SCHOOL CLIMATE FOR SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH: REFLECTIONS BY
COLLEGE-AGE ADULTS ON K-12 EXPERIENCES

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SCHOOL CLIMATE FOR SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH: REFLECTIONS BY COLLEGE-AGE ADULTS ON K-12 EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

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The K-12 school environment is often a challenging and sometimes anxiety provoking environment for adolescents who identify as sexual minorities. Sexual orientation is a controversial topic; thus it is often difficult for schools to establish and implement policies for this population. Issues faced by sexual minority adolescents in school, include bullying, physical and emotional abuse, issues with acceptance, and dealing with the stress of coming to terms with their own sexual identity. Eight college students identifying as sexual minorities were interviewed in a focus group format to reflect on their K-12 school experience. The information provided in the current study illuminates difficulties, dangers and mistreatment of sexual minority youth in the K-12 school setting. The participants discussed experiences such as bullying and negative school climate. The pervasive heteronormative view present in many school settings often promotes anxiety and adversity for adolescents identifying as sexual minorities.
Suggestions for improving school climate, including educating staff and students on issues related to sexual and gender identity, promoting a positive school climate for all students and providing interventions for students who are impacted by negativity within the school setting, are discussed.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Perspective</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important Terminology</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Minority Youth in Schools</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Experiences</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Factors</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Difficulties</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate and Sexual Minority Youth</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay-Straight Alliances</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of School Climate</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Discrimination Policies</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sexual Minority College Students’ Perceptions of High School ........................................... 21
Emerging Adults’ Perspectives on Adolescent Experience .............................................. 23
The Present Study ............................................................................................................. 24

CHAPTER III: METHOD ........................................................................................................ 26
Research Question ........................................................................................................ 26
Research Design ........................................................................................................... 26
Participants and Setting ................................................................................................. 27
Materials ......................................................................................................................... 28
  Measures ..................................................................................................................... 28
Procedures ..................................................................................................................... 29
  Recruitment ................................................................................................................ 29
  Focus Group Sessions ................................................................................................ 29
  Confidentiality ............................................................................................................ 30
Data Collection .............................................................................................................. 30

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS ...................................................................................................... 31
Data Analyses ................................................................................................................. 31
  Perceptions of the K-12 School Climate for Sexual Minorities .................................. 31
  Heteronormative Experiences ...................................................................................... 32
  Bullying and Victimization ......................................................................................... 32
  Rejection Experiences ................................................................................................. 34
  School Support Needed .............................................................................................. 35
  Mental Health Disparities ......................................................................................... 36
School Climate Improvement .................................................................................. 37

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION ...................................................................................... 39

Review of Purpose and Major Findings ................................................................. 39

Limitations ............................................................................................................ 44

Implications for Future Research ......................................................................... 45

Implications for Practice ....................................................................................... 46

Intervention .......................................................................................................... 47

Advocacy .............................................................................................................. 48

Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 48

REFERENCES ....................................................................................................... 50

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Participant Consent Form .............................................................. 58

APPENDIX B: Questioning Route .......................................................................... 61

APPENDIX C: Demographic Questionnaire ......................................................... 63
The K-12 school environment is often a difficult and anxiety-provoking environment for adolescents who identify as sexual minorities or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Questioning (LGBTIQ). While not all sexual minorities experience difficulties, many schools lack adequate interventions and services for this population (Weiler, 2003). Sexual orientation is a controversial topic, thus it is often difficult for many schools to incorporate policies specifically protecting this population’s interests. The interaction a student encounters at school and at home can greatly impact his or her educational experience (Heck, Flentje, Cochran, 2011). Some issues are particularly concerning for sexual minority adolescents. These include bullying, physical and emotional abuse, issues with acceptance, and dealing with the stress of coming to terms with their own sexual identity.

Schools often maintain a heteronormative view of the student population and, as a result, sexual minorities are viewed as deviations from the norm, resulting in a difficult educational and social experience (Heck et al., 2011). According to Weiler (2003), an estimated 10% of students are exclusively homosexual and even more identify as non-heterosexual. Sexual minority youth are at an increased risk of mental and physical health
issues, not as commonly experienced by their heterosexual peers (Weiler, 2003). Such issues include: anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and attempts, drug abuse, low self-esteem, life dissatisfaction and sexually transmitted diseases. One study anonymously surveying sexual minority youth reported higher rates of illicit drug use, including cocaine, marijuana, inhalants, heroin, methamphetamines, ecstasy, and painkillers with no prescription. These risky behaviors could increase the likelihood for health problems and even incarceration, perpetuating further life difficulties and consequences as a result (Bowers et al., 2015). Research also suggests that sexual minority youth develop mental health problems due to experiences with prejudice, discrimination, victimization, and violence, which are commonly perpetrated by the victims’ peers (Jacob, Drevon, Abbuhl, & Taton, 2009).

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2011), schools must provide an environment that is safe and supportive of academic or social achievement for all students. It is critical for schools to provide sexual minority students with equal access to education and mental health services (Murphy, 2012). Schools are legally obligated to assume an active role in improving the learning environment for sexual minority students. Guidelines from the Office of Civil Rights of the United States Department of Education forbid sexual harassment and the creation of a sexually hostile environment, including for students who identify as sexual minority (McFarland & Dupuis, 2003). According to Weiler (2003) schools have a legal, ethical, and moral obligation to provide equal access to education and protection for all students, especially those facing serious issues within the school setting. Under the 14th Amendment of the
United States Constitution, all students are entitled to equal protection (U.S. Const. amend. XIX). Research indicates that most children are aware of their gender identity and sexual orientation by elementary school. As a result, students experience anxiety due to internal and external factors related to their sexuality (Jacob et al., 2009). Sexual minority students perceive the school setting as unsafe, creating anxiety, and ultimately inhibiting their potential for success in school and decreasing their pursuit of postsecondary goals (GLSEN, 2008). The present research study examined the perceptions of school climate experienced by sexual minority individuals through college-age youth’s recollection of their K-12 schooling experience.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will provide an overview of perceptions of school climate experienced by sexual minority individuals. The review includes a description of sexual orientation terminology used in the study. It also provides research on sexual minority youth in schools, including statistics and experiences. To delve further into perceptions of school climate, the literature review also examines risk factors, treatment of sexual minority youth in schools, bullying and resilience. Finally, an examination of research provides suggested changes to improve the school environment for sexual minority adolescents. The changes include student support groups, changing attitudes and negativity, non-discrimination policies and curriculum. This section will provide insight into the potential stressors and anxiety for sexual minority adolescents and factors that may improve the school environment for this population.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation typically describes a person’s predominate, innate disposition for the gender of his/her romantic and/or sexual partner(s) (Hollander, 2000). Sexual orientation is often used synonymously with sexual preference, but there are differences between the two terms. Sexual preference is a political and moral term insinuating the
exertion of voluntary and conscious choice regarding sexuality (Harley, Hall, & Savage, 2000). Sexual orientation is the preferred reference term for lesbians and gay males because of its emphasis on sexuality being an innate aspect of an individual’s identity, deriving from a natural sense of being (Savage & Harley, 2009). Homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality are categories of sexual orientation, which describe an individual’s psychosocial, emotional, spiritual, erotic, and sexual attraction. Further, sexual orientation describes behaviors that orient individuals to a person of the same, opposite, or both sexes (Savage & Harley, 2009).

