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Identifying Systems of Support in High Schools for Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth Living
in Conservative Communities: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

Nuriyah Bender

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

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Dedication

This research is dedicated with love to Layli and August.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
Abstract.....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Purpose of the Study	2
Significance.....	4
Positionality Statement	5
Definition of Terms.....	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	8
Challenges and Experiences of GSD Students	9
Lack of Connection.....	10
Feeling Unsafe & Anti- LGBTQ Remarks	11
Substance Abuse	12
Effective Supports in High Schools for GSD Students	14
Teacher and Staff Training	14
Allyhood	17
Genders and Sexualities Alliances.....	18
Anti-Bullying Policies	20
Supportive Curriculum and Representation.....	21
Barriers to Creating and Sustaining Effective Supports	22
Current Policies.....	25
Gaps in Literature	27
Chapter 3: Methodology	29
Research Design.....	29
Qualitative Design	29
Phenomenological Approach	30
Site	31
Sample.....	31
Data Collection	32
Semi-Structured Interviews	33
Researcher’s Journal	37
Existing documents.....	38

Analysis.....	38
Phenomenological Considerations.....	39
Ethics & Confidentiality	40
Validity	41
Reliability.....	42
Transferability.....	43
Chapter 4: Findings.....	44
Participants’ Profiles.....	44
Supportive Factors	46
Protective Friendships.....	46
Self-Expression and Connections Through The Arts	49
Accepting and Thoughtful Peers.....	51
Affirming and Supportive Adults	54
Conservative Policies and Advice for Educators.....	58
Awareness of National Politics.....	60
Avoidance of the Other Group.....	61
Advice for Educators	63
Findings Conclusion	66
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions.....	68
Discussion.....	68
Effective Supports in High Schools for GSD Students	69
Barriers to Creating and Sustaining Effective Supports	70
Significance.....	72
Implications for Educators.....	73
Limitations	74
Implications for Future Research.....	75
Personal Reflection.....	76
Summary.....	77
Appendix A Consent Form.....	78
References.....	81
List of Tables	vii
Abstract.....	viii

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Purpose of the Study	2
Significance.....	4
Positionality Statement	5
Definition of Terms.....	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review	8
Challenges and Experiences of GSD Students	9
Lack of Connection.....	10
Feeling Unsafe & Anti- LGBTQ Remarks	11
Substance Abuse	12
Effective Supports in High Schools for GSD Students	14
Teacher and Staff Training	14
Allyhood	17
Genders and Sexualities Alliances.....	18
Anti-Bullying Policies	20
Supportive Curriculum and Representation.....	21
Barriers to Creating and Sustaining Effective Supports	22
Current Policies.....	25
Gaps in Literature	27
Chapter 3: Methodology	29
Research Design.....	29
Qualitative Design	29
Phenomenological Approach	30
Site	31
Sample.....	31
Data Collection	32
Semi-Structured Interviews	33
Researcher’s Journal	37
Existing documents.....	38
Analysis.....	38
Phenomenological Considerations.....	39
Ethics & Confidentiality	40

Validity	41
Reliability.....	42
Transferability.....	43
Chapter 4: Findings.....	44
Participants’ Profiles.....	44
Supportive Factors	46
Protective Friendships.....	46
Self-Expression and Connections Through The Arts	49
Accepting and Thoughtful Peers.....	51
Affirming and Supportive Adults	54
Table 4 Participants’ Experiences with Adults.....	54
Conservative Policies and Advice for Educators.....	58
Table 5 Participants’ Experiences with Conservative Policies.....	59
Awareness of National Politics.....	60
Avoidance of the Other Group.....	61
Advice for Educators	63
Findings Conclusion	66
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions.....	68
Discussion.....	68
Effective Supports in High Schools for GSD Students	69
Barriers to Creating and Sustaining Effective Supports	70
Significance.....	72
Implications for Educators.....	73
Limitations	74
Implications for Future Research.....	75
Personal Reflection.....	76
Summary.....	77
Appendix A Consent Form.....	78
References.....	81

List of Tables

Table 1 Definition of Terms	6
Table 2 Interview Questions for Semi Structured Interviews.....	34
Table 3 Participants' Profile Information	45
Table 4 Participants' Experiences with Adults	55
Table 5 Participants' Experiences with Conservative Policies.....	60

Abstract

Within the first few months of 2022 more than 300 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in states across the country (Human Rights Campaign, 2022). Many of these bills, some of which are now laws, discriminate against transgender students or restrict instruction and materials related to LGBTQ+ topics in schools. Gender and Sexually Diverse (GSD) students often do not feel safe in schools (Kosciw et al., 2020). Using a phenomenological approach, this qualitative study sought to identify the factors that helped GSD students feel the most supported in high schools in order to assist educators with actionable ways they can support students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies. By interviewing college students and a recent college graduate, participants were able to reflect on their high school experiences. These four GSD students felt most supported by their protective friendships, accepting peers, connections to the arts, and affirming adults who were direct and intentional with their support. The participants suggested that educators, regardless of their own or overarching conservative beliefs or policies, should at minimum ask for and use students' preferred names and pronouns. The data suggest that to be supportive of GSD students, educators should be knowledgeable of GSD identities and school and community resources, create safe spaces by building relationships, and be direct with their support. Ultimately this study contributes to insight on how to support GSD students in high schools, even those with conservative social and political policies.

Keywords: gender and sexually diverse (GSD), LGBTQ+ support, high school students, conservative policies, qualitative, phenomenological approach

Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2019 National School Climate Survey, 59% of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) students felt unsafe in high school because of their sexual orientation, 43% felt unsafe because of their gender expression and 37% felt unsafe in school because of their gender (Kosciw et al., 2020). Over 95% of LGBTQ students reported hearing homophobic remarks at school and over 50% reported hearing this frequently (Kosciw et al., 2020). Gender and Sexually Diverse (GSD) (Meadows & Shain, 2020; Ullman, 2018) students often do not feel safe in schools.

Unfortunately, anti-LGBTQ laws and policies outside of schools also create an unsafe and hostile environment for GSD children and their families. "While more states every year work to pass laws to protect LGBTQ people, we continue to see state legislatures advancing bills that target transgender people, limit local protections, and allow the use of religion to discriminate" (ACLU, 2022, para. 1). These laws include, but are not limited to, bans on or criminalization of healthcare for transgender youth, restrictions on single-sex facilities to discriminate against transgender people, exclusion of transgender youth from athletics (31 states have recently introduced, passed, or have discussed this type of bill), school or curriculum restrictions, and restrictions on accessing accurate identification (ACLU, 2022). In early 2022, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas issued a directive to have all families and care givers seeking gender-affirming care for transgender minors investigated by the Department of Family and Protective Services for child abuse (Passantino, 2022). These legal attacks on GSD people have an impact on the

lives of GSD students. Konnoth (2019), a lawyer, stated the following at a conference for medical professionals:

Observing the physical treatment of someone in society tells you their status- depriving someone of resources doesn't just cause them suffering, but also sends a message about where they stand. And depriving someone of social status can make society treat them badly in physical and material ways. (p. 278)

In the past few decades, there have been many victories in the fight for equal rights and fair treatment of GSD people in our society. However, there is still a critical, immediate need to create safe learning environments for GSD students, ones in which their identities are affirmed, and they feel safe to be themselves (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Purpose of the Study

Effective educators not only teach their students but in order to promote learning, must also create friendly, safe environments, and positive relationships with their students. "The importance of supportive teachers in particular cannot be overemphasized: supportive educators increase LGBT students' psychological attachment to school, decrease suicidality, and lower absenteeism. Further, students imitate the pro-LGBT behavior of teachers" (Konnoth, 2019, p. 283). The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify the factors that helped GSD students feel the most supported in high schools in order to assist educators with actionable ways they can support students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies.

Nieto and Bode (2018) stated “there is a pervasive and impenetrable silence concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) people in most schools, not just in the curriculum but also in extracurricular activities” (p. 37). By studying what factors were most impactful in the lives of GSD undergraduate college students and recent graduates, ages 18-24, when they were in high school, I hope to amplify their voices and help educators identify clear ways they can support GSD students and create safe environments for them. This research study seeks to answer the following question and subquestion: What factors help gender and sexually diverse (GSD) youth feel supported in high school? How can educators use these factors to support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies?

Studies that have examined the factors that create positive environments for GSD students (Casale et al., 2018; Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Porta et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2020; Whidden et al., 2020) as well as reflect on the challenges that GSD students struggle within schools (De Pedro et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2020). However, the number of these studies is very few, and laws and policies written to restrict the lives of GSD people, specifically transgender children and youth, continue to be presented and passed across the country in large numbers (ACLU, 2022). Few studies have been conducted to examine the ways educators can effectively support students despite restrictive policies. Meadows and Shain (2021) wrote a chapter about ways counselors can support GSD students in school communities that are socially conservative in the United States or around the world. Their research comes from literature on the topic as well as their own personal experiences as allies (Meadows & Shain, 2021). Shelton (2019) conducted a longitudinal study examining the complexities of allyhood and the

contradictions of experiences that shape decisions to protect and advocate for GSD students in areas with conservative social policies. My qualitative study seeks to build on these ideas and understandings by interviewing students about their personal experiences to gather ideas of how educators can be effective allies and schools can develop plans of action to support GSD students, despite their own or overarching social and political conservative policies. College students are at a unique position to share their past high school experiences because they have had time to reflect and are often physically removed from their high school communities where both negative and positive experiences occurred. Both the time that has passed and the physical distance are likely to help these students reflect upon and analyze their experiences and perhaps provide ideas for areas of improvement for educators and school staff.

Significance

Even though the topic of the rights of LGBTQ+ people is politically controversial, the needs of these students must be addressed in schools. Nieto and Bode (2018) stated:

Exposing the contradictions between democratic ideals and actual manifestations of inequality makes many people uncomfortable, including some educators. Still, such matters are at the heart of a broadly conceptualized multicultural perspective because the subject matter of schooling is society, with all its wrinkles and warts and contradictions. Ethics and the distribution of power, status, and rewards are basic societal concerns; education *must* address them. (p.40)

This study is significant to all educators, administrators, and staff within schools because GSD students are a part of all schools and communities. “There is growing acknowledgement in

educational communities that this erasure of students with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations is both harmful to the children themselves and antithetical to the mission of schools to cultivate growth, development, and learning” (Meadows & Shain, 2021, p.47). The injustices in society such as the restrictive laws and policies that are being passed are often out of the control of educators. However, educators and administrators are in control of their school environments, the relationships they create, and the atmosphere they foster. This study is significant because it seeks to uncover the ways GSD students feel the most supported in order to create actionable ways educators can provide safe environments for these students.

Positionality Statement

I conducted this study because I feel strongly as an educator that it is my job to provide safety, protect authenticity, and help students feel comfortable to learn in my classroom. Identities are multifaceted with multiple cultural components and socializing agents (Cushner et al.,2019). I am aware of my privileges and social disadvantages due to the various aspects of my identity. As a Peruvian American raised in rural Virginia by a Spanish-speaking mother, I have experienced discrimination and personally understand the significance of representation in schools and the curriculum. I am a strong advocate for equity and justice. I also understand that as a straight, cisgender female, I have privileges that others do not. Cooper et al. (2014) explained that “by identifying oppressed dimensions within their own personhood, all members of an organization or community can take up the role of an ally for self and others” (p.347). I want to use my position as a researcher to amplify the voices of those whose lives are being restricted due to homophobic and transphobic laws and policies.

As an early childhood educator, I feel strongly about creating safe environments where all students feel represented, cared for, seen, and able to be themselves. I believe that it is important for all educators to use the powers they have as experience developers, molders of young minds, role models, and relationship creators, to meet the needs of every child to create clear access to their education.

Definition of Terms

There are various terms and acronyms used throughout this paper. Table 1 provides definitions and explanations of these terms.

