the results of the national school climate survey (Atteberry-Ash, Kattari, Speer, Guz, & Kattari, 2019). The researchers also found that reports of decreased feelings of school safety, electronic and in-school bullying, and rates of skipping school for safety were the highest among transgender students. This indicates that while all GSM students are at risk for decreased school safety, transgender students are the most at-risk. It is likely that teachers understand the risk of bullying for GSM students, but it is important that they are aware of the disproportionate risk for gender diverse students. Understanding issues of safety in

a school is the first step in helping teachers create a more positive climate in their buildings.

In addition to school climate, policies and curriculum regarding GSM issues also have a significant impact on GSM-student and family inclusivity in school systems. Bishop and Atlas (2015) surveyed school psychologists across urban, suburban, and rural elementary schools in New York State to analyze factors of inclusivity within New York State school districts. The study found that curriculum regarding GSM topics was relatively rare and that when such topics were discussed in class topics were taught informally. Bishop and Atlas (2015) also found that anti-bias training with specific LGBT content was uncommon across the schools, indicating a need for more teacher training in this area. This study illustrates a general lack of teacher training in GSM issues in a state that tends to have socially progressive policies. Bishop & Atlas (2015) also noted that GSM-related school organizations were present in only about 30% of their sample, which may be more reflective of a lack of GSM organizations in elementary schools in general.

Research indicates that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students experience lower rates of victimization and bullying in schools that have SOGI policies (Day, Ioverno, & Russell 2019). This study also found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth make up a higher percentage of the population in schools that have SOGI policies. Such policies may create a school climate that allows more students to feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientations, therefore making the school appear to have more lesbian, gay, and bisexual students than other schools.

In schools that lack formal SOGI policies, teachers may not have specific guidance on how to handle GSM student victimization. Teachers may not know how to incorporate GSM topics into their curriculum, or they may not feel safe doing so depending upon the school's climate. Investigating whether schools have SOGI policies and how teachers feel about them can help determine what teachers believe is needed to increase feelings of safety for their GSM students. Additionally, providing information to teachers in schools that lack SOGI policies is vital to the process of helping GSM students feel safe at school.

The presence of a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) or other GSM-affirming club in schools is another factor that significantly impacts school climate for GSM youth. Heck, Flentje, and Cochran (2011) surveyed college and university students about their high school experiences to determine whether the presence of a GSA had an influence on their feelings of safety at school. The study's results varied depending on whether students attended school in rural or urban areas and indicated that feelings of belonging were significantly moderated by the broader community climate. Heck, et al. (2011) found that schools in larger cities and towns were more likely to have a GSA. Students at schools that had a GSA generally reported more feelings of belonging at school. Those who attended schools with a GSA also reported less victimization at school as well as lower rates of problematic alcohol use. In rural towns or towns that do not have a GSM-affirming climate, schools may either lack GSAs or the GSAs may not be as effective in changing the overall school climate. In such cases, it is important to have other resources such as informed and supportive teachers available to help students feel safe at school. Heck, et al. specifically suggested recommendations to improve school climate for GSM

youth that include: a specific GSM anti-bullying policy, training teachers on how to intervene in GSM victimization, having SOGI policies, and having curricula that include SOGI topics. Researchers suggest that school psychologists can work with teachers to help them learn how to support GSM students, disclose personal offense to slurs and homophobic statements, and intervene in bullying.

### **Teacher Support**

Teachers have extensive contact with students that allows them to make a difference in students' lives, but the actions that teachers take are heavily influenced and controlled by stakeholders and community politics. The school's administration, parents, the school board, and even the students may have a say in what can be discussed within the classroom. In a focus group on supporting GSM students conducted with preservice teachers, participants made it clear that politics was a determining factor in when and how they "stuck up for" GSM students (Shelton, Barnes, & Flint, 2019). While the participants in this group decided that teaching was an inherently political field and that social justice issues such as racism must be discussed within the classroom, they were especially hesitant to discuss issues of sexuality and gender identity. Participants asserted that specifically "sticking up for" GSM students may alienate students who have a religious opposition to such issues.