**Historical Perspective**

While sexual minorities have increased visibility within society, there is still a need for support for sexual minority youth in the school setting. Earlier research focused on students’ fear of coming out and dealing with issues related to non-disclosure (Weiler 2003). More recently, sexual minority youth are more likely to come out while in high school and even middle school. Changes in research reflect a shift over several years. Initially the focus involved serving the needs of sexual minority youth afraid of coming out. More recently the focus is geared toward sexual minority youth who are out and experiencing rejection. This is a result of sexual minorities coming out at an earlier age and openly expressing their sexual identity within the school setting (Savage & Harley, 2009). Being out in school is more prominent and indicates a need for support for students who are coming out in high school and earlier during the K-12 school experience. Sexual minority youth experience high levels of harassment and bullying as a result of being out in the school setting (Mitchell et al., 2015).
Important Terminology

Sexual minority refers to identities that include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning. For the purpose of the present study, each term is operationally defined for ease of understanding and to focus on meeting the needs, challenges, and concerns of this population in the school setting. *Lesbian* refers to women who are attracted to other women. *Gay* refers to men who are attracted to other men. *Bisexual* individuals are attracted to individuals of the same sex simultaneously or sequentially. The term *transgender* involves gender identity (e.g., man, woman, or somewhere in between) rather than sexual orientation. It describes an individual whose biological sex (male or female) does not match their gender identity as a man, woman, or somewhere in between. Transgender is included with L, G, B, and Q because these individuals experience many of the issues facing the LGB population. *Intersex* refers to variant sexual anatomy. Intersex individuals were born with an anatomy not traditionally regarded as standard male or female. *Questioning* permits an individual anonymity not to claim a sexual orientation identity, allowing them to develop and understand their own sexuality (Macgillivray, 2004).

Sexual Minority Youth in Schools

Research on sexual minority students in the school setting shows that this population is growing; students are expressing their sexual or gender identity from an earlier age (Savage & Harley, 2009). One study indicated that students in Grades 7 through 12 who report some form of same-sex or both-sex romantic attraction increased to about 12% of the total population (Russell, 2006). As many as nine students in every
classroom of 30 are in some way affected by sexual minority issues, such as having a gay
or lesbian relative or identifying as sexual minority his/herself (Savage & Harley, 2009).
According to the 2012 National Coming Out Day Youth Report, approximately two–
thirds (64%) of sexual minority youth surveyed are out to their classmates and 61% are
out at school in general (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). This report also found that 9 in
10 sexual minority youth are out to their close friends, which is generally the case
regardless of region, religion, race/ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation. Peers
are typically the most important supporters in the lives of many LGBT youth. Youth who
are out to their immediate family or out at school reported increased levels of happiness,
optimism, acceptance and support through multiple measures and also report higher
levels of active participation in LGBT organizations at school and in the community
(Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Finally, results from the same report indicated that
17% of youth who are out say they are harassed at school “frequently;” 12% of youth
who are not out say the same. The study indicated 10% of youth who are out at school
say they are harassed outside of school “frequently;” 6% of youth who are not out say the
same (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). The difficulties experienced by sexual minority
youth in schools demonstrates the importance of exploring such issues further, as well as
the importance of finding ways to improve school climate for this population.

School experiences. While the sexual minority population has increased and
more supports are available for them, they are still an at-risk population with a variety of
negative school experiences. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services, the drop-out rate for sexual minority high-school students is four times the
national average (Weiler, 2003). Other research shows that sexual minority high-school students are half as likely as their heterosexual peers to pursue any type of post-secondary education (GLSEN, 2008). This same study also showed that more than 60% of sexual minority students do not feel safe in schools because of their sexual orientation and 38.4% do not feel safe because of their gender expression, which is a two to six times greater percentage of students than those who report feeling unsafe because of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, or religion (GLSEN, 2008). Nearly 44% of gay males and 54% of lesbians reported losing at least one friend as a result of disclosing their sexual orientation (Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Ryan & Futterman, 2001).

Victimization is another issue experienced by this population and by 60% to 80% of sexual minority youth between the ages of 14 and 21 (D’Augelli, 2006). The negative school experiences of sexual minority youth are detrimental to their success and opportunities for the future. This population is in need of stronger supports to reduce the incidence of victimization in the school setting.

**Risk factors.** The numerous issues previously described are quite serious for sexual minority youth and can impact them even after they have left the school setting. Problems that occur for sexual minorities in adolescence are likely to extend into their adult lives, further inhibiting their ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Sexual minorities are more likely to experience multiple types of abuse which can result in more serious mental health problems and increased self-destructive behavior in adulthood, such as drug and alcohol abuse and unsafe sexual practices (Heck et al., 2011). One study indicated that sexual minority youth reported higher sexual abuse, as well as blame and
stigmatization, than an at-risk heterosexual group (Mitchell et al., 2015). Adverse social 
interactions are the result of the many negative experiences faced by sexual minorities. In 
a study by Kelleher (2009) sexual minority participants indicated that experiences of 
heterosexism were the strongest cause of anxiety. Such experiences ranged from hearing 
anti-gay jokes to experiencing physical harm. These social situations are often 
unpredictable and leave the sexual minority individual feeling vulnerable and uncertain 
of when personal attacks may occur.