Table 1

Definition of Terms

Key Term or Acronym	Meaning
Advocacy	“The act or process of supporting a cause” (Merriam Webster, n.d., para 1).
Ally	LGBTQ allies are “persons who identify as heterosexual and who engage in advocacy against homophobia and heterosexism” (Cooper et al., 2014, p.346).
Allyhood	The process of creating LGBTQ allies and the stages of being an ally (Cooper et al., 2014).
Cisgender	A person whose “gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth” (Merriam-Webster, n.d., para. 1).
Controversial policies	Controversial is defined as “causing a lot of angry public discussion and disagreement” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, n.d., para. 1). Bathroom policies regarding regulations as to which bathrooms transgender people can use are controversial

	policies (Casale et al, 2018) no matter who the policy is protecting or favoring. They cause heated discussions and make national news.
Gender and Sexually Diverse (GSD)	This term encompasses lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer and questioning people (Meadows & Shain, 2021).
Heteronormativity	Pennell (2017) explained “that our society is based around the idea that everyone is heterosexual and cisgender, and anyone who is not is deviating from what is considered normal” (p. 65).
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ)	<p>LGBTQ+ is often used to include “intersex, pansexual, genderqueer, questioning, and other sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions that do not fit heterosexual norms” (Pennell, 2017, p. 62, footnote 1).</p> <p>In this paper you will see that some authors referenced and participants use LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQ+, and LGBTQIA+.</p>
South or Southern	In the United States the South or Southern region traditionally share conservative political and social policies (Shelton, 2019). For this paper these are the states referred to as the South or Southern region of the United States: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to explore the factors that help GSD youth feel supported in high school it is important to understand the complexity of issues surrounding school climates for GSD students, the effects they have on this group, and the barriers that exist because of controversial policies or conservative social and political ideals. First this literature review explores the challenges GSD youth face in schools, followed by effective support systems explored by researchers, and finally discusses the barriers teachers and schools face when attempting to implement these support systems. The purpose of this literature review is to give historical context to the topic of supporting GSD youth by helping the reader understand why support is needed, what can be done, and what barriers exist in the pathway to systemic change.

Multiple subgroups in the field of education are invested in uncovering the issues that LGBTQ+ students face and how to best support them. Associations of school counselors (Cooper et al., 2014), health and psychology professionals (De Pedro et al., 2017; Meadows & Shain, 2021; Pampati et al., 2018; Porta et al., 2017; Rivers et al., 2018), LGBTQ+ supporters (Bradley et al., 2019; Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2020; Shelton, 2019), sex health educators (Roberts et al., 2020; Ullman, 2018), and other educational groups (Casale et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2014; Pennell, 2017; Whidden et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) have conducted research that is included in this literature review. This literature review explores societal trends on this topic and explains theory-informed practices (Mertler, 2020) related to creating safe environments for GSD students. The “funneling approach” (Mertler, 2020, p. 76) is used to help the reader first understand the broader issues that GSD students face, followed by an explanation of practices that have shown to be effective and then finally narrowing to the

possible barriers that prevent schools from implementing effective practices. My study seeks to gather ideas of how educators can be allies and develop plans of action to support GSD students despite social and political barriers towards creating and maintaining effective support systems.

Challenges and Experiences of GSD Students

Every year GLSEN provides a *National School Climate Survey* with a section titled “The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation’s Schools” (Kosciw et al., 2020). The data from the 2019 survey includes challenges LGBTQ+ students face, statistical information, and proposed supports school systems can implement. For this section, I focus on five studies but include supportive information from studies that will be detailed in the following section as well. Pampati et al. (2018) conducted quantitative research for School Nurses on school connectedness, bullying experiences, perceived safety, and absenteeism among transgender youth while implementing an HIV prevention program. The research took place in a large urban school district in Florida with a predominant Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black population (Pampati et al., 2018).

On a larger scale, De Pedro et al. (2017) and Zhang et al. (2020) used data from state-wide surveys to investigate the relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation and alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. De Pedro et al. (2017) compiled a quantitative study by analyzing the data from the 2013-2015 California Healthy Kids state-wide survey for the *Journal of School Health*. This study focused on substance use among middle and high school transgender students. Zhang et al. (2020) studied data from the 2015 Oregon Healthy Teens Survey to investigate the impact school-based health centers had on the behaviors of sexual minority youth.

The fourth study in this section is a qualitative study conducted by Roberts et al. (2020) in the form of semi-structured interviews of LGBTQ+ students of color in the New York City School District. This study was conducted by Sex Health Educators and focused on how to deliver culturally appropriate messages in the sex health curriculum to LGBTQ+ students of color with various religious and cultural backgrounds. In the fifth study, Rivers et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study in England, consisting of analysis drawn from 17 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The LGBT adult participants reported having attempted suicide as youth and were between the ages of 26 and 52 years at the time of the study. The authors were able to uncover themes from the stories provided by their participants. After reviewing the literature on challenges that LGBTQ+ students face in school, the following themes emerged: lack of connection, feeling unsafe, the persistence of anti-LGBTQ remarks and slurs, and substance abuse.

Lack of Connection

In a study by Whidden et al. (2020) that will be detailed in the second section, school connectedness was defined as the way students feel about their social role in school and their experiences and connections with peers and adults. School connectedness is linked to feeling supported, accepted, and having quality relationships with students and staff. LGBTQ+ students, and transgender students specifically lack school connectedness because they often feel ostracized and unrepresented. Pampati et al.'s (2018) quantitative study discovered many transgender students felt unaccepted, lacked connections to school, and felt staff and students did not care about them. Many of these students reported feeling unsafe and experienced more bullying than their cisgender peers. Similarly, the qualitative interviews conducted by Roberts et

al. (2020) discovered that LGBTQ+ students felt underrepresented and unsupported in sexual health education classes, so much so that most of them sought information from outside resources such as external programs in the community or internet resources. These students did not feel closely connected, represented, and accepted in school.

Likewise, the participants in the qualitative study conducted by Rivers et al. (2018) experienced isolation and little support and affirmation from those around them. The participants in this study were between the ages of 26 and 52 years (Rivers et al., 2018), and their experiences as youth occurred in various decades with diverse levels of social and political support present (depending on the era of time). Rivers et al. (2018) uncovered these themes: “conflict about coming out, concurrent mental health problems, and grieving over lost relationships” (p.3). The authors noted that “appropriate adult and/or professional intervention could have made a difference, although, we must reflect critically on the inappropriateness of those interventions in heteronormative and/or homophobic cultures where same-sex desire was discouraged or forbidden” (Rivers et al., 2018, p.6). Not only is it important to have support systems and relationships with caring people, but these systems and people must be knowledgeable and understanding of LGBT topics, rights, and struggles. The authors argue that the absence of support systems negatively influenced the experiences these participants had in their youth.

Feeling Unsafe & Anti- LGBTQ Remarks

The 2019 *National School Climate Survey* revealed the negative experiences GSD students have in high schools. Kosciw et al. (2020) stated “Schools nationwide are hostile

environments for a distressing number of LGBTQ students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBTQ language and experience victimization and discrimination in school” (p. 3). In the study by Pampati et al. (2018), transgender students reported feeling unsafe at a greater percentage than their cisgender peers and reported not feeling as though staff cared about them. “Transgender students in our sample experienced heightened levels of bullying compared to their cisgender peers” (Pampati et al., 2018, p. 299). At the beginning of a study conducted by Horowitz and Hansen (2008), which will be detailed in the next section, staff and students reported hearing many anti-LGBT slurs and remarks frequently during the school day. Students reported that teachers and students did not step in to intervene when remarks or slurs were made. Substance abuse, suicide, high-risk behavior, and depression are connected and correlated to concealing one’s sexual identity and coping with identity-based victimization (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008).

Substance Abuse

Anti-LGBTQ remarks and slurs, bullying, and feeling unsafe can lead students to feel disconnected from peers and staff. Consequently, some high school students turn to substance abuse. As Zhang et al. (2020) pointed out, “there is no standard method of assessing sexual orientation among adolescents” (p.1157) and adolescents are going through the “ongoing process of sexual development” (p. 1157), so many may not yet self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This makes research tied to the sexual orientation or gender identity of adolescents difficult and may explain the gap in research nation-wide.

De Pedro et al. (2017) focused on substance abuse among transgender students in California and Zhang et al. (2020) investigated the disparities between sexual minority youth (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) and their heterosexual peers as associated with alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. De Pedro et al. (2017) found that “transgender students were more than three times as likely to report cigarette use” and “more than twice as likely to drink alcohol in school” (p. 306) compared to their cisgender peers. They were also three times more likely to use marijuana in school and about two times more likely to report tobacco and inhalant use (De Pedro et al., 2017). Overall, transgender youth, specifically, have shown elevated use of all substances compared to nontransgender peers. De Pedro et al. (2017) indicated the need for the education of school health professionals, so they can support transgender students. They suggested that health professionals provide staff training, create connections with LGBT community centers, and be caring and affirming adults.

Zhang et al. (2020) found that sexual minority youth (SMY) were more likely than their heterosexual peers to use alcohol, binge drink, smoke cigarettes, use e-cigarettes, use marijuana, and use unprescribed prescription drugs. SMY were more than twice as likely to use marijuana and cigarettes than their heterosexual peers. Zhang et al. (2020) found that SMY in schools with school-based health centers were “less likely to drink alcohol, use e-cigarettes, use marijuana, and use unprescribed prescription drugs compared with SMY in schools without SBHCs [school-based health centers]” (p. 1165). Zhang et al. (2020) suggested that school-based health centers potentially play a protective role for SMY and are an important resource for a population that may not receive the health care services they need. “Unfortunately, SMY often face personal and structural barriers that reduce access to much-needed health services” (Institute of Medicine,

Board on the Health of Select Populations, Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities, 2011, as cited in Zhang et al., 2020, p.1155). Overall, the data from both studies suggested that GSD youth engage in substance abuse at higher rates than their heterosexual, cisgender peers. Both studies stressed the importance of access to quality health professionals for GSD youth.

Effective Supports in High Schools for GSD Students

Researchers have found that effective staff trainings, anti-bullying policies, supportive programs, and curriculum resulted in safer climates for LGBTQ+ students. Kosciw et al. (2020) emphasized that safety and support are essential components to enable all students to experience academic success. “LGBTQ students who have LGBTQ-related resources report better school experiences and academic success” (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 8). The following supports were found to be successful: proper teacher and staff training, teacher and staff allyhood, the creation of Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSAs), implementation of strict anti-bullying policies, incorporation of a supportive curriculum, and representation in staff and curriculum.

Teacher and Staff Training

Supportive adults can make a world of difference in the life of a high school student. Teachers can have supportive conversations, help students find allies in the community, ensure classroom environments have inclusive posters and materials, help initiate Gay-Straight Alliances, create safe zones, and advocate for affirming and inclusive policy changes. To create safer school environments for LGBTQ students, teachers and staff should be trained and

supported by the administration. Numerous studies found that staff development and professional teacher training on how to react to bullying, slurs, or anti-LGBTQ remarks had a positive impact on school climate (Bradley et al., 2019; Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Pampati, 2018; Pennell, 2017; Whidden et al., 2020).

Horowitz and Hansen (2008) conducted a mixed-methods study for five years in Minnesota that implemented staff development activities, class lessons, and school-wide events. Six high schools were part of this study. More than 180 staff members participated in planning and filling out rubrics, and 767 student surveys were found useable (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008). Though students and teachers reported still hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks, over time these were heard less often, and proper staff reactions and disciplinary actions occurred more frequently. The study suggested that the staff development and classroom lessons on LGBT issues were successful in improving the school climate. The researchers indicated a need for more LGBT resources.

Similarly, but not for the same extended period, Whidden et al. (2020) conducted a school-wide quantitative study in a rural Texas public high school for about 18 months. The researchers conducted a pre-test to evaluate the school climate before putting in place four interventions. With the researchers' input, the school administration implemented the following supports for LGTBQ+ students: created a Gay-Straight Alliance, provided professional training for teachers, created Safe Zones, and provided teachers with resiliency lessons for all subject areas to implement with students. The researchers wanted to know how an inclusive environment would influence the way students felt about social connectedness. Whidden et al. (2020) reported

that “Significant gains were made in the areas of students enjoying school, decreasing social stress with peers, forming positive connections with parents, and increased classroom confidence” (p. 13). The researchers found that one limitation was teacher buy-in because differences were indicated in students’ feelings depending on the teacher teaching the lesson.