Teachers may have varied beliefs on their ability to provide support for GSM students. Shelton (2019) detailed one teacher's experience trying to be an ally to her GSM students in her first few years of teaching in a southeastern US school district. The teacher, as an outsider in a politically and culturally conservative district, found that it

was just as difficult to gain support from the administration as it was to convince her students to stop using homophobic language. She even noted hearing homophobic language from school administrators themselves. She discussed her fear that standing up for GSM students who were being victimized in class may result in further victimization for those students later in the day because she may be confirming their GSM status. She also noted that her GSM Safe Space sticker might have been causing more harm by making her classroom a potential space for students to be outed to the community. This case study exemplifies the power that administration and community climate can have on a teacher's ability to provide a safe classroom for GSM students, and that even actions that are typically seen as best practices in supporting GSM students may be harmful in certain communities. Teachers experience an enormous amount of pressure to conform to both parents' and administrators' expectations and going against those expectations could result in ostracism or even unemployment. In order to be able to help GSM students feel safe at school, teachers need to have some sense of security that they will not risk their jobs supporting these students.

Teachers' ability and willingness to intervene on behalf of GSM students is influenced by several factors. Swanson and Gettinger (2016) studied teacher's frequency in providing support to GSM students, the importance they placed in providing such support, and their overall attitudes towards GSM students. Teachers in schools that had an active GSA as well as those who received more professional development in this area placed greater importance on supporting GSM students and reported more frequently providing them with support, though the authors noted that there was a significant discrepancy between values and actions. While higher percentages of teachers endorsed

displaying visual GSM support (such as safe-zone stickers) and attending professional developments in this area, less than one-third of the teachers reported doing these things. Finally, the teachers in this study reported several significant barriers to supporting GSM students. These barriers included discomfort with or values in opposition to GSM issues, lack of knowledge on how to intervene, and lack of knowledge of GSM issues in general. Many teachers also reported a lack of GSM support groups, enumerated anti-bullying policy, or training in their schools. These findings indicate a strong need for increased administrative response, access to professional development, and other methods for teachers to learn how best to support these marginalized students.

### **School Psychologists**

While mental health providers are often an important resource in the school building for GSM students, their knowledge of GSM student needs may be limited. Staton, De Noble, and Gilligan (2015) found that of counselors and school psychologists surveyed across Virginia, only a small percentage reported feeling very prepared to work with GSM students. The participants reported that formal training, access to relevant empirical literature, and resources for students and families would help them feel more prepared to work with these students. School psychologists provide direct support to students as well as indirect support through consultation with teachers and administration. This makes it imperative that school psychologists feel prepared to support GSM students both directly and indirectly.

School psychologists can use surveys to conduct needs-assessments to address specific areas of concern within their schools. Using a needs-assessment survey guidance

document to collaborate with teachers can lead to the identification and improvement of resources for GSM students. The resource mapping phase of a needs-assessment would also be an important part of this work when determining what resources are available for GSM students in rural schools (Skalski, et al., 2015).

### **Purpose**

Previous research indicates that GSM students are at increased risk of bullying and victimization in school (Atteberry-Ash, et al., 2019; Kosciw, et al., 2018). Schools that have enumerated anti-bullying and SOGI policies, GSM inclusive curriculum, GSM organizations, and supportive teachers have all been shown to reduce these rates of bullying and victimization (Day, Ioverno, & Russell, 2019; Bishop & Atlas, 2015; Flentje & Cochran, 2011). It is not apparent through the literature whether most rural schools have these resources. Community resources and role models in rural areas are typically limited, and while students rely more heavily on schools for extracurricular activities in rural areas, GSM students tend to avoid school functions (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018; Kosciw, et al., 2018; Stanley, et al., 2008). In addition, students in rural schools may be at increased risk due to the potential for decreased school adjustment and lack of SOGI policies associated with the higher percentage of low socioeconomic status populations in these regions (Day, et al., 2019; Stanley, et al., 2008).