The constant anxiety of anticipating an unpredictable negative event causes 
extreme stress and depression. Results of one study provided evidence to support findings 
that sexual minority youths are at higher risk for suicidality compared with heterosexual 
youths (Bostwick et al., 2014). Moreover, research indicates that sexual minorities often 
fail to reach their full academic achievement due to the anxiety and unpredictable 
victimization they experience in schools (Murphy, 2012). As a result of feeling unsafe, 
these students are more likely to miss school to avoid violence or mistreatment.
Consequently, sexual minority adolescents often have poor academic performance 
leading to a lowered GPA and decreased likelihood of attending college (Murphy, 2012). 
Another study showed that questioning youth described greater amounts of truancy, 
depression, suicidal ideation, and alcohol/marijuana use than other sexual minority 
students. These results suggest that questioning youth may be at greater risk than LGB 
youth (Birkett, Espilage & Koenig, 2009). Creating a support system for students in the 
school and reducing instances of anxiety and victimization will ideally make students feel 
more comfortable and more likely to attend. When schools recognize issues existing for
sexual minority youth and create a positive school environment, this may decrease risk factors and increase the likelihood for later life success.

**Bullying.** Sexual minority students are more likely to withdraw from typical peer group experiences as a result of pervasive heterosexism and for fear of being ostracized if their sexual identity is revealed (Savage & Harley, 2009). Further, sexual minority adolescents experience higher levels of anxiety and negative experiences as a result of a social climate involving hostile attitudes and poor treatment of sexual minority individuals. This results from a heteronormative school environment placing considerable stress on non-heterosexual students and also contributes to sexual minority youths’ social discomfort resulting from devaluation of an aspect of their identity (Savage & Harley, 2009). Even if overt expressions of homophobia are absent in school, the use of anti-gay language suggests that most school environments are unsupportive of sexual minority students. By not providing support in the school environment, sexual minority youth are at an increased risk for negative outcomes. Such negative outcomes include increased internalized homophobia among heterosexual students (Birkett et al., 2009). According to the 2012 National Coming Out Day Youth Report, 54% of the sexual minority respondents said they were harassed or called names at school (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). From the same report, sexual minority youth who are out at school are 17% more likely than youth who are not out to report that they were verbally harassed or called names at school “frequently” compared with 12% of youth who are not. However, 41% of youth who are out report they are verbally harassed or called names outside of school “frequently,” “often,” or “sometimes;” (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Bullying is a
serious issue with lasting psychological effects. With the increased bullying experiences of sexual minority youth, it is important for such issues to be addressed and measures taken to reduce bullying experienced by this population.

**Resilience.** Resiliency is a process, capacity, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenges and threatening circumstances (Garmezy & Maston, 1991). Resiliency allows school personnel to help sexual minority students overcome negative past experiences and to move toward positive outcomes. Research on resilience suggests that a pathway toward resilience can occur by identifying with a larger sense of purpose and feelings of belonging within a group (DiFulvio, 2011). The results of one study examining resilience in sexual minority youth described increased positive experience when the individuals made a decision to no longer fear their minority status. As a result, sexual minorities reclaimed their identity, leading to self-acceptance and pride. The participants improved their resiliency by connecting with individuals and groups of other students. This enabled them to identify with a collective identity and provide them with purpose (DiFulvio, 2011). Having a social connection among sexual minority peers facilitates resilience through acknowledging a collective experience of discrimination so that individuals do not blame themselves for their negative experiences (Wexler, 2009). Other research showed that resilience and coping increases after coming out and gaining acceptance for oneself and others (Vaughn & Wachler, 2009). Schools that create and organize student support groups such as gay-straight alliances (GSA) allow sexual minority adolescents to positively connect to others with similar experiences, thus promoting resilience.
**Mental health difficulties.** Sexual minority adolescents experience a number of challenges that place them at increased risk for mental health issues. Research indicates that sexual minority adolescents are at a higher risk of developing internalizing disorders such as major depression and are also twice as likely to develop lifelong mood and anxiety disorders (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2008). The stress experienced by sexual minorities can inhibit their ability to develop emotional regulation, and as a result, emotional instability. Respondents in one study reported experiencing anxiety as a result of negative societal perceptions of their sexual identities, stress associated with disclosing their sexual identities, challenges in developing healthy self-concepts, and negative outcomes associated with these stressors (Huquembourg & Brallier, 2009). Other research provides evidence that rejection by peers and losing friends due to sexual orientation has a negative impact on the mental health of adolescents and is a significant predictor of suicide attempts for sexual minority youth (Diamond et al, 2011). Non-disclosure stress is another anxiety provoking experience for sexual minority adolescents; this occurs when adolescents fear the reactions that those around them may have regarding his/her sexual orientation. The anticipation of a negative reaction to their sexual identity causes anxiety for the sexual minority individual. The most anxiety provoking experience for sexual minority adolescents is not having family acceptance and experiencing conflict within the family related to their sexual orientation (Diamond et al, 2011). Developing methods to help sexual minority adolescents manage stressful situations may assist them in developing more effective
coping methods, increase resilience, and reduce the effects of stress on their mental health (Hatzenbuhler et al., 2008).

**School Climate and Sexual Minority Youth**

According to the National School Climate Center (2014), *school climate* refers to the quality and character present within school life in association with norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions, and organizational processes and structures. School climate is crucial for students because it establishes the basis of all learning and teaching occurring within the school environment. Research shows that school climate is predictive of students’ ability to learn and develop in healthy ways (National School Climate Center, 2014). Positive school climate is related to improved teacher retention, lower dropout rates, decreased incidence of violence, and higher student achievement (National School Climate Center, 2014). Positive school climate is an important aspect of student success and a negative climate can be detrimental to students. Sexual minority students often experience a negative school climate and are more likely to experience mistreatment within the school setting (Fisher et al., 2009).