In another case, Bradley et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative research study on the effectiveness of bully prevention activities through a computer simulation. The sample group included 2,904 participants from 809 schools across the United States. The participants were middle and high school educators (Bradley et al., 2019). “Step In Speak Up” is a computer simulation designed by Kognito and the Trevor Project and was developed with input from scholars and professionals focused on LGBTQ school mental health and education (Bradley et al., 2019). The simulations included “mini-conversation role-plays where learners interact with intelligent, fully animated, and emotionally responsive virtual students who will react like real students” (Bradley et al., 2019, p. 326). The participants had to attempt to gain the trust of the virtual student by choosing between “critical, judgmental or labeling” responses (Bradley et al., 2019, p. 328). The simulation included a virtual coach to suggest correct tactics and provide feedback. The data, collected from pre- and post- surveys, conveyed that about half of the participants “reported increases in their behaviors interacting with students and a higher percentage reported increases in interactions with other adults” (Bradley et al., 2019, pp. 332-333). The idea is that if enough faculty and staff in schools complete the simulation, a “school culture shift might ensue, hopefully leading to a safer and more supportive learning environment for LGBTQ students” (Bradley et al., 2019, p. 335).

From another point of view, Pennell (2017) provided LGBTQ+ support training to high school teachers and staff for numerous years. The goal of these training sessions was to help teachers and staff create safe and welcoming environments for LGBTQ+ students. At first, the author's training sessions included personal narratives of their trauma and endured discrimination. This method of training proved to be numbing and draining for Pennell and inadvertently focused on the negative experiences of LGBTQ+ students. The author decided to focus her theory-informed training on society and queer cultural capital. "It is my belief that we should offer teachers a way to recognize systemic oppressions against LGBTQ+ people as well as ways to see LGBTQ+ people for their strengths" (Pennell, 2017, p. 71). The article detailed the following training activities that can be used with school personnel: heteronormativity scavenger hunt, gender spectrum activity, and identifying queer cultural capital in passages from LGBTQ+ narratives in nonfiction books (author included a booklist). Through the course of these training sessions, the author noted having constructive conversations and seeing growth in participants. Pennell (2017) indicated that teachers become better advocates when they understand society's role in heteronormativity and view transgender students through a positive cultural capital viewpoint.

Allyhood

Training teachers to use proper terminology, understand challenges GSD students face, intervene to stop bullying, and create safe environments for GSD youth is a great start, but having teachers become allies takes this understanding to another level. Allyhood is the process and stages of becoming an ally (Cooper et al., 2014) and is an intentional and reflective process.

Becoming an ally means adding a social justice action component to the education provided in teacher trainings by participating and initiating conversations with colleagues and self-directed learning of LGBTQ topics. Cooper et al. (2014) urged readers to consider “allyhood” as a way to create long-lasting change. Cooper et al. (2014) provided statistics from GLSEN’s *National School Climate Survey* of 2011 as well as numerous other authors to lay the foundation as to why a systemic change is needed in schools to protect and support LGBTQ students. The authors described the importance of social justice allies whose members are privileged in society (Brodio, 2000, as cited in Cooper et al., 2014) and the concept of a broader definition of allyhood that includes all individuals because others can relate their own experiences of oppression (Waters, 2010, as cited in Cooper et al., 2014). One training program detailed by Cooper et al. (2014) was created by the University of Michigan in 2005. This program focused on “the active engagement of the training participants to facilitate growth in the areas of personal awareness, knowledge, skills, and action related to development as an LGBTQ ally” (Cooper et al., 2014, p. 350). Overall, the authors stressed that education in the form of professional development, conversations with colleagues about LGBTQ issues, self-directed learning, the creation of more allies, and collaboration among professionals were the most crucial factors for creating systematic change in the area of LGBTQ support for students.

Genders and Sexualities Alliances

Pennell (2017) and Whidden et al. (2020) discussed the supportive nature and necessity of GSAs in school. GSAs used to be known as Gay Straight Alliances but are now known as Genders and Sexualities Alliances (Meadows & Shain, 2021). Similarly, Porta et al. (2017)

conducted a qualitative study exploring the benefits of GSAs through the lenses of LGBTQ+ youth. The researchers found that GSAs provide LGBTQ+ youth with community, emotional connection, social support, and a sense of belonging. GSAs connected students to supportive adults, community resources, and the larger LGBTQ+ community. Many students indicated that these groups helped them feel safe at school and gave them a place where they could truly be themselves. The authors urged schools that cannot have GSAs due to the political climate, to consider other clubs such as social justice or diversity clubs where students can feel safe to be themselves, and staff can provide resources for LGBTQ+ students.

Likewise, McCormick et al. (2014) detailed the benefits of GSAs in a qualitative study involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The study found that GSAs provide social support for all students by normalizing their thoughts and feelings and helping students gain a sense of appreciation for the differences of others and their unique differences. In this study, the GSA gave LGBTQ+ students a group to be accountable to, a sense of connectedness to school, and hope. The limitations of this research were the small sample size and lack of diversity in the sample group (McCormick et al., 2014). Conversely, the study of LGBTQ+ students of color by Roberts et al. (2020) indicated that students had mixed feelings about GSAs. The qualitative interviews found that some students considered it to be a positive resource, while others noted an “unsupportive atmosphere or a lack of LGBTQ+ persons in leadership positions” (Roberts et al., 2020, p. 276). The effectiveness of a GSA was dependent on the leadership and atmosphere that was created by the educator and participants.

In the same fashion, Rivers et al. (2018) explained that positive LGBT role models and a dedicated support system where youth can attend regular group activities such as sports, voluntary work, or educational type activities with other LGBT youth, created a sense of community. Later in life, many of the participants in the qualitative study conducted by Rivers et al. (2018) found “LGBT social networks an effective means of support through sharing experiences with others and developing a sense of community” (p.7). The authors explained that this study on the experiences of LGBT people who attempted suicide helps readers understand an important aspect of LGBT people’s health and provided possible interventions for those struggling with family or community discrimination, abuse, or isolation (Rivers et al., 2018). The authors believed that their participants would have had better experiences if they had communities to lean on such as the kind GSAs create in high school.

Anti-Bullying Policies

Given their yearly and detailed research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in the United States, Kosciw et al. (2020) recommended “adopting and implementing comprehensive bullying/harassment policies that specifically enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in individual schools and districts, with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience” (p. 18). Comparably, Ullman (2018) found that strict and comprehensive anti-bullying policies empowered teachers by giving them a clear framework for confronting anti-LGBTQ+ remarks and slurs. The researcher conducted a qualitative study through a series of interviews with NYC school staff members from nine public and private schools. The research found that framing gender and sexually diversity inclusive

policies under anti-bullying discourse created limitations but provided teachers with a safe context in which to work (Ullman, 2018). It was difficult to “disrupt the hetero/cisnormative gender climate” (Ullman, 2018, p. 506) but anti-bullying policies provided an opening for teachers and schools to create safer environments for LGBTQ+ students.

Supportive Curriculum and Representation

Educators can make a difference in the lives of students by including the experiences and histories of LGBTQ+ people in the curriculum and materials. LGBTQ+ people should ideally be represented in staff and faculty and not just in the curriculum. Students in the study conducted by Roberts et al. (2020) noted the importance of having teachers and GSA leaders who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Supportive environments can be created through general lessons that teach resiliency skills and empathy to all students. The study conducted by Whidden et al. (2020) indicated that lessons that provided students with resiliency skills, tolerance, and self-confidence helped improve the school environment. These resiliency lessons as defined by the author included parent and community involvement, self-reflection, and how to set goals (Whidden et al., 2020). Similarly, Casale et al. (2018) implemented a mixed-methods study in two small schools in Southeastern United States, to find out if teaching controversial topics can lead to more empathy in students. The researchers operated under the assumption that empathy is the key to having an open mind about people who are different from themselves. Casale et al. (2018) stated that at the end of the study, students agreed that learning about controversial topics made them more empathetic towards people who were different from themselves.

Also in relation to curriculum and representation, Meadows and Shain (2021) explained that in conservative areas teachers can show their support by displaying safe-zone signs and by using rainbows or other LGBTQ+ signage. These gestures signal to GSD students that the educator is supportive. The authors suggest teachers can be supportive in their language by using the correct pronouns, start introductions with your own pronouns, and use non-binary language such as “scientists,” “musicians,” or “students” rather than “boys and girls” (Meadows & Shain, 2021).

Barriers to Creating and Sustaining Effective Supports

The political environment in the United States is currently turbulent and polarized. Some states are actively protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ people with legislation such as adding “x” as an option to mark gender on identification (Pennell, 2017). While other states are restricting bathroom use for transgender people (Pennell, 2017). Empathy has not been present in many political debates and the climate is divisive (Casale et al., 2018). Hurtful and conflicting messages in our media and politics put LGBTQ+ youth in tough positions, feeling targeted, isolated, and unsupported. This climate can also make it difficult for administrators and educators to create and maintain effective supports for GSD youth in schools.

Shelton (2019) explained that historically the southern portion of the U.S. is known for being more conservative with social and political policies. In the *2019 National School Climate Survey Executive Summary*, Kosciw et al. (2020) stated “LGBTQ students in the South had more negative school experiences overall than students in all other regions, including higher rates of biased language, victimization, and anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices”

(p.17). Kosciw et al. (2020) also explained that “LGBTQ students in the South were least likely to have access to LGBTQ-related resources at school” (p.17). It can be significantly harder for GSD students to find encouragement and assistance, and possibly harder for teachers to create and maintain systems of support.

Shelton (2019) explored what it is like to be a LGBTQIA+ ally in the South by conducting a four-year qualitative, longitudinal study. The study started with 17 members of an undergraduate English education cohort and ended with following one student, a cisgender, heterosexual female given the pseudonym ‘Bailey’, in her pre-service year as a teacher and her first three years teaching and being an LGBTQIA+ ally (Shelton, 2019). Bailey realized her position in the school power structure was low as a new teacher. In addition, “she was a political and cultural mismatch with her school setting” (Shelton, 2019, p. 598). This made it difficult for Bailey to become a strong ally and stand against the conservative, heteronormative ideals of the school administration, faculty, and student population. At Bailey’s school, students would use anti-LGBTQIA+ language such as slurs. Administrators had also been heard using anti-LGBTQIA+ language at times, indicating to the teacher that she would not be supported if she actively advocated for students as an ally.

Shelton (2019) explained that during the study Bailey learned that many LGBTQIA+ ally practices such as directly calling out bullying or name calling and posting Safe Zone stickers did not make students safer, but instead made them targets. The author explained that the doubt and demoralization that Bailey experienced in the three years as an ally “more fully expose[d] the ways that teachers’ ally efforts are made directly affected by sociocultural and political factors more than most literature examines” (Shelton, 2019, p. 600). Shelton (2019) discovered that

allyhood is complex and at times more contradictory than they had previously believed, especially allyhood in a conservative area. At times doing the opposite of what the common practices of allyhood would deem appropriate, the teacher found she was able to be a better ally for her students.

The study by Shelton (2019) brought to light some of the barriers educators face when trying to be effective LGBTQIA+ allies in conservative areas, especially in the South. The educator was met with unsupportive administration, colleagues, parents, and a general school and community culture that was unwelcoming, unsupportive, and at times hostile towards LGBTQIA+ students. The teacher's own professional ranking among her colleagues and cultural mismatch with the community made it difficult for her to assert any power and advocate, regardless of the opinions of others, for fear of losing her job.