In rural schools, teacher intervention is one of the most important factors for GSM student safety (De Pedro, et al., 2018). Teachers' beliefs regarding their ability to provide support, access to professional development on GSM issues, level of comfort with GSM issues, and training on how to intervene contribute to whether teachers feel they are able

and likely to provide support for GSM students (Shelton, 2019; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). It is apparent that teacher intervention and support are driven by school climate, opportunities and resources. These factors also vary widely across school systems throughout the United States, making it impossible to group all rural systems. The purpose of the current study was to gather information from rural teachers about these factors in their school systems. The information was used by the researcher to create a guidance document for rural school psychologists to assess the unique needs of teachers at their own schools. The information gathered from rural teachers addressed the following research questions:

1. What training or familiarity do rural teachers have with GSM student needs?
2. What specific factors in rural schools help or hinder the ability to support GSM students?
3. What do rural teachers need to be able to better support GSM students?
4. What support is present for GSM students at rural schools based on teacher feedback?

### **Methodology**

The goal of this study was to develop a resource sheet (Appendix B) and guidance document (Appendix C) for rural school psychologists to better understand what teachers need to be able to support GSM students in their schools. The guidance document was developed through interviews with teachers to understand what unique factors about rural communities and schools influence teachers' abilities to support GSM students. The interview questions covered climate factors, curriculum and policy, presence of GSM organizations, and frequency of professional development or training in GSM issues and



support in rural schools (Appendix A). Interview questions were piloted with feedback from three current high school teachers. Information gathered about how these factors uniquely influence rural schools was used to create a resource sheet about supporting LGBTQ+ students in rural schools that includes specific survey questions rural school psychologists can use to assess the needs of teachers in their building.

### **Participants**

The participants of the study were six public-school teachers who currently or recently taught middle or high school in rural or small city schools. For the purposes of this study, a small city was defined as fewer than 25,000 residents. Participants were chosen by convenience sampling method through volunteers. Volunteers were recruited through professional and personal contacts of the researcher with informed consent. The interviews took place via phone and video conferencing. Participants were sampled from public schools in Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia.

### **Demographics**

Participants ranged in age from 25 to 41 years old with a mean age of 36.50. They had two to 25 years of experience teaching with a mean of 12.67 years. All participants identified as female. Three of the six teachers were English teachers. One teacher formerly taught English and currently supports teachers in an administrative role. The other two teachers taught Theater and World Geography, respectively. Five teachers worked at the high school level and the sixth teacher taught at the middle school level.

## **Procedure**

The data collection method consisted of semi-structured phone or video interviews that lasted approximately 40 minutes. The interviews consisted of 21 open-ended questions (Appendix A). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Recordings and transcriptions were erased upon the completion of the thesis project. Verbal consent prior to the start of the interview. Following the interview, participants were provided with a list of resources to find more information about supporting GSM students (Appendix C).

## **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). This method involves recording the interviews and then coding them for specific themes. Additionally, overarching themes were identified throughout the interviews. The themes provided insight about rural school climate for GSM youth and determined the areas in which teachers in rural schools indicated needing the most help for supporting GSM students. This data was then compiled into a guidance document for school psychologists that includes information about GSM issues in rural communities and key questions to help school psychologists investigate the needs of their communities.

## Results

### Community Climate

Emerging themes related to community climate included tight-knit groups, conservative values, the impacts of the 2020 election, the influence of Christianity, and limited community resources.

The six teachers described their communities as generally conservative areas. As these interviews were conducted during or shortly after the 2020 election season, all teachers mentioned Donald Trump at some point when referencing the culture of their communities. Teacher 3 stated that “politically, our entire county but like two people voted for Trump.” However, Teacher 5 discussed her county as being more accepting of LGBTQ+ people than expected despite the highly conservative population. Four teachers referenced Christianity’s influence on the community and high levels of church involvement. Teacher 3 emphasized the high poverty rate, while Teacher 5 speculated that her community ranged from lower- to middle class. Teacher 4 described her community as “Somewhat insular; people don’t really venture outside of this county.” Throughout her interview, Teacher 1 reiterated “everybody knows everybody” and discussed the impact that has on the community. For example, in reference to the community climate, she said that it plays a role in how the beliefs and opinions of the students are reflections of the adults in the community and that most of the community is fairly homogenous.