Research has demonstrated high rates of violence and mistreatment of sexual minorities in schools (Fisher et al., 2009). Further, research shows that sexual minority students are typically the most underserved population in schools (Uribe, 1994). According to the 2010 National School Climate Survey for sexual minority students, 61.1% of these students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 39.9% felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Several other nationwide and regional surveys have shown that
sexual minority youth often experience homophobic harassment from peers and school staff (Birkett et al., 2009). They are often victims of violence including such heinous acts as being urinated and ejaculated upon, attacked with weapons, threatened with death, gang raped and more. In one study, one-third of these attacks were witnessed by school personnel or adults who did not intervene (Weiler, 2003). These situations cause serious physical and psychological harm to students; however, many schools do not have proper interventions in place to adequately handle or prevent such incidents. Often such attacks go unreported by the sexual minority victims because they feel that no action will be taken or reporting it will only worsen the situation (Murphy, 2012).

The most common explanation for mental health disparities among sexual minority adolescents is related to stigmatization and discrimination faced in schools, especially bullying and harassment, exclusion, and violence (Saewyc, 2011). According to the 2010 National School Climate Survey for sexual minority students, 84.6% were verbally harassed (called names or threatened) because of sexual orientation and 63.7% were verbally harassed because of gender expression; 40.1% were physically harassed (pushed or shoved) at school in the past year because of sexual orientation and 27.2% were physically harassed because of gender expression. Finally, 18.8% were physically assaulted (i.e., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation and 12.5% because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Schools often transmit cultural values and beliefs that reinforce heterosexism and often disregard any sexual orientation outside that of the heteronormative. For example, issues facing the sexual minority community are excluded from school curricula, denying
education about issues facing this population and student opportunities to obtain information on these topics. If schools increase efforts to create positive support for sexual orientations other than heterosexism, school climate may improve for sexual minority adolescents. The aforementioned information highlights the importance of creating a more supportive and accepting educational environment for these individuals.

**Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)**

Peer support groups for sexual minority youth and their allies are one way to create a more positive environment and strong support network, and in turn, improve school climate. Typically referred to as gay-straight alliances (GSAs), these groups are formed within the school and led by students with the support of school personnel. The goal of a GSA is to increase understanding about needs and challenges arising from differences in sexual orientation and often advocate and promote social actions as a means of improving school climate for all students (Savage & Harley, 2009). GSAs also advocate for sexual minority students as well as offer positive support to individuals questioning their sexuality, have sexual minority family members, or who are allies (i.e., supporters) of the population (Murphy, 2012). GSA’s offer opportunity for sexual minorities and their allies to become involved in the school setting, not only to provide support for one another, but to educate the school on the issues specific to sexual minorities.

Findings from the 2010 National School Climate Survey for sexual minority students indicated that individuals in schools with a GSA reported less victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression and had a greater sense of
connectedness to the school community than schools without a GSA. Less than half (44.6%) of those surveyed reported that their school had a GSA or other support club (Kosciw et al., 2010). Results from this study demonstrate the need for school GSAs or similar support groups for sexual minority students. GSAs within schools provide students with a safe environment to discuss their sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as resources and support to help with identity formation (Carvalho, 2006). One study found that students in a high school GSA reported positive school, social, and family relationships; comfort level with sexual orientation; development of strategies to handle assumptions of heterosexuality; increased perceived ability to contribute to society; and enhanced sense of belonging to school community (Lee, 2002).

Research shows that school acceptance is a protective factor against suicide (Ploderl et al., 2010), and sexual minority students enrolled in schools with a GSA are at a decreased risk of suicidality and report lower suicide attempt rates than those attending schools without (Goodenow et al., 2006; Walls, Freedenthal, & Wisneski, 2008). Conversely, a school without a GSA-type group results in an increased risk of suicide attempts among sexual minority youth (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). Other important research indicates that, in schools with a GSA, sexual minority youth and allies actively work toward changing the school policies and environment; they gain access to public spaces and educate others around them, in turn, improving the school climate (Russell et al., 2009). Finally, in addition to positive identity development, sexual minority youth in high-school GSAs expressed various feelings of empowerment: personal empowerment (having a voice), relational empowerment (being part of a group), and strategic
empowerment (knowing how to use information) as a result of having strong support from a GSA (Russell et al., 2009).

GSAs are protected by federal law through the Equal Access Act passed by Congress in 1984. Student groups in public secondary schools are protected by ensuring students a fair opportunity to conduct a meeting without being discriminated against on the basis of religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings (United States Department of Justice, 1984). There are many benefits to having a GSA in schools. The GSA provides a safe environment for sexual minority youth, as well as a supportive presence within the school setting allowing for greater group visibility to students and teachers. Also, the presence of these groups has a positive impact on the academic achievement and experiences of sexual minority youth because they are able to more clearly identify where support lies within the school either through fellow students or school personnel (Heck et al., 2011). A school might also consider developing a resource room specific to the needs to sexual minority adolescents, where they can acquire information, support and work with peers to handle and resolve issues experienced (Fisher et al., 2009).

**Perceptions of school climate.** Sexual minority adolescents often experience negativity from those they encounter within the school environment. Such experiences lead sexual minority adolescents to have a negative perception of school and individuals within the school environment. According to the 2012 National Coming Out Day Youth Report, 31% of students surveyed were not willing to come out at school for fear of being judged or mistreated by school personnel or peers (Human Rights Campaign, 2012).
Based on results from the 2009 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National Youth Climate Survey, nearly three quarters of sexual minority students surveyed heard homophobic or sexist remarks often or frequently at school and more than half of students heard homophobic remarks from school personnel. Less than one fifth of students surveyed reported that school personnel frequently intervened when hearing homophobic remarks or negative remarks about gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Another aspect of school climate that is detrimental to sexual minority youth is the prevalence and commonality of homophobic language and teasing. Such teasing can have a negative impact on sexual minority students and promotes a negative connotation to non-heterosexual identities. Schools with little homophobic teasing and a positive climate resulted in significantly improved outcomes for sexual minority youth (Birket et al., 2009). Schools implementing policies and discouraging negative language and attitudes toward non-heterosexual identities helps to create a more positive environment for all students, but especially for sexual minority adolescents. School psychologists and counselors should be cognizant of the negative consequences experienced at greater rates by the sexual minority population, and should assume a leadership position within schools and universities to promote a safe school environment (Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009). In doing so, they create a positive school environment to reduce negative incidences that could be detrimental to sexual minority students.