Another barrier to allyhood and creating effective support systems can exist within oneself and world view. Cooper et al. (2014) explained there are three stages of ally development, which are described as the initial stage, intermediate, and mature stage. The authors explained that as people learn more about others and "begin to engage in activities that develop cognitive knowledge and intrapersonal awareness, they begin to understand that they are members in a larger system that can profoundly shape perspective and affect individual wellness" (Cooper et al., 2014, p. 347). During the initial stage of ally development people have adopted the dominant culture's perception of LGBTQ people as a group, have had little experience with members of the group, and only know what they have seen on social media, television, and magazines. As people develop as allies through the intermediate stage, they start to become aware of multiple perspectives, expand their worldviews, and begin to "acknowledge

privilege and systemic oppression” (Waters, 2010, as cited in Cooper et al., 2014, p. 348). It is common during this stage for allies to feel anxiety, shame, or guilt about past behaviors, and they may be cautious to engage in conversations about LGBTQ topics in fear of appearing discriminatory or offensive by accident (Cooper et al., 2014). The final stage of ally development is the mature stage where allies have adopted a “multifaceted worldview and an internal sense of agency and can consider multiple perspectives in a nonjudgmental manner” (Cooper et al., 2014, p. 348). Through direct conversations, trainings, self-reflection, and ongoing education, people can move through the stages of allyhood (Cooper et al., 2014). However, this takes dedication and commitment to change. It is difficult for people to move past the dominant culture’s perception of a group without a dedication to change, willingness to engage in self-reflection, and effort to learn more to better understand the struggles and hardships of this group.

Current Policies

Ullman (2018) described the time we live in as “paradoxical” (p. 495) because while public discourse is becoming more inclusive of gender and sexual diversity, conservative policies and politics challenge some of these hard-won legal rights. Konnoth (2019) acknowledged how far society has come to be able to have conferences and give talks about the health and safety of LGBT children. Although social progress towards equality is being made, there are political movements specifically targeting GSD people. The Human Rights Campaign (2022) stated, “LGBTQ+ people are under a coordinated attack in state legislatures across the country, with a record number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills on track to be considered in 2022” (para. 1). The organization explained that more than 300 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in various states in the first quarter of 2022 (Human Rights Campaign, 2022). “Many of these discriminatory bills

target transgender kids, including dozens upon dozens of bills that try to ban trans kids from playing sports or receiving life-saving health care” (Human Rights Campaign, 2022, para. 3). While other bills put restrictions on school curriculum, to access accurate identification, or prevent nondiscrimination protections (ACLU, 2022).

Of the more than 300 anti-LGBTQ+ bills that were introduced in the first quarter of 2022 (Human Rights Campaign, 2022), a focus on the bills that have been passed into law provides an appropriate view of the calculated attack on GSD people, specifically children and youth. Alabama and Florida passed laws restricting instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools (Passantino, 2022). Ohio has a similar law awaiting votes in the state House that would ban instruction and materials on these topics to students in grades kindergarten through three, and place restrictions on curriculum for grades four through 12 (Passantino, 2022). Arizona, Iowa, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Utah passed laws banning “transgender women and girls from competing on sports teams consistent with their gender” (Passantino, 2022, para. 12), but each state varies with where the restrictions are placed, i.e., public, private, charter, or colleges. Arizona and Texas are restricting youth access to gender-affirming care with laws or directives from the governor to have families investigated for child abuse by the Department of Family and Protective services. The Texas directive is currently blocked by a temporary injunction due to the ACLU suing on behalf of parents of a transgender girl (Passantino, 2022). Alabama’s governor signed the Vulnerable Child Protection act, “which states that anyone who provides gender-affirming care—including puberty blockers, hormone therapy or physical gender-affirming surgeries—to an individual under age 18 could be convicted of a felony” (Alfonseca, 2022, para. 9).

Although these laws portray a dark future for GSD people in our country, the other side of the “paradoxical time” (Ullman, 2018, p. 495) we live in must be considered as well. In light of these Anti-LGBTQ+ laws, some states such as California have declared their states to be legal safe havens for transgender children and their families (Alfonseca, 2022). Colorado, Connecticut, Minnesota, New Mexico, and New York have also introduced similar protections for trans people from other states (Alfonseca, 2022). The polarity of the politics surrounding the rights of GSD people may have an impact on the experiences of high school students and the decisions they make about being open about their identities. This study hopes to gain an understanding of the impact of the anti-LGBTQ+ laws on the experiences of GSD youth.

Gaps in Literature

As noted in the literature, GSD students experience significant hardships and challenges navigating through hostile schools. As explained in this chapter, systems of support have been implemented and numerous studies suggested these systems improved school climate and the high school experiences of GSD students. Laws and policies against LGBTQ people are constantly changing. As Shelton (2019) mentioned, the literature does not explain the effects sociocultural and political policies have on allyhood. Rivers et al. (2018) wrote about the differences within the experiences of each of their participants based on the time period they attended high school. My research study will add to the literature on the high school experiences of GSD students, the supports they perceived as being the most helpful, and barriers, if any, to receiving assistance and encouragement specifically in areas with conservative political and social policies. As noted in this chapter, anti-LGBTQ policies, laws, and restrictions are being brought to state legislatures and voted on every day and have been for a few years. Along with

these policies there are also unwritten social policies that may influence the lives of GSD students in the South. As Konnoth (2019) noted, in many ways, such as with marriage equality, society is becoming more open-minded and accepting. There are positive movements and negative backlashes happening at the same time that make this topic a quickly changing one. The thoughts and experiences of these participants of my study could benefit this field.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This qualitative research study strives to uncover factors that help GSD youth feel supported in high school and understand the impact conservative social and political policies have on school climate and student perceptions of safety and support. This chapter explains the research design, site, and sample I used for this study. It also details the data collection techniques and approaches to analysis that I used to gather the information needed to answer my research questions. The research question and subquestion are as follows: What factors help gender and sexually diverse (GSD) youth feel supported in high school? How can educators use these factors to support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies?

Research Design

To answer my research questions, I conducted a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach. In the sections that follow I provide an overview of qualitative research and phenomenology as it pertains to this study.

Qualitative Design

Mertler (2020) explained “Qualitative research designs use systematic observation to gain knowledge, reach understanding, and answer research questions” (p.13). Through this study, I hoped to gain an understanding of the experiences of GSD students in high schools, what systems of support were most helpful to them and answer my research question regarding the impact of conservative policies on their experiences. The foundational goals of qualitative research are to understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their

worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.15). These are the goals of this study; therefore, a qualitative design worked to answer my research questions.

Phenomenological Approach

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that “all of qualitative research draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation” (p.26). Phenomenological studies go a step further by focusing on the “essence or basic structure of experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). The four participants in my study attended high schools within 25 miles of each other in a large metropolitan area in the South. Although their identities, high schools, and experiences were different, there were overlaps and similarities in the essence of their shared experiences.

Another important part of phenomenology is the researcher’s open-minded view of the situation by acknowledging but then setting aside all assumptions in order to examine the situation itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In a previous chapter, I stated my experiences, point of view, and positionality. For this study, I “bracketed” my assumptions in order to be fully open-minded and listened to my participants’ views and experiences. The third aspect of phenomenology that I adopted for this study is phenomenological reduction which is “the process of continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). I interviewed my participants two times each, conducted member checks, and issued follow-up questions to attempt to get to the core of their experiences and truly understand the essence of these shared experiences.

Site

The site for my study was a public university in the southern portion of the United States. The university has an active LGBTQ+ student organization and an advocacy and support center specifically for sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. I went through the advocacy and support center to find students who were actively involved as volunteers and peer educators. I gave participants the option of meeting in person in a room I reserved on campus without windows for privacy or on Zoom. Five out of eight of the interviews were conducted on Zoom. Two participants chose to exclusively meet on Zoom and one participant met in-person for one interview and on Zoom for the following interview.

Sample

I used nonprobability sampling, not random sampling, in this qualitative study to discover what occurs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in high schools for GSD youth. To understand how conservative social and political policies influence GSD youth's perceptions of school supports, I used purposeful sampling by interviewing GSD college students and a recent graduate who attended high school in the southern portion of the United States. As a region, the southern portion of the United States has been known to have more conservative social and political beliefs and has resisted racial and gender equality through policies more than in other states (Shelton, 2019).

The purposeful convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was self-identifying LGBTQ+ adult students from a university in the South based on availability at the time of the study (late summer). The sample for this study was four students ages 19-22, (a sophomore, two

juniors, and a recent graduate) who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. The study was conducted during the month of August when not many college students had returned to campus. Through various meetings and correspondence, I communicated with the university's GSD advocacy and support center assistant director who connected me with four willing participants who were available during this time period. These students were ideal participants for this study because they are or were peer educators or volunteers for this GSD advocacy and support center and are comfortable speaking about these topics. These students and recent graduate have had time to reflect and are removed from their high school experiences both through time and physical distance since they are now second- or third-year college students or recent graduates. As self-identified advocates, these participants had appropriate insight and advice for teachers and school staff.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that a magic number of participants for qualitative research does not exist. Therefore, finding an approximate minimum number, striving for saturation of data, and reaching redundancy, when the same responses keep coming up in answers and data, were the ultimate goals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data elicited were not generalizable because of the small sample size. However, the data offered a snapshot of individual experiences from a purposeful sample. I obtained a detailed understanding of the essence of the experiences of these four participants.

Data Collection

Given that this study sought to understand past events and perceptions, I used multiple semi-structured interviews and a researcher's journal to collect data. Forms of qualitative data

collection such as submitted course work, video recordings, and existing documents (Mertler, 2020) were not appropriate for this research because this study focused on past experiences and feelings of current college students and recent graduates. Quantitative data collection techniques were also not appropriate for this study. The researcher's journal as well as the multiple interviews with four participants gave a more detailed account of their experiences and helped with triangulating the data.

Semi-Structured Interviews

For semi-structured interviews, researchers have a set of questions to start from that are the same for every participant (Mertler, 2020). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher the flexibility to ask follow-up questions or probing questions (Mertler, 2020). The structured questions allowed for every participant to answer the same questions, but the semi-structured aspect left me room to ask probing questions to get a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences in high school. The strengths of semi-structured interviews are the flexibility of asking follow-up questions and the possibility of collecting the same type of information from each participant through structured, required questions. One limitation of this type of data collection is that it is time-consuming.

In order to gain a full picture of their experiences related to the research questions, each participant was interviewed twice for 45 minutes to an hour each time to provide more adequate data. I conducted eight interviews, two with each participant in August and September 2022. Interviews began on August 3 and ended on September 4. During this time participants were moving and participating in job and volunteer training which caused scheduling to be a bit

harder. In order to interview Devin, a recent college graduate and former volunteer for the university's GSD advocate group, I submitted an IRB amendment, which took longer than expected since the website was down for over a week. Despite these small hurdles, interviews were still conducted within four to six weeks as planned.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed by a secure online service. The online transcription service helped offset the need to manually transcribe multiple and lengthy interviews, which is a limitation of using interviews as a method of data collection. After every interview I reviewed the transcriptions for errors and themes. Between the two rounds of interviews, I reviewed and coded the existing data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Table 2 shows how each question asked in the first round of interviews directly related to the research questions. Table 2 also lists the profile questions I asked the participants in order to gather information for the structural descriptions needed in a phenomenological study. The second set of interview questions were individualized as they directly connected to what each participant said in the first interview. However, after analyzing the data from the first round of interviews and noticing a few themes, I asked each participant more about their friendships, peers, and connection to the arts as well as conducted member checks during the second round of interviews.