Four of the six teachers did not name any community resources for GSM students. Teacher 5 listed local LGBTQ+ Pride events as a resource. However, she hypothesized

that most of the GSM community resources that students were likely to access were located in neighboring counties. Participant 3 mentioned community theater as an affirming space where GSM students and adults were likely to find support.

A theme for challenges GSM students face in the community is lack of acceptance that results in the fear of coming out. Three teachers emphasized the influence of Christianity in their communities and the notion that having a GSM identity is considered sinful. The teachers also emphasized the importance of having an accepting family and the role they play in whether a student feels safe coming out. Teacher 3 responded that she believes in her community, coming out would be “very uncomfortable, depending on the family you came from, their beliefs, involvement in the community, and whether their community connections are all church related- because that is a lot of them.” Other responses included facing homophobic comments. Teacher 6 mentioned that GSM students may face bullying and harassment, but that since she began teaching she has seen a significant increase in support and acceptance for GSM students and expressed pride in her community’s emphasis on creating a strong “community fabric” of mutual support. Teachers 1 and 4 talked about GSM identities as being a secret that other students and community members whisper about. Participant 4 recounted a conversation in which another adult discussed a student’s coming out as though “it’s this big secret that he’s gay, or that it’s something to be offended by.”

### **School Climate**

Emerging themes related to school climate included positive and supportive staff with a need for professional development, support for openly out students, support of students’ self-expression, and limited GSM-specific resources. Anti-bullying policies are

essential for GSM students but the teachers reported a lack of specific GSM student protective policies.

All teachers reported a need for increased GSM student support in their buildings. However, the teachers offered positive statements about their school staff and the welcoming environment they foster for their students. Teacher 4 reported that from her perception, the majority of staff supports GSM students the same as every other student. However, she noted that students who are out to her have reported feeling that the school was not a hospitable environment. Teacher 5 had a similar response, indicating that she has witnessed two openly GSM students being picked on by peers but supported by teachers. Teacher 5 also reflected on the impact of having five openly GSM teachers at her school and how that has helped to promote a positive climate for GSM students. Teacher 3 noted that there is not always outspoken support for GSM students at her school, but that two of their elected class presidents identify as gay and are well liked by peers. However, Participant 3 also discussed the high rate of GSM students who get kicked out of their homes because of their GSM identity. She referenced students' parents as the largest barrier for her being able to support GSM students because of the consequences of parent backlash for both her students and herself.

One school climate factor that three of the teachers believed had a significant impact was having the same, small group of students together for all of their school years. This meant that most of the students knew each other and their families fairly well and that everyone was interconnected to a degree. Politics was also a recurring point of discussion, which again may have been related to the timing of the interviews corresponding with the 2020 election. Three teachers emphasized that the students tended

to be split politically between progressive and conservative. Teacher 2 postulated that “maybe it’s just that the middle ground is less vocal about it” but that otherwise, students are vocal about their strong political views.

All teachers said that their schools were fairly supportive of students’ self-expression as long as students followed the dress code. Teacher 1 stated that she tries to compliment students when they try a new style of hair, makeup, or clothing to help them feel seen in a positive way. Teacher 4 also mentioned supporting students’ expressions by complementing unique styles. Teachers 3 and 5 both mentioned students wearing LGBTQ Pride flags as capes, however in one school it was allowed and in the other school it was not allowed within the confines of the dress code. Teacher 6 reported that within the last three years, her school has become more affirming by ending the policy that required female students to wear dresses under their graduation gowns.

Concerning sources of support, only one teacher mentioned their school having a GSA. Teacher 4 reported that she offered to help students start a GSA but did not get enough interest to follow through. Five of the teachers mentioned counselors or social workers as the primary source of support. Additionally, the teachers included other teachers or teachers who had safe space stickers. When asked what resources within the school the students were most likely to access, two teachers reported being unsure. Three teachers guessed that it was the counselors and one teacher said students were likely just utilizing peer support.