**Non-discrimination policies.** In order to protect the sexual minority population from harassment, schools are legally obligated to implement non-discrimination policies for this population. These policies guarantee the rights of sexual minority individuals to
participate and benefit from all opportunities within the educational setting without fear of harassment or exclusion. However, once non-discrimination policies are in place it is critical for the district to maintain and establish a plan in order to ensure adherence to the implementation of non-discrimination policies (Fitzsimons-Lovett & Budzisi, 1996). One study found that some individuals claim that sexual orientation should not be protected under a non-discrimination policy because it gives special rights to sexual minority individuals and disregards the rights of morally conservative individuals who oppose non-heterosexual orientations (Macgillivray, 2004). In addition, morally conservative individuals reported that including sexual orientation in non-discrimination policies would allow sexual minority content inclusion in the curriculum, which would create greater acceptance and knowledge regarding such orientation. This is problematic for morally conservative individuals, because many feel that it is in direct opposition to beliefs taught in some homes and religious institutions. This may lead to such individuals being labeled as bigots for having such beliefs, which imposes on their religious freedom (Savage & Harley, 2009).

Despite opposition for inclusion of sexual minority protection in educational non-discrimination policies, is it necessary to implement such policies, but this is not a means of granting special rights to sexual minority individuals. Implementation guarantees protection necessary in a heterosexist educational system. Non-discrimination policies protect teachers and other educational professionals so they are able to handle issues of sexual minority discrimination in the educational setting (Savage & Harley, 2009). Sexual minority adolescents are a minority group within the educational setting and
require equal protection against harassment and discrimination, just as any minority student requires. It is the responsibility for administrators in schools to implement and maintain non-discriminatory policies. Administrators who fail to create a safe and inclusive climate and fair access to education for all students, including sexual minority adolescents should be held accountable for their negligence (McCabe & Robinson, 2008). Non-discrimination policies may require system’s-level change within schools to provide safety and support to sexual minority students.

Curriculum. School curriculum is another part of the educational system that affects the experiences of sexual minority youth and should provide students reliable and valid information on sexual orientation. It also provides an opportunity to debunk false information from rumors and homophobic stereotypes. Teachers and school professional can include age-appropriate information regarding sexual minority individuals and adversity they have experienced (McFarland & Dupuis, 2003). Providing students with a lesson on various types of families for elementary school students is an example of including sexual minority topics in the curriculum. High school students can learn about civil rights history for sexual minorities, read literature by sexual minority authors, write papers on famous or influential sexual minority individuals, or complete projects on diversity issues (Fisher et al., 2009). When developing a curriculum, it is important for educators to not make assumptions regarding obstacles they may face within the classroom. Such obstacles include: non- sexual minority student beliefs, which may impact a students’ empathy for sexual minorities and could vary based on factors such as race, ethnicity, and sex. Schools should encourage students to examine personal and
social origins of negative attitudes about the sexual minority community and help students overcome prejudices or fears in order to embrace diversity (Gastic, 2009). Including sexual minority topics in the school curriculum allows all students to receive accurate and valid information regarding sexual minorities and provide a sense of support to those experiencing similar issues.

**Sexual Minority College Students’ Perceptions of High School**

Few studies have examined the perspectives of sexual minority college students when reflecting on their K-12 school experiences once they have left that setting for higher education. One such study, which involved interviews with sexual minority college students regarding their high school experience, revealed that many participants reported feeling isolated and insecure in high school due to extremely limited access to accurate information on issues related to sexual orientation (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002). These individuals reflected on their feelings of isolation due to a lack of support from peers, school personnel and family, which also contributed to their perception that their sexual identity was wrong or even immoral (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002).

Another study’s results suggest that the presence of GSAs in high schools may have positive and potentially long-lasting effects on college students’ attitudes toward LGBT individuals (Worthen, 2014). These results indicate that a positive school climate, as perceived by sexual minority students, has a long lasting impact on individuals’ opinions beyond the high school experience. On the contrary, when students felt unsupported in the school environment, they experienced confusion and denial when
attempting to accept their sexual identity (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002). Even beyond high school, while many college-age participants had accepted their sexual minority identities, some felt uncomfortable with their identity and accepting themselves, and were still working toward complete acceptance (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002).

The sexual minority college student participants in Plaza et al.’s (2002) study wished they could have accessed more supportive adults when they were in high school. Having an adult role model has, in fact, been shown to enhance resilience among sexual minority youth by promoting positive self-esteem (Lemoire & Chen, 2005). These individuals were cautious about disclosing their sexuality out of fear that they would be rejected by someone they cared about or change the dynamic of the relationship. In the same study, the interviewees were especially cautious about disclosing their sexual identity to teachers for fear of unfair treatment. Many of the participants wanted to be open about their sexual identity, but were apprehensive because of the mistreatment they saw of other openly sexual minority peers (Plaza et al., 2002). A suggestion from sexual minority college students to help increase awareness of allies within high schools is to ask supportive staff within a high school to display “safe zone” stickers in their classrooms to make schools feel safe and supportive for LGBT students and allies (Griffin et al., 2004). Sexual minority college students also reported feeling uncertain and confused about their identity in high school and often internalized their feelings (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002).

In this same study, sexual minority college students perceived heterosexual and LGBT-identified friends and non-family adults as providing emotional and instrumental
support, but felt limited emotional support from heterosexual peers when they were in high school (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002). Those interviewed conveyed discomfort in disclosing information about their sexuality to heterosexual friends, because their heterosexual friends appeared uncomfortable discussing sexual identity outside of their own (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002). Another study reported that college students who identified as heterosexual reported greater acceptance of sexual minority youth when there was a GSA present in their high school (Worthen, 2014). Sexual minority students reported admiring and looking to older sexual minority peers who were open about their sexuality as role models (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002). This would also provide support for the importance of gay-straight alliances in schools where students can seek out older role models and easily identify other sexual minority adolescents or allies.

**Emerging Adults’ Perspectives on Adolescent Experience**

The current study examines the perceptions of LGBTIQ college students when reflecting on their K-12 educational experiences. While in high school, these individuals were in the adolescent stage of development impacting their perceptions of their environment. Adolescence occurs between childhood and adulthood, and it is encompassed by changes in physical, psychological, and social development (Ernst et al., 2006). Changes occurring during this time often increase adolescents’ vulnerability as a result of new experiences and emotional changes, which also makes adolescence a time of great adjustment (Steinberg, 2005). The important aspect of development to consider in the current study is increased emotional reactivity where they experienced heightened emotional reactions to situations they experience. During this period adolescents’ social
environment changes; greater time is spent with peers versus adults, and more conflicts arise between parents and the adolescent (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008). As a result, there is heightened emotional reactivity and extreme emotional responses to the environment and individuals with which they interact.