Table 2

Interview Questions for Semi Structured Interviews

Research Question	Required Interview Questions	Rationale Behind Question
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Profile Information	<p>What are your preferred pronouns? Where are you from? Where did you go to high school? What year are you in college? How old are you? What or was your role with the GSD student advocacy group? If you would like to share, how do you identify? What other aspects of your identity would you like to share?</p>	<p>These questions gather profile information that helps build a fuller picture of the individual experiences of the participants and provides data for structural descriptions.</p>
1. What factors help gender and sexually diverse (GSD) youth feel supported in high school?	<p>How wide or small was the perception of others in school of your LGBTQ identity when you were in high school? Did others assume or explicitly know because you were intentionally out? What type of support systems, if any, did you have in high school? Or what helped you feel the most supported? If you did not have any support systems, what do you wish were present in your high school?</p>	<p>This helps me understand how many people knew and how open the student was with others about this part of their identity. This tells me what factors were the most helpful. In later interviews, I can ask more specific questions related to this to find out more details about their experiences. This is a good starting point.</p>
	<p>Which experiences related to your LGBTQ identity, either positive or negative, stand out to you the most? Why were they significant?</p>	<p>This is also a starting point to find out if they first share negative or positive experiences. This is something I can come back to in the second round of interviews to get more information.</p>
a. How can educators use these factors to support GSD	<p>When you were in high school, the U.S. President reversed several policies that the previous administration had put into place to protect the rights of LGBTQ people. The president reversed transgender student guidance, banned transgender people from serving in the military, and fought to remove LGBTQ rights from protections under sex</p>	<p>Giving some background to the policy changes helps students understand what I mean by political policies with my research questions. This helps me understand if national-level policies impacted students' experiences.</p>

<p>students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and</p>	<p>discrimination laws (Simmons- Duffin, 2020).</p> <p>Were you aware of these policy changes? If so, did they impact your high school experiences or your decisions? How so? Please explain.</p> <p>If not, does knowing this change your thinking about supports that were effective to you?</p>	
<p>political policies?</p>	<p>Who or what support system helped you navigate these experiences?</p>	<p>This question helps me understand the most effective support system related to this topic.</p>
	<p>The question you just answered touched on national political policies that impact LGBTQ people. There are also conservative social policies that are often understood and followed within a community but are not explicitly written. For example, in some communities it is frowned upon for educators to live with their significant others before marriage (Shelton, 2019). It is not written but everyone knows the general view and feelings of the community at large.</p> <p>Were there any social policies that impacted your high school experiences? If so, what type of rules or ideologies did your school or community have? How did this impact your high school experience?</p>	<p>This will help me understand the impact conservative social policies had on the experiences of the participants.</p>
	<p>Who or what helped you navigate these social policies?</p> <p>If there weren't any people or things that helped you navigate these social policies, what would have been helpful?</p>	<p>This connects the main question to the subquestion. What supports did the participant have that helped them work through and navigate social policies? The idea is to gain an understanding of what teachers can</p>

	do to help GSD students in conservative climates.
What advice would you give teachers who may struggle to give support to students in communities that have strong conservative social policies?	This may be hard for some participants to answer but for those who can, it may be helpful to hear what they think teachers should or can do.
Is there anything else you want to add that is related to this topic?	This question allows them to unload any other thoughts on the topic.

Researcher's Journal

Mertler (2020) explained how a teacher's journal can be used as part of data collection. I used a researcher's journal to reflect on interview responses that were of greater value than others and to discuss the emotions that were visually apparent but may not come through over audio. Mertler (2020) proposed a two-column approach with one column for observations and the other for interpretation. I used this two-column approach with one column for my observations of body language, volume, tone, notes, etc. The second column for my reflections after the interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stressed the importance of a reflective component to field notes and observations. The reflection aspect of the researcher's journal is a strength of this type of data collection because the researcher can record emotions that were visible and consider the nonverbal cues the participants provided. Audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews allow participants to provide only the information they perceive is necessary. Reflecting on my observations of nonverbal messages allowed me to include a more detailed description of the participants' true feelings towards the topic and indicate which

responses required more emphasis. Reflection also allowed me to document my initial thoughts, rank the importance of several of the comments or responses, and write down possible follow-up questions for the next interview. After each interview, I immediately jotted down my thoughts and reflected on the interview in order to provide relevant data.

Existing documents

Since this study focuses on the feelings and past experiences of the participants, interviews and a researcher's journal are the most appropriate forms of data collection. I conducted background research into how close the participants' high schools were from each other and if their high schools had existing, LGBTQ+ protective policies on their websites. Only one high school did but the participant was not aware of these policies in high school. Consequently, it is important to focus on the research questions and make sure the data that is being collected directly relates to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since the participant was not aware of this policy and the other participants' schools did not have these policies, I did not include the information in my study. Existing documents such as journals, handbooks, and other documents that related to the research topic did not exist.

Analysis

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that data analysis and collection "should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research" (p.195). For this reason, I used my computer to document my observations during each interview. I started with my research questions to analyze data and began coding within a week after each interview. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that coding is a way of assigning words or phrases in qualitative data so that it can be retrieved more

easily later. I used inductive analysis (Mertler, 2020) and a simplified version of phenomenological analysis to find patterns and themes and construct a framework for my study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Quotes and phrases from the participants in the transcriptions combined with their non-verbal communication documented in the researcher's journal helped me highlight common ideas and important experiences. I read the interview transcriptions multiple times, first to review them for accuracy, second to begin identifying categories to code the data (Mertler, 2020), third to solidify codes, and fourth to verify codes.

To make “sense out of the data” by “consolidating, reducing, and interpreting” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202) I sorted quotes from the participants by putting them into categories on a spreadsheet. Each participant's responses were color coded. During the multiple data reads, I consolidated categories, used my research questions to guide the analysis process, and looked for larger themes and connections.

Phenomenological Considerations

Phenomenological analysis includes textural, structural, and composite descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). I included textural descriptions of the experiences of my participants by including verbatim quotes (Mustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). Structural description is the “setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced” (Mustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 201). I provided nonidentifiable locations, participant profile information, and general context to be sure to have structural descriptions in my findings. Lastly, composite descriptions were formed by incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions in order to provide the essence of the

experiences of the participants, which is the “culminating aspect of a phenomenological study” (Mustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 201). Another aspect of phenomenology that I used were the phenomenological questions that guided my research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My research question and sub questions are clear and focused: What factors help GSD youth feel supported in high school? How can educators use these factors to support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies? I used the phenomenological approaches of holistic reading, highlighting, and detailed reading (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to create categories and themes. First, I used the holistic reading approach by reading the entire transcripts of an interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While doing so, I highlighted important phrases and examined each statement in order to use the highlighting and detailed reading approaches as well (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The end result of these processes is a detailed description of the essences of the lived experiences of these participants.

Ethics & Confidentiality

For a study to be credible and trustworthy, the researcher must be “trustworthy in carrying out the study in as ethical a manner as possible” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.265). I followed the university’s institutional review board’s (IRB) guidelines as well as conducted a research study that was transparent, genuine, and conscious of the sensitivity of the topic. I asked the participants to share about aspects of their identity, their perceptions of their experiences, and what they found to be the most valuable support in high school. In order to be sensitive to the personal aspect of these questions, I selected to work with a group of college students who have volunteered as peer advocates and are comfortable speaking about these topics. Merriam and

Tisdell (2016) explained that the relationship between the researcher and the participant needs to include consent, privacy, and protection. Participants provided consent through IRB-approved consent forms, which detailed the topic of study and type of questions I would be asking (see Appendix A). During the first round of interviews, I reviewed parts of the consent form with the participants to remind them of the topic of study and privacy procedures.

I followed IRB's protocol by keeping all my electronic data in a folder on my password-protected computer. I made sure all written data, and the recording device were stored in a locked bag. Participants' names and other proper nouns such as locations were kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms (Mertler, 2020). I made sure the participants were aware that bringing up past events in an interview may make painful memories emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were made aware that they only had to share what they wanted to share. A handout with follow-up support including university counseling center information and contact information for a follow-up conversation with a board member of the advocacy group was created but only sent to one participant during the second round of interviews. To ensure that my interview questions were ethical and considerate of my participants' identities, I consulted with my thesis committee before my second set of interviews.

Validity

In order to ensure validity of this study I used triangulation of my researcher's observations, interview responses from four participants, and data from follow-up interviews. I triangulated data on all research questions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated "triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through

observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people” (p.245). Another strategy I used was member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the second round of interviews, after analyzing some data, I checked back with my participants to see if my interpretations “rang true” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). To ensure validity I also used the strategy of peer examination (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with my thesis committee. My committee read, reviewed, and commented on my findings. These three strategies along with seeking full saturation of data during the data collection phase helped ensure validity.

Reliability

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained “strategies that a qualitative researcher can use to ensure consistency and dependability, or reliability are triangulation, peer examination, investigator’s position, and the audit trail” (p. 252). As stated above, I used methods of triangulation and peer examination (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by my thesis committee. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained “reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (p. 250). Qualitative research studies can be replicated, but the results can still vary tremendously because of the unique experiences of each individual participant. In order to give my readers confidence that the data I collected was the best accounts possible, I kept an audit trail of my processes during data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is part of my researcher’s journal and included the decisions I made, questions I asked, and issues or problems I encountered. The triangulations of my researcher’s journal and the responses of multiple participants with different GSD identities adds reliability to this study. I made sure my findings

were consistent with the data through triangulation with my researcher's journal and interview transcripts, peer examination by my thesis committee, and a detailed audit trail.

Transferability

Transferability is “the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 253). I provided detailed descriptions of my data collection practices, methods of analysis, and an in-depth discussion of my findings. Since generalization cannot occur in qualitative research statistically (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), it will be left to my readers to apply the findings to their particular situations or gather their own connections to the findings. “The person who reads the study decides whether the findings can apply to his or her particular situation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 256). In order to ensure transferability, I provided a rich, thick description of the findings of my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Conclusion

For this qualitative study with a phenomenological approach, I interviewed three self-identified GSD university students and one recent college graduate who were active or recent volunteers and peer educators for an on-campus GSD advocacy and support center. The interviews were semi-structured which gave me the flexibility of asking follow-up questions and collecting the same type of information from each participant through required questions. Data was analyzed through a simplified version of phenomenological analysis. This chapter detailed the ways this study strove to be credible and trustworthy as well as maintain validity, reliability, confidentiality, and transferability. The next chapter will discuss the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

This qualitative study was driven by this research question and this subquestion: What factors help gender and sexually diverse (GSD) youth feel supported in high school? How can educators use these factors to support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies? The themes in this chapter essentially provide the answers to these questions based on responses from the interviews of four participants and the reflections and observations from my researcher's journal.

Data was collected throughout four and a half weeks through two interviews conducted for each of the four participants. A researcher's journal was kept with a detailed audit trail, interview observations, and my reflections during and after each interview. An analysis of this data provided themes and subthemes that answer the research questions. This chapter begins with brief profile and background information for each participant to provide a structural description of their experiences (Mustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptions of each theme will provide composite descriptions and detailed textural descriptions with direct quotes from each participant that represent the essence of their experiences (Mustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants' Profiles

All four participants attended the same public university in the southern portion of the United States and are or were active members of an LGBTQ+ student organization, advocacy, and support center on campus. Devin graduated a few months ago but the other three participants still attend the same public university. Table 3 shows how each participant described their identity and their age. I used the participants' own words to describe their gender, sexuality, and

any other aspect of their identity they wished to share. In consultation with the participants, I came up with their pseudonyms.

The participants attended different high schools within 25 miles of each other in the same state, in a large metropolitan area in the South. Their high schools represent two school districts in the same Southern state. Each of the participants' high schools had an estimate enrollment of 2,500 to 3,000 students (D. Black, personal communication, October 12, 2022; M. Miller, personal communication, October 12, 2022; N. Cupit, personal communication, October 12, 2022; N. Watson, personal communication, October 13, 2022). Max and Nicky described their high schools and the areas they grew up in as liberal. Nicky, Devin, and Nolan described their high schools as diverse. Nolan explained that he attended a “very racially, very ethnically diverse high school” (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022).

Table 3

Participants' Profile Information

	Max Miller	Nicky Watson	Devin Black	Nolan Cupit
Gender	Cisgender female	Nonbinary	Transgender man	Trans male
Sexuality	Asexual	Bisexual		Bisexual
Other	Panromantic			Neurodiverse
Age	19	19	22	20
Pronouns	She/Her	They/Them	He/Him	He/Him

Supportive Factors

What factors help GSD youth feel supported in high school? To answer this research question four themes arose when analyzing the data from each participant's two interviews, member check correspondence, and observations and reflections from my researcher's journal. The themes are protective friendships, self-expression and connections through the arts, accepting and thoughtful peers, and affirming and supportive adults. The titles for these themes were created by analyzing the data to words to describe the essence of their experiences, and in some cases, the participants' own words were used for theme names.