When asked about how familiar they believe other teachers in their schools were about GSM student issues, their responses varied. The theme was that teachers were generally supportive of their students. They also all reported a spectrum of knowledge

with some teachers very aware of GSM student needs and others that likely were unaware and uninformed.

Concerning administrative response to GSM student issues, three were unsure of administrative positions and involvement. Teacher 6 identified restorative practices as a big part of conflict resolution in her school system as response to any issue. Teacher 4 mentioned that their administrative responses are reactive responses to handling bullying but that they have no proactive prevention measures yet for GSM student safety. Teacher 5 reported that her administration is quick to respond and handle bullying incidents but they are not fully aware or supportive of GSM student needs.

### **Representation and Curriculum**

Emerging themes related to representation in the curriculum were the general lack of representation and passive inclusion through books in the media center.

Representation at school or in the curriculum varied, but the most common response, referenced by four of the six teachers, was that students could access books or resources through the media center. Teacher 2 mentioned that her school GSA takes part in the National Day of Silence, an event that raises awareness about GSM targeted bullying. Teacher 3 shared that GSM issues come up frequently as part of the discussion in their banned books unit. She also displays posters of authors who have known GSM identities. Counseling lessons were mentioned by Teacher 5 as an area where GSM themes are intertwined into some of the discussions at the middle school level. Teacher 4 discussed the lack of representation and visibility by comparing her school to her experience working at a local university and the presence of safe space stickers at the university.

## **Teacher Training**

The emerging theme related to teacher training was a general lack of preservice training and professional development.

While training in GSM issues is a key factor in being able to support GSM students, the teachers reported little to no training in this area. Three of the teachers had no pre-service training related to GSM student issues. The other three teachers discussed having one class lesson on broad minority support or diversity. Post-graduate professional development was more varied. Teachers 2 and 5 had no formal professional development, but did their own research in their free time. Teacher 3 mentioned discussions on the topic from participating in an AP Psychology conference. Teacher 6 had legal training on name changes as a current school administrator. Teacher 6 also discussed having participated in several implicit bias trainings and none of the trainings ever mentioned GSM topics.

## **Personal Familiarity and Needs**

Emerging themes related to personal familiarity and needs included a spectrum of familiarity with GSM student needs but strong willingness to support GSM students, and the need for training.

When asked to rate themselves on how familiar they were with GSM student needs, the teachers' answers ranged from 5-10 on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being unfamiliar and 10 being very familiar. However, when asked how ready they were to support GSM students in their classroom, with 1 being completely unready and 10 being completely ready, only one teacher saying she was a 6 and the rest ranged from 9-10. This indicates



that while they do not all feel very familiar with GSM students' needs, they are nevertheless ready and willing to support them.

Teachers referenced the need for training or personal research to be more knowledgeable about GSM students' needs. Teacher 1 mentioned that she feels she needs to do her own research because she expressed doubt that her school would provide professional development on this topic. Teacher 6 discussed the need for her county to collect data about GSM school climate from the perspectives of students and staff to be able to address the unique needs of her system. She stated that "that's one of the reasons why we do not have more attention paid to this, because it's not something we track." Teacher 3 also mentioned the need for stronger home-school connections because she feels she does not have the support of her students' parents, and the problems that could result in supporting GSM students' without their families' support.

### **Responses to Slurs**

The emerging theme related to responding to homophobic language in the classroom was immediately addressing the situation.

All teachers reported that they immediately shut down any homophobic language or slurs that they hear in their classrooms. Three of the teachers additionally mentioned having discussions about language use and seizing the opportunity to challenge their students to think about what they are saying and the impact of their words.