Moving into early adulthood, there is an emergence of complex forms of thinking required in complex societies (Jensen Arnett, 2004). At this stage, there are changes in adolescents’ sense of self and capacity for self-reflection. Emerging adults begin to decide on a worldview; however, they also recognize that other perspectives exist and are valid as well (Jensen Arnett, 2004). In college there is an increased sense of self-confidence where individuals realize they can speak up and be themselves with less fear of being humiliated or put down. These individuals are now more easily able to adopt a more enlightened and accepting view of the world; they can better understand their own feelings and perceptions, as well as those of others around them. In the present study, asking college-age emerging adults to reflect on their adolescent high school experience provided an interesting perspective. Since the college students have a more matured perspective on their adolescent experiences, they are able to provide valuable insight on their own adolescent experiences versus their new perspective reflecting back as an adult.

The Present Study

The present study examined the experiences as reported by college students identifying as sexual minority of high school and their perceptions of school climate during their K-12 schooling experience. College students engaged in focus group discussions, which offered an opportunity to reflect on the perceived climate in high
school. Current research on sexual minority youth and school climate is limited mainly to surveys and literature reviews (GLSEN, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2010). The purpose of the present study was to gain insight on the experiences of sexual minority students in K-12 schools, particularly regarding perceptions of school climate and experiences of stress, as a means to determine implications for schools on how to improve school climates.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Question

The following research question was examined in the present study: *What are the perceptions of sexual minority college students as they reflect on their K-12 educational experience?*

Research Design

The current research study utilized a qualitative research design with focus groups as the method for data collection. Focus groups allow for a group discussion focused on a central theme. It allows a permissive atmosphere that fosters a range of opinions to allow the researcher to obtain further understanding of the issue (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 2008). This research design was selected given the limited number of qualitative studies examining this topic. The focus group method allowed participants to share experiences and interact with one another to enrich the data collection. Phenomenological theory was used to guide data analysis for the present study. The participants were asked to reflect on a shared experience, considered the phenomenon. It is important to understand common experiences of individuals identifying as sexual minorities in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon (}
Crestwell, 2003). The obtained information and inferences can be applied within the school setting in order to improve the experiences of sexual minority students currently in the K-12 school setting.

**Participants and Setting**

Participants included \((n = 8)\) young adults (ages 19 to 24) who identify as sexual minorities and are also college students in a Midwestern state in the United States. Participants were selected based on convenience sampling, because of proximity and accessibility to the researcher. Descriptions of each participant follow; pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.

*Mary* is a 19 year old, white female who attended a public high school in a suburban community. She identifies as bisexual. She now attends a public university.

*Ralph* is a 19 year old, white male who attended a private high school in an urban community. He identifies as gay. He now attends a public college.

*Jane* is a 21 year old, white female who attended a public high school in a rural community. She identifies as lesbian. She now attends a public college.

*Sally* is a 20 year old, white female who attended a public high school in a suburban community. She identifies as bisexual. She now attends a public college.

*Lucy* is a 19 year old, black female who attended a public high school in a suburban community. She identifies as bisexual. She now attends a public college.

*Ann* is a 23 year old, white female who attended a public high school in a suburban community. She identifies as bisexual. She now attends a private college.

*John* is a 20 year old, white male who attended a public high school in a suburban community. He identifies as gay. He now attends a private college.
Rose is a 23 year old, white female who attended a public high school in a suburban community. She identifies as lesbian. She now attends a private college.

Two focus groups were held: one in October and one in January. The first group had five participants, and the second group had three. The focus group sessions were conducted in private meeting rooms, one at the university and the other met at an off-campus location, and at times that were most convenient to the participants.

Materials

Measures. Participants engaged in focus group discussions in small groups facilitated by the primary researcher using a semi-structured questioning route (see Appendix B) developed for the current study. The questioning route was loosely based on the major points identified in the 2009 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation’s schools (Kosciw et al., 2010). Several questions were taken directly from Final Student Report of the Campus Climate Group Research Project, where focus groups were conducted to determine perceptions of school climate for LGBTIQ individuals at San Jose State University (Murray, 2011). The primary discussion questions were designed to be open-ended to encourage ongoing discussion and dialogue among group participants.

A short demographic questionnaire was given to participants at the conclusion of the focus group to gather additional information on participants. The demographic questionnaire asked participants to identify: (a) gender identity, (b) age, (c) sexual orientation, (d) ethnicity, (e) public or private school and rural, urban, suburban, and (f) state where K-12 school was located.
Procedures

Approval from the University of Dayton’s Institutional Review Board was obtained before carrying out the study.

Recruitment. Participants were recruited by emailing the student president of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) at selected colleges and universities in the surrounding regional area. The researcher initially contacted the college or university’s GSA president to recruit participants and determine whether the GSA would allow the researcher to hold a focus group discussion members identifying as a sexual minority. College/university GSA presidents who demonstrated an interest and willingness to allow group members to participate provided GSA group members with information on the focus groups as well as the researcher’s email address in order to contact her about participation. Once interested individuals contacted the researcher, she answered questions, provided further information and then set up a time to meet with the students to conduct the focus group. At the focus group session, participants were provided consent forms to sign.

The initial recruitment method resulted in a very low response rate for the second college or university’s GSA. As a result, participants were recruited using snowball sampling; the researcher contacted acquaintances who were college students attending the university and who also identified as sexual minorities. Beyond recruitment, all information provided to participants as well as methods for setting up the focus group were uniform.

Focus group sessions. Two focus group sessions were conducted for the present study. One focus group session was held in October and one session was held in January. Focus group sessions were scheduled at the convenience of the participants and held in
private meeting spaces, for the first group on campus and the second group off campus. Prior to each focus group session, the researcher arrived 30 minutes in advance to prepare refreshments, audio equipment and to review the questioning route and procedures. Formal signed consent forms (see Appendix A) for participation were obtained from participants prior to the focus group. Sessions were audio-recorded in entirety. Supplemental notes were also taken by the researcher. In exchange for participation, participants were provided food and beverages during the group session. Each session lasted an average of 45 minutes.