Protective Friendships

All four participants mentioned that their friends supported them the most in high school. Friends were mentioned over 40 times in the interviews and in the researcher's journal. During the first set of interviews, the words "peers" and "friends" were used interchangeably by some of the participants. During the second set of interviews, I conducted member checks to determine if the statements they made previously were about friends or classmates. To differentiate between friends and peers, I defined "peers" as classmates in their high school classes that they would not consider friends or did not spend time with outside of school. During the second set of interviews, I asked the participants to tell me more about what their friend groups meant to them, how they were formed, and what the friendships provided. After the interviews, it was clear that my participants found their friendships to be as Nicky stated "safe spaces" where they felt heard, respected, valued, and validated (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Max explained, "I did have my friends and we were all mostly queer, LGBTQ+ identified. So, we

kind of confided in each other and had each other” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022). This sentiment of trusting friends and feeling seen was echoed by Nicky and Nolan. Nicky explained that they felt safe to be themselves because “I had other people around that were also being themselves” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022). Nicky stated that “friends was the main support system” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022) including online friends because “a lot of LGBT people kind of flock online because they know that they can find that validation” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Nolan stated that he had “a lot of peer-to-peer support” and many of his friends were also gender and sexually diverse (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). When I asked Devin what type of support he had inside and outside of school during the years he was in high school, he stated, “I had more support from friends” and “probably just my friends” (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). These remarks indicate that their main support systems were their friends and friend groups, a community of like-minded, validating people they could trust.

The observations and reflections in my researcher’s journal confirmed that when the participants talked about their friendships, they were calmer and at ease. Nolan’s gestures were minimal and calmer when I asked about support systems in high school and his response was friends (N. Bender, researcher’s journal, August 23, 2022). My research journal also detailed how important friendships were for Max, Nicky, and Devin due to body language and how often their responses came back to friendships (N. Bender, researcher’s journal, August 3, 2022; August 23, 2022; August 30, 2022). The topic of friendships put participants at ease suggesting the deep significance of these relationships and comfort felt by them.

To fully understand the importance of friendships I asked each participant more about their friends in high school during the second round of interviews. These friendships were protective because as Max detailed, information was kept “confidential,” her friends were open about their feelings, “everybody was very accepting,” and “they wouldn’t judge you for it” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022). Nicky explained, “I felt supported just because I knew it was a group of people that were similar to me either just by identity or by personality” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Nicky described their friends as “a good venting space,” and “nonjudgmental,” and when communicating with their friends they knew they were going “to feel validated” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Nolan echoed the importance of validation and support from friends. He stated that his friends “tended to be more supportive of... LGBT and my identity” (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022). The participants’ friends identified as GSD themselves or were supportive of their GSD identities. Devin pointed out that the support from his friends was “straightforward” (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). This sentiment of appreciating explicit, straightforward support was shared by the other participants. Devin’s friends would ask “questions about how they could better support me,” “what pronouns to use,” and checking-in to see if he had changed his name (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). Nolan also commented that his friends supported him by using “the right pronouns” and calling him by the different names he was trying at the time (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022). He stated, “they would constantly check in, you know, is this still right? ...am I still using the right pronouns?” (N. Cupit, personal communication,

September 4, 2022). All of these remarks signify the protective nature of these friendships as a place where participants felt heard, supported, accepted, and not judged.

Summary Comments. The observations and reflections in my research journal and the interview transcripts provide detailed descriptions of how important and protective friends were to the participants during high school. These friends were vocal with their support, confidential, open to listening, thoughtful, and respectful of pronouns and names. Many of the participants' friends were also GSD. As Max stated, "the saying in the queer community [is] that people who are queer...gravitate towards each other" (M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022). She also explained that her friends who were aware of their GSD identities earlier than she was, were able to pave the way by being openly out about their identities with the group and others (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022). As suggested by the notes in my researcher's journal, friends were the dominant protective support of the participants' GSD identities when they were in high school (N. Bender, researcher's journal, August 18, 2022).

Self-Expression and Connections Through The Arts

During the first interview with Devin, he mentioned the marching band eight times in about 20 minutes (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). It was clear that Devin felt the most supported by his marching band family, which included friends, peers, and their parents (N. Bender, researcher's journal, August 23, 2022). After this interview, I began to see a theme around the arts among the data collected from all the participants. I reviewed earlier transcripts from other participants and found that Max, Nicky, and Nolan brought up a connection to art or art programs at school. The participants either found their friends through the

arts or participants were members of art programs where they felt safe as GSD people and able to express themselves.

Max was an art student in her high school and when she spoke about the art department, she smiled many times (N. Bender, researcher's journal, August 18, 2022). Max stated that everyone in the art department was "pretty open," "very accepting," and would be "very nice" about whatever you were making, regardless of "the subject matter" (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022). Max explained:

I have found that the arts is often populated with LGBTQ+ people, and my theory is because it lets us express ourselves in ways we may not be able to otherwise. I met many queer people in my art classes because many queer people took art classes. (M. Miller, personal correspondence, September 12, 2022)

This sentiment of being allowed to express oneself through art was echoed by Nicky in their first interview when they stated "it was a lot easier for people to express themselves in the high school I went to" when referring to the performing arts high school they attended (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022). Nicky also explained that at the performing arts high school they attended "a lot of people were LGBT" (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022). Nolan repeated the idea that "a lot of queer people" share "common interests" such as theater (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Through theater, Nolan found his friend group (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022) and a "really great," supportive theater teacher (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). The arts allowed the participants to express themselves and provided a safe space. This safe space

connected the participants to students who became friends and teachers who were supportive and accepting.

When reflecting on his high school experience, Devin mentioned the marching band family as the largest source of support for his GSD identity (N. Bender, researcher's journal, August 23, 2022). For Devin, it was not just his marching band friends but also any "acquaintances" within the marching band and the "band parents" whom he found "extremely supportive" when he came out as "being trans" (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). This group was "immediate to switch to using he/him pronouns and correcting anyone" and "making sure that I knew that if I ever needed anyone that they were there" (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). The group was protective and supportive.

Summary Comments. All of the participants were members of art programs in high school. Whether it was a creative writing program in a performing arts high school, a visual art program, theater, or a marching band, these spaces allowed the participants to find and connect with other GSD students and adults (teachers or band parents) who were welcoming. The data suggest that these art spaces where they were able to express themselves and their identities, participants felt accepted and supported. The findings indicate that the arts brought like-minded individuals together.

Accepting and Thoughtful Peers

As mentioned earlier, in the first set of interviews it became clear that peers and friends were powerful sources of support for the participants in high school. The participants used the words "peers" and "friends" interchangeably at first, so I provided clarity by defining peers as classmates with whom they did not spend time outside of school. When analyzing the data, it

became clear that the participants carefully selected the people they surrounded themselves with and those they did not go near. Those they avoided will be discussed further when answering my research subquestion. Max explained, “I surrounded myself with people who were accepting and so I’ve never experienced any pushback or negativity against us” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022). Although they encountered people in school who were not understanding, the majority of the participants’ comments surrounding classmates and peers were positive. Nicky explained that supportive peers meant “even if they weren’t in the [GSD] community...they were still...very accepting of that community” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Similarly, Nolan stated that his peers were “thoughtful” about his identity (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022). These two words “supportive” and “thoughtful” came from Nicky and Nolan’s comments and were corroborated by Devin’s and Max’s statements about peers.

Nicky explained the feeling they felt from most of their peers when they stated “as I was going through the journey of discovering myself, they were almost going along that journey with me” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Nicky recognized that, in a way, their classmates were along with them in their journey of discovering their GSD identity. Regardless of their classmates’ knowledge of GSD identities, “the support of both of us learning together about myself...was a good support” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Max indicated a similar type of support from her peers when she stated, “on the whole, I found that all the student body was pretty open about it as well” when referring to the LGBTQ+ community (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022). In both cases, Nicky and Max felt their peers were open and willing to understand their GSD identities.

Nolan and Devin encountered more people who as Devin put it “quietly supported” them (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). When discussing how peers supported him regarding his GSD identity, Devin stated, “there were a good number that just didn’t really ask any questions, that just kind of seemed to go with it” (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). Devin also stated that he received a “good amount of support” (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022) from his sister whom I consider a peer rather than a friend because friends are chosen. Nolan experienced some negativity from peers but disclosed that “most of the time, they just didn’t care” (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022). He went on to explain that some peers would use the right name or pronouns after hearing his friends talk to him (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022). Devin expressed that there were some students who “would kind of... look at me and be kind of confused but...I never really had that feeling that I had to be more concerned about...what they were thinking...or that...it would hinder my classroom experience” (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). These statements suggest that when support from peers was not direct, it was passive support by being flexible with changes such as pronouns and preferred names.

Summary Comments. The data reflect that the participants’ classmates were directly supportive by joining their journey as Nicky expressed (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022), or more passive with quiet support as Devin expressed (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). Either way, high school peers seemed to be a supportive factor with their quiet or passive support even though participants acknowledged there were

groups of students with whom they avoided contact. These experiences and comments will be further addressed in another theme.

Affirming and Supportive Adults

The participants shared that some adults were supportive, others were outright unsupportive, and some were supportive in words but their actions were harmful. Adults include teachers, parents, parents of others (band parents), administrators, and school faculty and staff. Most participants mentioned a negative encounter or experience with one or more unsupportive adults. To fully cover the essence of the participants' experiences with adults in high school, I outline negative experiences that led to the participants describing the support they wish they had had. In a later section, I give more details about what specifically the participants feel educators should do to support GSD students in high schools to answer the research subquestion. Most importantly in this section, I detail the positive qualities of affirming, supportive adults the participants remember the most to answer the question: What factors help gender and sexually diverse (GSD) youth feel supported in high school? Table 4 below summarizes the participants' shared experiences. As you can tell from Table 4 the participants' experiences were complicated, similar to one another, but also varied over the four years in high school and different because the participants' GSD identities varied in how visible they were to others.

Table 4*Participants' Experiences with Adults*

	Max	Nicky	Devin	Nolan
GSD identities (self-described)	Asexual Panromantic	Nonbinary Bisexual	Lesbian then Transgender man	Trans male Bisexual
Pronouns	she/her	they/them	he/him	he/him
Shared identity with parents	X		X	X
Had one or more unsupportive parents			X	X
Had parental support in word but actions were harmful	X		X	X
Believed most teachers were supportive or at minimum neutral towards GSD students	X			
Shared about one or more adults whose support made a huge impact		X	X	X
Had negative experiences with teachers, administrators, or other adults in high school		X	X	X

Negative Experiences. The participant's negative experiences with adults varied but were memorable because years later they were able to describe these situations in detail. For Max and Devin, the verbal support of one or more of their parents was overshadowed by their parents' lack of understanding and knowledge of what their GSD identities truly meant. Max

stated “my parents were trying to be supportive, but not the most understanding” and explained that one of her parents’ actions “didn’t seem to be supportive” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022). This led Max to understand that her parent “would never really understand fully what my identities were and what they meant to me and I’ve had to accept that” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022). Devin shared that aspects of his identity were easier for his family to accept than other parts (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). He had one supportive parent and one unsupportive parent. He explained that the supportive parent said that they “would support me but it was very loose” (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). My researcher’s journal described how serious Max was when discussing parental support and how nervous and sensitive the topic was for Devin (N. Bender, researcher’s journal, August 3, 2022; August 23, 2022). Support from parents was complicated and the topic was difficult for participants to discuss. The data seem to suggest participants’ parents did not fully understand their children’s GSD identities.

Nicky and Nolan both spoke of how they wished teachers had had more training. Nicky stated that “institutionally certainly there wasn’t anything” when referring to support of their GSD identity in high school (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022). Nicky explained that many teachers “didn’t have the training” and “really didn’t understand what it meant” to be a member of the GSD community, “much less than knew how to support,” or “their own biases got in the way” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022). Devin stated “I wish there... was more support from faculty and administration. Just knowing if not specifically towards me, just knowing that there was support there” (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Nolan shared this sentiment when he stated there was a need

for “better training, better awareness of...queer students” (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). My researcher’s journal confirms that some adults were supportive but did not fully understand (N. Bender, researcher’s journal, August 3, 2022). Overall, the data suggest that adults lacked the knowledge and understanding of GSD identities needed to support these students in high school.