### **Discussion**

Because teacher intervention is one of the most effective protective factors for GSM students in rural schools, understanding teacher training and feelings towards GSM student support was a main focus of this research (De Pedro, et al., 2018). None of the

teachers in this study mentioned any specific, formal GSM support training. Some had training on broader topics such as diversity, but not explicitly GSM support. As reported by participants, they had not received formal professional development on this topic. This is consistent with Bishop and Atlas's (2015) findings that GSM specific anti-bias training is rare. Additionally, teachers felt that training or access to information would be most helpful for them to be able to better support their GSM students. This belief is consistent with Swanson and Gettinger's (2016) finding that teachers endorsed professional development as an important factor in their ability to provide GSM support, but few teachers reported having attended a GSM support professional development. There is an obvious gap between best practice and current practices in schools in terms of providing teachers with training on GSM student needs. School psychologists could bridge this gap with minimal cost by providing professional development on this topic.

Prior research indicates that lack of knowledge on how to intervene and lack of knowledge of GSM issues are barriers for providing support (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Teachers surveyed had more confidence in their willingness to support GSM students than they did in their knowledge of GSM issues. A teacher in Shelton's (2019) study expressed fear of providing support due to potential risks for her students or herself. In contrast, the teachers in the current study felt confident supporting their students regardless of the need. It should be noted, that they were not asked to provide specific examples but instead were asked to speculate about their ability. Therefore, they may not have considered all possible factors that would impede their ability to provide support. In comparison, Shelton's participant was interviewed over time, and she was able to reflect on specific occasions she tried to provide support throughout the interview

process. While this difference might decrease the reliability of the teachers' beliefs, it should not diminish the fact that they seemed to truly care about their students' wellbeing.

Four of the six teachers could not name any community resources that GSM students likely accessed within the community. This is consistent with the research indicating a lack of resources in many communities, and the need to rely on school for support (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018; Stanley, et al., 2008). While the teachers in this study did mention resources such as counselors or supportive teachers at school, only two teachers mentioned social outlets including peer support and a GSA. While it is vital that students can identify safe and supportive adults at school, it is also important for them to have peer support, especially when social support is not accessible in the community. GSM students are more likely to avoid school functions due to feeling uncomfortable, and the lack of a GSA may increase this risk (Kosciw, et al., 2018). This lack of social support at schools implied by the teachers' responses indicates a need for increased GSM support and visibility to ensure students feel like they belong.

No teachers in the study referenced any Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) policies at their schools when discussing resources or administrative response. This was consistent with the hypothesis that SOGI policies are less likely in rural schools (Day, Iverno, & Russell, 2019; Stanley, et al., 2008). Instead, the teachers either referenced generic anti-bullying policies or were completely unaware of administrative response. De Pedro, et al., (2018) found that specific and enumerated SOGI policies are an important protective factor for GSM students. Based on the teachers' responses, their schools either lack SOGI policies or these policies are not enforced, thus, leading to a

reported wide range of GSM knowledge when speculating about their colleagues. Specific SOGI policies would help ensure that all teachers respond in a similar fashion to GSM students' needs.

Research indicates that school politics is a determining factor in whether teachers are able to intervene on behalf of GSM students (Shelton, Barnes, & Flint, 2019). All of the teachers in the present study reported not tolerating the use of anti-GSM language or GSM victimization in their classrooms. Additionally, they immediately take action to address anti-GSM rhetoric or bullying. Therefore, despite the non-affirming culture they mentioned within their communities, the teachers reported that they always speak up for their students.

A central theme that emerged from the interviews was GSM students' fear of coming out due to possible lack of acceptance in the community. Teachers cited conservative politics, especially influenced by the polarizing 2020 election, and the impacts of influential non-affirming Christian groups in the communities causing such fear. Two teachers discussed GSM identity as something that needed to be kept secret, which is consistent with Hulko and Hovanec's (2018) findings that GSM youth in rural areas feel the need to hide their identities due to lack of community acceptance. The teachers discussed small, tight-knit and homogenous communities with fairly consistent beliefs amongst students and community members. The lack of community acceptance combined with tight-knit communities indicates that even if a school is more affirming, coming out at school could risk a student's safety within the community.