**Confidentiality.** The audio recordings collected during each session were only accessible by the primary researcher. After completion of this study, recordings and transcriptions of the recordings will be destroyed. Participants’ identities were protected on the transcription by replacing their names with pseudonyms.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected in October 2014 and January 2015, transcribed and analyzed in October 2014 and January 2015. Data were collected through recorded focus group session each lasting 30-45 minutes. Focus group sessions were recorded with two forms of audio recording devices; one served as a primary recorder and the other served as an auxiliary recording device in the event the primary audio recorder malfunctions. To supplement data collection, the primary researcher also took written notes during the session. During the session, the primary researcher served as the group facilitator, encouraging discussion through the use of key questions, probing questions and ensuring that all participants had an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. The researcher ensured that the group remained on-task and redirected participants if necessary.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The present study sought to answer the following question: *What are the perceptions of sexual minority college students as they reflect on their K-12 educational experience?*

**Data Analyses**

Dialogue from each focus group session was transcribed word for word into a Microsoft Word document by the primary researcher. The transcriptions were coded using the long table approach, where participant comments were sorted and arranged based on themes that emerged when data was analyzed. This took into consideration the frequency, specificity, emotion and extensiveness to which participants shared in regards to each major theme during the focus sessions. Each response to a key question was summarized and examined for common themes (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This approach was selected for data analysis to identify themes, emotionality and shared experiences in order to answer the proposed research question.

**Perceptions of the K-12 school climate for sexual minorities.** Focus group session transcripts were transcribed and coded. After coding the data, the following themes regarding sexual minorities’ perceptions of the K-12 school climate emerged: 1) Heteronormative experiences, 2) Bullying and victimization, and 3) rejection experiences
4) School support needed, 5) mental health disparities, and 6) school climate improvement. The themes demonstrate a perpetuating impact of K-12 school experiences for sexual minority youth. The first experience that starts the domino effect of adversity starts with heteronormative experiences, resulting in bullying and victimization, leading to bullying and victimization, and rejection. As a result of those experiences, school support is needed, mental health adversities often develop without necessary support, and as a result, suggestions can be made on improving school climate as a means of decreasing this cyclical negativity.

Heteronormative experiences. Heteronormativity was mentioned by participants as a problem that continues in schools, and which perpetuates negativity, whereby sexual minorities are viewed as deviations from the norm. This view results in a difficult educational and social experience. Jane disclosed her personal struggle as a result of heteronormativity:

In high school no one was out and it was not an option of being out. I knew very few people that were out in high school and it was mostly rumors of who might be gay. Some of the people I know now that went to my high school did not come out until after they graduated because it would not have been acceptable at my school. I thought that everyone was just supposed to date a guy in high school and then college, then get married and have a bunch of kids.

Ralph brought up another experience of heteronormativity within the school setting:

[Homosexuality] was only discussed among students, and teachers refused to discuss it. Few people were open and supportive. It was only discussed when people were talking about how terrible it is. I had to take a class my senior year called Christian lifestyles and it talked about what families should be like and sexuality. Sex was discouraged and religion permeated throughout all of the lessons and there was no true education related to sexuality…unless it was heterosexual and waiting until marriage.

Bullying and victimization. Participants were asked several opening questions related to their experiences in the K-12 school setting in order to understand their
perspectives on school experiences and climate. Several participants mentioned specific incidents where they personally experienced bullying within the school setting. Lucy disclosed an experience where a school administrator did not want to allow a GSA and did not reprimand individuals for defacing club posters with offensive language:

I reestablished my GSA at my high school and it was a struggle. The principal would not complete paperwork because she thought a GSA was too controversial. She eventually allowed the club, but made it difficult to hang up posters and didn’t want me to call the club a gay-straight alliance, because people might find that offensive. One day someone wrote “fag” all over the GSA posters that I made and hung up throughout the school. I told the principal and she said that she was not going to do anything about it, and that I should have expected it.

Other participants agreed that school staff often did not interfere or reprimand students for incidents of bullying. John reported that one of his teachers witnessed the bullying first-hand and failed to intervene:

A student had yelled across the room, “FAG.” I was sitting right next to the teacher’s desk, and I could hear it loud and clear. There was no way the teacher couldn’t have heard him, but he didn’t even flinch. He sat there and allowed the derogatory terms to continue. It’s a memory that I’m not sure I’ll ever forget.

A number of participants reported that school staff engaged in behaviors that created a negative environment for sexual minority students. Ann discussed a specific experience where a teacher was directly involved in bullying a student:

I remember a teacher talking about how a student, who was not gay, was supposedly hitting on some other guy and how the two must be boyfriends. Other students and the teacher were laughing and continued teasing him. I remember people saying, “that’s disgusting” and it was like being gay was a horrible thing. It was pretty upsetting that the whole thing was started by the teacher.

Rose discussed experiences of bullying where a staff member would not intervene. This bullying resulted in her withdrawing from school involvement and an [athletic] activity she enjoyed:

I played sports and even before I came out, the girls on my team would use awful and derogatory slurs. In the locker room, they would accuse me of looking at
them or hitting on them. When my friends intervened, they accused us of being together and started harassing us both. The coach refused to do anything about it, so I quit the team. School really sucked after that, because I quit doing what I loved.

**Rejection experiences.** Participants discussed negativity experienced in the school setting both from staff and peers. One of the most difficult experiences was experiencing rejection after mustering the courage to come out, and then experiencing rejection as a result of being open about their sexuality. Sally reported that she was afraid to come out because she was afraid of feeling rejected. She also stated that since her friends were not aware that she identified as a sexual minority, they viewed her as “normal.” It is interesting that she identifies as a sexual minority, yet thinks that her friends’ perception that she is straight makes her “normal,” as she shared:

My really good friends have not cared at all and have been supportive of coming out. The only person in my immediate family that I am out to is my sister and she found out by accident…I am not out to my parents, I don’t know how they would react and if I want to come out to them. Most of the people from my high school, I would not care for them to know who I was dating whether it was a guy or a girl, if they saw me out with someone, then they would know, but I would not go out of my way to announce my relationship status. I am not out to most of my friends, I feel like they would have an issue if I came out to them, but since I have not, they treat me like a normal person.