Positive Experiences. The adults who made a considerable impact and supported the participants the most with their GSD identities in high school, were informed, intentional, and straightforward with their support. Nicky described a creative writing teacher who respected pronouns, made sure others used the correct pronouns, and introduced himself with pronouns (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022; August 30, 2022). Nicky detailed that this teacher provided “multiple lessons about diversity” that was “proof that it’s not just me, there is a world out there that is like me and wants to have the same representation” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Nolan talked about an English teacher who he believes “were LGBT themselves” and had resources and an “open door policy” (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022). He explained that the English teacher “made it very clear that they had an open door policy...at any time, if you needed to come in, have a conversation, or if you just needed somewhere to just kind of chill out, you...[had] a space [that was] available even during...planning periods or ...after school” (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022). Nolan described another English teacher and a career specialist who were direct with their support by stating they were a safe space and were available to have “difficult conversations” about their future and environments that were not safe (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Nolan said “some of our teachers made [their

support] really explicit” by asking students for their preferred pronouns and names and even going as far as to ask “can I call you this around your parents?” (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Devin’s experiences with faculty and administration were often negative or neutral but he was able to find support from the band parents (N. Bender, researcher’s journal, September 1, 2022). He stated the parents “that were supportive of me were very... straightforward with making sure I knew that they were” and that “these adults made it clear that you could talk to them, that it was safe to share things with them and that they’d be on your side” (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). Respecting pronouns and preferred names and adults explicitly saying they will provide a safe space were the top important ways participants felt supported by adults.

Summary Comments. The experiences of the participants varied just as their GSD identities and the visibility of their identities varied. However, they did have both positive and negative shared experiences and sentiments. For these reasons, I focused on the positive stories and characteristics of adults the participants’ described in order to answer the research question. The participants felt the most support from adults when the adults were straightforward with their support, provided time and space to listen to the students’ stories, and respected preferred pronouns and names.

Conservative Policies and Advice for Educators

Three out of four participants identify as transgender or nonbinary (refer to Table 3 or Table 4). These three participants, Nicky, Nolan, and Devin were aware of national politics when they were in high school. The fourth participant, Max, was not informed and still understanding/discovering her own identity. Social policies were harder for all participants to

identify. This is likely due to the fact that social policies are cultural norms that are accepted by a group of people and not written, so this makes them harder to name and identify. Shelton (2019) discussed the nuances of cultural norms and how in combination with school power structures they “shape teacher’s decisions, including ally activism” (p. 600). The participants were aware of these power structures and cultural norms within their high school as evident by their decisions to avoid certain groups and stick close to others. Several themes arose to answer the research subquestion: How can educators use these factors to support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies? The themes were awareness of national politics, avoidance of the other group, and advice for educators of ways they can be supportive. Table 5 details the shared experiences of the participants in relation to this topic.

The participants started high school in 2014-2017. During the time of the interviews, they were between the ages of 19 and 22 and were a sophomore, two juniors, and a recent college graduate. In 2016, Donald Trump was elected president and during his term, he put into place policies that reversed the previous administration’s efforts to protect the rights of LGBTQ people (Simmons- Duffin, 2020). As stated in my interview questions for the first round of interviews, President Trump banned transgender people from serving in the military, reversed transgender student guidance, and worked to remove LGBTQ rights from protections under sex discrimination laws (Simmons-Duffin, 2020). It is important to understand the national political context of these participants’ high school experiences.

Table 5*Participants' Experiences with Conservative Policies*

	Max	Nicky	Devin	Nolan
Aware of national policies		X	X	X
Avoided specific groups	X		X	X
Felt there were social policies or cultural norms in place where they would not be accepted by certain groups or teachers	X	X	X	X
Identified and were aware of adults and students with conservative values or beliefs			X	X

Awareness of National Politics

Devin, a transgender man, explained that national political policies impacted him mentally because he knew “government and systems” would not support his identity (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Nolan also stated that he was “very aware of what was going on” and that he “followed the news really closely during the time” (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). As a member of a military family, he was greatly impacted by the president’s decision to ban transgender people from serving in the military because being a doctor in the military was his goal and “dream job” (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). For Nicky, it was their creative writing teacher who took class time to have an open dialogue about the election of President Trump and shared with the class how they could be the

“ones that will be able to make the change if things do start to turn bad” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022). This was the start of Nicky’s awareness of political policies. They stated, “just being queer, you’re going to be a little bit more aware of policy changes like that because it directly affects you” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022).

Summary Comments. The data from the interviews and the researcher’s journal suggest that the participants who were more aware of their GSD identities in high school and whose identities were directly challenged by the presidents’ policies, were more aware of national politics. National politics did directly impact their futures and the lack of support they felt from governmental systems.

Avoidance of the Other Group

Max, Devin, and Nolan stayed away from others who they felt may be intolerant of their GSD identities. Each participant defined this “other” group differently. Devin and Nolan mentioned being able to tell which teachers or students were more conservative. Devin explained that in his school there were “conservative students” who he knew he “should definitely stay away from so that” he didn’t receive any “bullying or anything like that” and that even though this did not “jeopardize [his] safety...it definitely impacted it” (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Nolan detailed that the political divide was evident in his school. He stated, “we had a very large divide in the school between... left-wing [and] right-wing politics” (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). He explained that he was not aware of “unwritten social norms that were implemented” at his high school but he was aware that “left-wing” and “right-wing” students stayed within their groups and talked about their ideas amongst themselves (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Devin

explained that “presidential merch” was a red flag to him, and he knew to stay away (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). He stated that President Trump “seemed to...open the door for other government officials to really just start doing what they wanted” in terms of discrimination toward GSD people (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022).

Devin avoided teachers and students whom he believed may be conservative. This sentiment: “If I didn’t have to be around them, I was not going to be” was echoed by Max and Nolan (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022).

Although Max did not feel teachers or students were necessarily conservative, she stated she had some teachers who were “more...close-minded in general” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022). Nicky was also aware of another group; she said, “I very much felt judged as well from a certain sector of that high school. I never felt like I couldn’t be myself, but I did feel like I was judged for being myself” (N. Watson, August 4, 2022). Every participant identified the other group differently. Groups to avoid were identified as football players and coaches (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022; D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022), students with American flags on their pick-up trucks (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022), clothing with political statements or supporting specific politicians (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022; N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022), teachers who avoided or shut down conversations of “topics of diversity” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022), teachers who appeared to be conservative (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022), and people who were “stereotypically straight” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022).

Summary Comments. Mustakas (1994) called for composite descriptions of a phenomenon that describe the essence of a shared lived experience (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data suggest that these participants avoided interactions with adults and students who appeared to be conservative, close-minded, or unaccepting of their GSD identities. By doing so they were able to report not having many negative interactions with others.

Advice for Educators

As members of a university-affiliated group that advocates for GSD people and participates in peer and faculty education, these participants had a lot of advice for educators. First and foremost, in accordance with Nolan's remarks, although the South is considered to have many conservative policies, it is important for educators to remember "that even if you do live in the most right-wing, most conservative area...you're still going to have those students that do not [share those conservative views]" (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). He continued "they don't have the choice to leave...one of my biggest pet peeves... is people...completely categorizing the South as one big lump sum of intolerant conservatives" (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). These statements bring to attention the complexities of our society, the importance of remembering not everyone in a community shares the same beliefs, and the awareness that GSD students exist in every school and every community.

The participants believe that educators should be knowledgeable about GSD identities and school and community resources, use correct pronouns and preferred names, and create a safe space by building relationships and being direct with support. These topics were mentioned a total of 53 times in the interviews. In my researcher's journal I described how passionate,

comfortable, and confident the participants were when providing advice on how educators can support GSD students in conservative areas (N. Bender, researcher's journal, August 3, 2022; August 23, 2022; September 1, 2022).

Be Knowledgeable. Devin detailed that educators should “educate themselves... [and] really research and look into even...get involved or ask questions to people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community or communities of various...diverse and minority communities to... expand their knowledge” and to read and listen to the “personal experiences and personal stories” of others (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Nolan also mentioned the importance of research and learning about the identities of others, but he went a step further and explained that it is important for educators to “help” and have “resources on hand” so that “you can be that person for that one student” (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Max, Devin, and Nolan made it clear that to be truly supportive, educators must become more knowledgeable about GSD topics and lived experiences.

Use Preferred Names and Pronouns. The data suggest that the number one way educators can be more supportive of GSD students is by using their correct pronouns and preferred names. This topic was mentioned by every participant. Max stated, “if you're with more conservative people... or in a more conservative community, explaining [that] pronouns are used in day-to-day grammar” and “everybody uses them whether you identify as LGBTQ+ or not” may help some understand that “pronouns are a common thing” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022). Devin explained that by introducing themselves with their pronouns it shows students that “they have respect” for other people's preferred pronouns (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022). Nolan made it clear that asking students for

their preferred names and pronouns as well as respecting their privacy by making sure to note if these names and pronouns can be used in front of their parents is a fundamental way to support GSD students (N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022).

Create a Safe Space. Other ways the participants believe educators can support GSD students are by creating a safe space, building relationships, and being inclusive in their materials, curriculum, and language. Max believes educators should “be open-minded,” “show that you’re a safe space... with actions as well as words,” “introduce yourself with pronouns,” stop “any kind of...teasing or bullying or hate speech,” and “sticking up for the kids” (M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022). Creating relationships with students and providing a safe space means “letting them know that you’re kind of a listening ear or a person kind of in their corner” according to Max (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022). Nicky stated that safe spaces are “nonjudgmental, overall supportive” where students can “feel accepted” (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). Devin explained that educators could provide representation in their classroom with “subtle support like having... a poster” (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022). Max pointed out that “representation is vitally important, not just for the queer community, but for any minority group...because...having people whether they’re fictional or not, to be able to look up to and see yourself in, is really important for normalizing... and also affirming” people’s identities (M. Miller, personal communication, August 18, 2022).

Summary Comments. Primarily the data suggest that asking students for and actively using their preferred pronouns and names and introducing yourself with your pronouns is an important way to show support for GSD students. The participants also urged educators to

provide office hours, planning periods, or times after school for students to openly share with them in order to build better relationships. The participants want educators to be knowledgeable, provide refuge and respect, and create safe spaces where students can connect and be themselves.

Findings Conclusion

By analyzing the data from interviews, the researcher's journal, and personal communications with participants, I uncovered answers to the main research question and subquestion: What factors help gender and sexually diverse (GSD) youth feel supported in high school? How can educators use these factors to support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies? The participants made numerous comments that were similar and discussed many of the same topics suggesting that the data provided the best answers pulled from the essences of their shared lived experiences. The participants' friends were respectful with names and pronouns, vocal with support, confidential, and many were also GSD. The participants found the most support with their friends and in these friend communities. The participants explained that their peers were direct with support or passively accepting of their GSD identities, which provided another layer of support. In addition to being a space that allows for self-expression, art classes and programs as well as the marching band were safe spaces where the participants found other GSD students or welcoming adults. Although some adults were not supportive or did not truly understand their identities, the adults who were straightforward with their support provided knowledge, helped guide them, and made them feel respected.

To answer the subquestion, the data revealed that the three participants who identified as transgender or nonbinary were aware of national politics because the policies that were being

overturned at the time directly impacted their lives and futures. The participants were aware of teachers and students who had conservative beliefs and avoided groups who they believed may not accept their GSD identities. As university GSD peer educators, the participants had a lot of advice to give educators. They believe educators should be knowledgeable, use students' preferred pronouns and names, and create safe spaces by being intentional with support, stopping bullying and slurs immediately, and using inclusive material. The participants also emphasized the importance of building relationships with students, which starts by respecting their pronouns and names and listening to their stories and concerns.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to uncover the ways GSD students felt the most supported in high school in order to gather ideas of how educators can support these students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies. The research question and subquestion that guided this research are: What factors help GSD youth feel supported in high school? How can educators use these factors to support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies?

This chapter begins with a discussion of major findings in connection to support systems the literature suggested were effective and barriers that exist because of controversial policies or conservative social and political ideals. This discussion is followed by the significance of this study based on the focus and findings and implications for educators. This chapter concludes with consideration of the limitations of this project, implications for future research, and a brief summary of this study.

Discussion

The literature review discussed the issues surrounding school climate and the effects they have on GSD students as well as the barriers that exist because of conservative social and political policies and ideals. By following the guiding research questions, this study focused on how GSD students felt supported rather than the negative experiences they may have had in high school. The interview questions were also guided by the subquestion of how factors of support can be used by educators regardless of their own or overarching conservative social and political policies.