Research indicates that GSM inclusive curriculum is relatively rare, and when included, is informal (Bishop & Atlas, 2015). This is consistent with the teachers' reports. The most common source of representation that the teachers mentioned was through the media center. This is a passive form of inclusion, as students would have to actively seek out GSM resources as opposed to GSM topics being an active part of the curriculum. One teacher mentioned GSM topics coming up naturally in her English class, but did not specifically discuss actively making the topics part of her curriculum. These results indicate a need for more active inclusion in the curriculum to make GSM students feel included and to normalize GSM topics for the whole student population.

Teacher 3 seemed most aware of the risks of supporting GSM students in a small, politically conservative community. Her fears aligned with the risks that Shelton's (2019) participant discussed. For example, Teacher 3 referenced fear for her students' safety because of the risk of being rejected by their families and kicked out of their homes if they are openly out. She also feared backlash from parents who opposed GSM support that could risk her job. Her awareness of this issue may have been a reflection of the more extreme beliefs in her community, whereas other communities may have been more accepting.

Overall, the teachers' responses were relatively consistent with the research about GSM support in rural schools. The main areas of need that emerged from this research include professional development, clear GSM policies, administrative support, and inclusive curriculum. As one teacher mentioned, the best way to understand what is needed in a school is to collect data. Therefore, for individual school systems, collecting data on students' and teachers' opinions of GSM students' needs in their community

would be an important and useful place for a system to start. While some changes such as official policy modifications are more difficult to implement, adding a professional development to the school calendar is a simple place to start.

### **Implications for School Psychologists**

School psychologists are called to advocate for the needs of minoritized students. The findings of this study indicate that rural teachers need and desire training and support to better understand and meet the needs of GSM students, specifically in the form of information and professional development. School psychologists are able to both advocate for and provide increased professional development. School psychologists are also able to consult with teachers, suggest resources for classrooms, and share information. In rural communities, research indicates that school psychologists have positive relationships with both students and staff and are connected to the school and broader community, which puts them in an ideal position to use their connections to advocate for GSM student support (Clopton & Knesting, 2006). Disseminating information and resources to teachers may also reduce the load on school psychologists by decreasing rates of GSM students' mental health crises. One teacher in the current study expressed her doubt that her school would ever provide GSM support training. Therefore, school psychologists may need to step in and advocate for such training. Once they are able to start a shift in acknowledgement for the needs of GSM students, they may be able to advocate for larger changes including the implementation of SOGI policies.

### **Limitations**

There were multiple limitations to the current study. In regards to the participants, the study was limited by the small sample size and lack of diversity of the teachers. All of the teachers were white and female, which resulted in only one perspective across both race and gender. Additionally, most participants were English teachers. It is unknown whether there is a correlation between gender or a teacher's subject and their willingness to support GSM students. Future researchers should consider expanding this study to include a more diverse group of participants.

This study examines teacher perspectives on school climate. Their answers are all speculations about the experiences of GSM students, not information directly from GSM students. While many teachers used anecdotes of conversations with their students, the information still comes from a secondary source. Therefore, a more accurate reflection of GSM school climate would come directly from the students.

The teachers' interviews do not necessarily reflect all that happens at a school. It is possible that their schools did have SOGI policies and the teachers were just not aware of them. It is also possible that teachers were aware of more opportunities for GSM students at the schools or in the communities. While that is a limitation of the study, it still shows the teachers' knowledge gaps and limits their ability to direct students to resources.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined teachers' perspectives on school climate for GSM students and their ability to provide support. Understanding the gaps between best practices and reality in schools is a starting point for creating more affirming communities for GSM

students. The literature offers many suggestions for creating more inclusive schools, yet these practices are not being implemented consistently in rural schools. The teachers in this study provided insights into their own community climates and experiences supporting GSM students. It is clear that increased training for teachers, comprehensive policies and affirming curriculum are needed to help GSM students feel more included and safe at school.