Effective Supports in High Schools for GSD Students

Community & Belonging. McCormick et al. (2014), Pennell (2017), Porta et al. (2017), and Whidden et al. (2020) advocated for and explored the benefits of GSAs in high schools. These researchers found that GSAs provide youth with community, social support, emotional connection, and a sense of belonging. The participants in this study found this level of support with their friends, peers, and through their connections to the arts. These youth had poorly organized, “loosely founded” GSAs (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022), chose not to participate in them (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022; M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022), or only had one their last year of high school (N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). In this study the participants found emotional connection and social support through protective nonjudgmental friendships, accepting peers, and art programs that provided a sense of belonging.

Adult Training. Studies found that staff development and training on how to handle and react to situations with anti-LGBTQ language, slurs, and bullying, positively improved school climate for GSD students (Bradley et al., 2019; Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Pampati, 2018; Pennell, 2017; Whidden et al., 2020). Similarly, Cooper et al. (2014) urged educators to take this support a step further into allyhood, which involves social justice action, reflection, and being more intentional with support, interactions, and conversations with others. Three of the participants explained that they felt most of their teachers lacked understanding, awareness, and training. My study and these studies are similar because the participants in this study described those adults who were supportive in their high schools as informed, intentional, and

straightforward. Those adults respected their pronouns and preferred names, built relationships with these students, and provided safe spaces for open conversations.

Barriers to Creating and Sustaining Effective Supports

Unwelcoming Schools. Shelton's (2019) longitudinal study following a teacher during her pre-service year and first three years of teaching brought to light the barriers educators face in conservative areas when trying to be effective LGBTQIA+ allies. The educator from the study encountered parents, colleagues, administration, and a community culture that was unwelcoming and unsupportive towards GSD students. The data from my study contrasts from this study because my participants did not describe their school environments as unwelcoming and unsupportive as a whole. Their peers, their friends, and some adults were protective and direct with their support (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022; N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022; N. Watson, personal communication, August 30, 2022). However, the data from my study suggests that participants were aware of cultural differences and power structures within their schools as was evident by their avoidance of particular groups. As Cooper et al. (2014) explained one barrier to effective support can be within an individual's self and world view. Although the participants' schools were not unwelcoming in general, there were individuals with conflicting views.

Larger Policies. Ullman (2018) and Konnoth (2019) both pointed out how far society has come with advancing the rights of GSD people while simultaneously providing space for a strong unsupportive backlash that targets this group. During the time the participants in my study were in high school, the president, Donald Trump, reversed policies that protected the rights of LGBTQ people (Simmons- Duffin, 2020). Three out of four of the participants in my study were

aware of the national politics and these policies did affect them. For Devin the policies affected him mentally (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022) and for Nolan the policies meant that as a transgender man he had to give up his dream of being a doctor in the military (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). This study suggests that anti-LGBTQ national conservative policies made the participants feel unsupported by their national government and systems within the United States.

Ullman (2018) stated that we live in a “paradoxical” time with progress being made towards the rights of GSD people while new laws are attacking their rights (Human Rights Campaign, 2022) at the same time. This concept is reflected by the data from my study as well because the students received support from not only their friends but their peers and some adults in their schools. However, the participants also reported negative interactions with unsupportive adults (N. Bender, researcher’s journal, August 23, 2022), awareness of groups they felt they should avoid (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022), and desires to have more trained, aware, and directly supportive educators. Their experiences were both negative and positive, which can be perceived as paradoxical and complex.

Discussion Summary. Overall, the findings of this study aligned with previous research. The participants in this study were able to identify significant groups of people (peers, friends, and some adults) who were supportive of their GSD identities in high school. They found community, belonging, and protection from their friends and peers rather than GSAs as the literature suggested. The participants in this study were supported by informed adults who were intentional with their support which aligns with the studies that suggested faculty and staff training and professional development on GSD topics improve school climate for this group of

students (Bradley et al., 2019; Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Pampati, 2018; Pennell, 2017; Whidden et al., 2020). The participants in this study attended large schools where they were able to avoid groups with whom they felt were unsupportive. Although they were aware of those whose social policies and political views were not accepting of their GSD identities, the participants in my study did not attend unwelcoming schools with overall negative school climates as many studies suggested (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2020; Pampati et al., 2018). Lastly, the participants in this study were aware of national politics and three out of four of them were impacted by these policies. Overall, their experiences reflected positive reactions and support from friends and some adults as well as negative interactions in their school environments as Ullman (2018) and Konnoth (2019) described.

Significance

The overarching results of this study show that protective friendships, accepting peers, and direct support from adults help GSD students feel supported in high schools. The participants had supportive teachers and found their friends in art programs, which seems to suggest that the arts provide a safe space for some GSD students. Additionally, the data seem to support the need for training teachers and school staff about LGBTQ+ topics, issues, and experiences of individuals. Given the data, this study suggests that teachers can start to show their support by introducing themselves with their pronouns and asking students their preferred pronouns and names. A next level of support would be building relationships and creating a safe space where students can be themselves and discuss topics that are important to them. Although previous research has shown the importance of GSAs, the results of this study show that GSD

students can find the same emotional connection, community, belonging, and social support with their peers and friend groups that GSAs provide in some schools.

This study was unique in showing that the arts had a role to play in providing safe places for the GSD students to be themselves and by showing the negative impact national politics had on the experiences of GSD participants when they were in high school. Interviewing active and former volunteer and peer educators of a university GSD advocacy group is another benefit of this study. These participants have had time to reflect on their high school experiences and are comfortable speaking about these topics as members of an advocacy group that helps professors, students, and university groups support GSD students. Their advice for educators does not only reflect lessons learned from their own experiences but also knowledge they have gathered in their roles as volunteers and peer educators working to support faculty and students.

Implications for Educators

In light of the current political policies being pushed in many states across the country that directly relate to school curriculum and access to activities in school (Human Rights Campaign, 2022), it is timely to consider ways educators can support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative policies. At bare minimum, all educators can use inclusive language (Meadows & Shain, 2021) by introducing themselves with their own pronouns, ask students for their preferred names and pronouns, and actively use these pronouns with their students (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022; M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022; N. Cupit, personal communication, September 4, 2022; N. Watson, personal communication, August 4, 2022). As Meadows & Shain (2021) suggested, safe zone stickers and other LGBTQ+ symbols can help GSD students identify supportive adults.

However, this study indicates that direct, intentional support from teachers is most effective and most desired by students. In conservative areas where culture aligns with anti-LGBTQ policies, teachers can build relationships with students and provide safe spaces for students to share their feelings and thoughts (D. Black, personal communication, September 1, 2022; M. Miller, personal communication, August 3, 2022). Pennell (2017) suggested teachers reach out to local LGBTQ+ advocacy groups or centers for support. The data from this study suggest that educators should be aware of GSD resources in order to connect students to local resources and groups (N. Cupit, personal communication, August 23, 2022). In conservative areas where local organized groups may not exist, resources can be websites or online groups. Ultimately, if the conservative policies an educator is struggling with are personal, the best place to start is self-awareness and seeking out stories and experiences of GSD people (Cooper et al., 2014) to make the unfamiliar more familiar. This study proposes that educators seek out information about GSD people through interactions with others or personal narratives (D. Black, personal communication, August 23, 2022) in order to develop an understanding of what Pennell (2017) described as queer cultural capital. These actionable items can be used by any educator seeking to support GSD students regardless of their own or overarching conservative policies.

Limitations

The sample used for this study provided several limitations that are important to consider. First, the participants are from the same metropolitan area in the South and represented two school districts. Though their GSD identities and personal experiences were different, one cannot rule out the general area and school divisions contributing to the similarities of their experiences.

Second, the participants attended schools with similar population sizes (2,500 to 3,000 students), which could have contributed to why they were able to avoid interacting with some students and teachers. Potentially, their experiences could have been drastically different had they attended schools with enrollments of less than 1,000 students. Third, although time has allowed the participants space to reflect on their experiences, interviewing college students and recent college graduates about their high school experiences rather than interviewing current high school presents a participant limitation. Being separated by a few years from their high school experiences is a limitation because they may be viewing the experiences differently now. However, these participants each participated in two interviews and multiple personal communication via email for member checks. There were numerous similarities in their stories and feelings; I believe this study captures the essences of their shared experiences (Mustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). These are factors to consider as limitations of this study.

Implications for Future Research

Given that the participants were from the same large, metropolitan area in the South, future studies with more funding could focus on small or rural Southern areas. Anti-LGBTQ+ state bills are currently being passed and introduced all over the United States (Human Rights Campaign, 2022). Many of these bills and laws restrict school curriculum related to LGBTQ+ topics and ban transgender students from using the bathrooms or playing the sports that align with their gender. These laws directly impact schools and GSD students. Research like this study, can provide schools with data to support decisions that will directly benefit GSD students.

This study on a larger scale could provide more evidence of factors of support and advice for educators in areas with conservative political policies.

The arts provided safe spaces for individuals in this study to be themselves and find some of their friends. Future studies could explore this theme further. Some topics that could be studied in more detail include: how various art programs such as music, band, creative writing, and visual arts, support this group, what this could mean for art programs, and how educators can use this information to support students in general education classrooms.

Personal Reflection

Conducting this study allowed me to learn research methodology and gain a deeper understanding of the role of educators as advocates. Analyzing the data from this study was similar to putting together a puzzle that I was very invested in. The process of uncovering the essence of the shared experiences of my participants felt both empowering and humbling. I learned that I enjoy research and may want to continue to do this in the future. Additionally, as an educator I have always advocated for students. After completing this study, I will take more time to be aware of local, state, and national policies and how they directly impact the lives of my students. This study and other studies show how intentionally and directly supporting students in the classroom and outside of the classroom with your personal time can have a direct impact on their lives. However, advocating for students beyond the classroom by being aware of policies that affect them and speaking up when I can, are my goals now and my biggest takeaways from this project.

Summary

Using a phenomenological approach, this qualitative study examined the factors that helped four GSD students feel the most supported in their high schools in a metropolitan area in the South in order to provide educators and schools with actionable ways to support students regardless of their own or overarching social and political policies. Three current and one former peer educators and volunteers from a university GSD advocacy group were each interviewed two times. Three of these participants were college students and one was a recent college graduate, which meant they had time to reflect on their high school experiences. These students felt most supported by their protective friendships, connections to the arts, accepting peers, and affirming adults who were direct and intentional with their support. The participants believe that regardless of their own or overarching conservative policies, educators should use inclusive language by asking for and using students' preferred names and pronouns. The data suggest that to be supportive of GSD students, educators should be knowledgeable of GSD identities and school and community resources, create safe spaces by building relationships, and be direct with their support. Ultimately this study contributes to insight on how to support GSD students, regardless of conservative social and political policies.

Appendix A Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Nuriyah Bender from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the high school experiences of gender and sexually diverse (GSD) college students, what systems of support were most helpful to them, and what impact, if any, conservative social and political policies had on their experiences. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her master'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 two interviews that will be administered to individual participants. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your experiences as a GSD high school student, what support systems you found most hopefully, and what impact, if any, conservative social and political policies had on your experiences. If you choose to consent, you will be observed via typed field notes and your interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. If you decline to be audio recorded, interviews will be recorded via handwritten notes.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require one and a half to two hours of your time. You will be interviewed two times and each interview will be approximately forty-five minutes to one hour in length. If necessary, the researcher will also email or ask follow-up questions in interviews for clarification purposes with responses.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life). The interview questions ask about your lived experiences and LGBTQ identity and may be distressing to you as you think about your past. As the participant, you can end the interview at any time and will be allowed to continue at your discretion.

Benefits

A potential indirect benefit from participation in this study includes a chance to reflect on one's experiences and identity. Information from this study could potentially help teachers improve their practice and support of other students.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented to the researcher's thesis committee and may be published in academic journals. The research might also be presented at conferences to help other educators become better teachers. 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 successful defense of the study, only de-identified data will be kept.

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:

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Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

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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 interviewed. _____ (initials)
- I give consent to be audio recorded during the interviews. _____ (initials)
- I give consent to be observed during the interviews. _____ (initials)

Name of Participant (Printed)

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