## Appendix A

1. What is your age?
2. What grade level and subject do you teach?
3. How many years have you been teaching?
4. Tell me about any preservice training you had in LGBTQ+ or related topics.
5. Tell me about any professional developments you had in LGBTQ+ or related topics.
6. How would you describe the community outside of the school? Examples include social culture, political climate, or economic factors of the area.
7. How would you describe the climate of your school building?
8. What challenges might LGBTQ+ students face in your community?
9. What is your school's climate like for LGBTQ+ students? For example, if there are openly out students at the school, how are they treated by students and staff?
10. Are LGBTQ+ topics or people represented at your school? Examples include LGBTQ+ figures or topics in the curriculum, in library books, or on posters.
11. How does staff at your school respond to or support student self-expression? For example, clothing choice, identity presentation, or artistic expression?
12. What support is available at your school for LGBTQ+ students?
13. What resources you know of - in school and in the community- are LGBTQ+ students at your institution most likely to access?
14. Do you perceive an increase in LGBTQ+ support as a need for your school building?
15. On a scale of 1-10, how familiar are you with LGBTQ+ students' needs?
16. What do you need to feel more knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ student needs?
17. What do you do if you hear a student make disparaging comments or uses slurs regarding LGBTQ+ people or topics?
18. How does the administration at your school handle LGBTQ+ specific issues or bullying?

19. How familiar do you believe other teachers in the building are with LGBTQ+ student needs?
20. On a scale of 1-10, how ready do you feel to support LGBTQ+ students in your classroom?
21. What would you need to make this number increase?

## Appendix B

Resources for supporting LGBTQ+ students:

**GLSEN** is an organization that was founded by teachers in 1990 to create supportive school environments for LGBTQ+ students. They conduct nationwide research about school climate and provide resources for students, teachers, and schools. Additionally, they uplift student-led initiatives such as the Day of Silence and Ally Week. More information and resources can be found at <https://www.glsen.org/>

**The Trevor Project** is a crisis intervention and suicide prevention organization for LGBTQ+ youth under 25. The Trevor Project has call, chat, and text intervention and suicide prevention hotlines with trained counselors. They offer suicide prevention skills workshops, faculty and staff training, school policy recommendations, LGBTQ+ resource guides for students, and a social networking community for students. More information and resources can be found at <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

**USC Rossier's Students and Gender Identity Toolkit for Schools** is a series of resources for supporting gender identity conversations in schools and creating inclusive classrooms. The toolkit includes a glossary of terms that educators should know regarding gender identity and expression. The toolkit can be found at <https://rossieronline.usc.edu/students-and-gender-identity/>

**Learning for Justice** is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center that provides free social justice and anti-bias related resources to educators. They provide classroom resources and professional development opportunities. Their LGBTQ+ resource topic page can be found at <https://www.learningforjustice.org/topics/gender-sexual-identity>

## Appendix C

### Gender and Sexual Minority (GSM) School Climate Guidance Document

#### School Policies

Research indicates that generic anti-bullying policies are not sufficient for supporting GSM students. Specific, enumerated policies supporting GSM inclusion and safety are a major protective factor.

#### Inclusion and Representation

When and where are students discussing GSM topics? Are there any formal conversations in this area? A short teacher survey could ask questions such as when and how are GSM topics coming up in classrooms.

#### GSM Student Perspectives

Survey the student body about GSM student needs. GLSEN has a free local school climate survey tool intended for middle and high school students available on their website: <https://localsurvey.glsen.org/>

#### Professional Development for Teachers

Teachers need current information to best support GSM students. A short teacher survey can gain information about what training teachers have had in regards to supporting GSM students. The Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools Training is one option for professional development if schools would like to outsource a training. If this option is out of budget, the attached resource sheet provides free websites that school psychologists can use to create their own professional development.

#### Safe Spaces

What safe spaces do students identify in the school? Depending upon the community climate, school may be the only available option for safe spaces and groups. Are certain classes, groups, or teachers deemed "safe" or "unsafe" for GSM students? This information could be gathered from the student perspectives survey. Think about how you could start to increase the amount of safe spaces in your school.

#### GSA

Does your school have a Gender and Sexuality Alliance? It is important to understand not only whether there is one but how it impacts the safety of GSM students at your school. Additionally, if your school does not have one, try to find out the history of whether students have tried to start one and how that was handled by administration. This can provide more insight into whether your school is affirming for GSM students.

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