Beyond the school setting, participants agreed that acceptance was difficult to achieve from family, friends, and even the community in which they lived. Jane described her experience of rejection after coming out to her family and community:

My mom did not react well to me coming out. She told me that if I came out in my hometown, my little brother would be bullied because I came out. She is still not comfortable with me being out. My close family and friends are supportive, but my mom, sisters, and friends have outed me. People were supportive. My family said to be careful who I come out to, because they may be against it and react negatively toward me. My family does not understand how to be supportive.

When reflecting on experiences of negativity in high school, Rose expressed:
I feel like they influenced me positively and negatively. For a really long time, my experience in high school and at home made me feel like my sexuality was unnatural and that there was something wrong with me. After leaving high school, and becoming a more educated person, I now know that if I had been better supported in high school, I wouldn’t have felt that way about myself. I think society is moving in the right direction in a lot of ways, but my experiences in high school showed me how these adverse school climates still exist and that anyone who is not heterosexual is seen as an outsider or like something is wrong with them. I know that I am stronger now for having those experiences, but I feel like I shouldn’t have had to go through that or have been mistreated so badly. My experiences taught me to provide support and hope for individuals who had experiences like mine. It also taught me not to be scared and to educate people who perpetuate ignorance.

**School support needed.** Participants’ experiences with depression and mental health difficulties led to further discussion on lack of school intervention and staff support available. With this lack of staff support, participants noted that having known allies and support within the school setting may have improved their experience. Mary expressed that she had a positive experience with a school counselor:

> I had a really great counselor, because one day I was just really overwhelmed and was not well at all. I cried all day and tried to go home, but I was not allowed to go home. A teacher found me in the bathroom and took me to the counselor. I was crying a lot and did not know why. She listened to me and after I just felt better.

Jane said that it was difficult to navigate the school setting to find allies available for support, whether a teacher or another student:

> People would say they were in support of sexual minorities, but I could tell that they may have just said that and not felt that way. It was hard to navigate whether people were just saying they were supportive because they thought that I might be gay and did not want to be rude, or if they genuinely supported it.

Sally added her experience with school staff that expressed support, but were not genuine in supporting students:

> My senior year [students] tried to start a GSA and had huge issues from the administration to be able to start the organization. The problem with the principal
not allowing the organization to start was that he would tell the public that he was really supportive of the GSA and wanted [interested students] to have the opportunity to express themselves. He said that everyone is welcome, we should not discriminate against people, and accept their opinions; however, when they were starting the club he would not allow it because people would take offense. They finally were able to start the club after a year and a lot of people showed up, so it was obviously something they wanted to have happen. The administration just went as far as they could to stop it from happening.

Mental health disparities. Participants reported difficulties with anxiety and depression throughout the discussion. The stated difficulties, as related to the participants’ sexual identification, impeded their educational achievement and potentially prevented them from achieving full success in school. Sally disclosed a common occurrence in high school related to her anxiety and depression:

Sometimes I just had crying days where I was just upset. The counselor let me sit in her office and try to help me, but I don’t think she really understood how to help me or what to do to make me feel better. I feel like if anyone had sexuality questions they would not have gone to the counselor. I don’t think the counselors were equipped to deal with sexuality issues.

Jane discussed a similar experience, and agreed with Sally about experiences of depression:

I was extremely depressed in high school and it seemed like no one noticed or cared and there was not mental health. Our guidance counselors only focused on academics and would not take the time to talk to me. They never wanted to deal with mental health and would only let you cry in the office for so long before they just sent you back to class. I was eventually diagnosed with clinical depression in college, but suffered serious depressive episodes throughout high school.

Depression and anxiety were also prominent topics discussed in the second focus group. Ann mentioned her personal experiences with anxiety related to coming out, as well as depression that followed as a result of her discomfort and anxiety as a sexual minority:

I struggled with anxiety and depression throughout high school as a result of my sexuality, because, as I got older, I was definitely attracted to girls and I felt like there was something wrong with me. My family is very conservative and religious, and when one of my best friends came out my senior year, my mom
essentially talked about her like there was something wrong with her. Although I personally felt that this was not the case, it was really hard for me to think about how my mom might act if I came out to her. At one point there was a girl that I really liked and felt a strong connection, and I distanced myself from her and really hurt her because I refused to accept the fact that I was bisexual. I felt really bad for treating her that way and was very depressed that I had connected with someone, but refused to pursue any type of relationship out of fear that I would be disowned or experience the same mistreatment as I witnessed taken out on my friends.

**School climate improvement.** Participants were asked to share their suggestions for schools, or what they would have changed about their own experiences. Sally’s suggestion for schools to become more involved in implementing curriculum to include sexual minorities:

> Teachers should focus on representation beyond stereotypes. Staff should be careful with the media and historical figures or movies they show in class to highlight gender and sexuality issues, and what to discuss. A wide variety of these individuals should be introduced to students so they are aware that there are differences within the gay community and not all sexual or gender minorities are the same.

Jane agreed, and added:

> It would have been really helpful if there were classes available to learn about sexuality and different types of sexuality and gender expression. Sexuality and gender identity needs to be addressed openly and comfortably. Teachers should bring it up with anything related to family. It should be made as seamlessly as possible, not to draw extra attention to it, so it becomes a more fluid and natural aspect of learning, just like heterosexuality in society. It doesn’t need to be special; it just needs to be reality. There needs to be student-centered groups and supports. Basically, everyone who works within a school should be educated and trained to teach and interact with sexual and gender minorities to not intentionally or unintentionally offend students. They should be safe-space trained. Groups in the community should also be made known in case students are uncomfortable or need support outside of the school setting. Maybe even collaboration with school groups and the community to build those relationships.

Another suggestion made was to teach all students comprehensive sexual education, with an emphasis on various aspects of sexuality beyond heterosexuality and also educating staff. Ralph divulged:
Teachers should provide basic education on topics of sexuality, gender and sexual health, and allow students to discuss and to form their own opinions. They can serve as a facilitator of good and healthy conversation, so that they can learn from one another and base their opinions on facts and intellectual discussion with peers rather than being forced to conform to an ideal that discriminates against an entire population of people that violate their basic beliefs. Schools should allow and educate teachers in order for them to lead these types of discussions.

Schools should also make an effort to extend the provision of support to student groups through a GSA. Ralph expressed his desire to have had such support during high school:

The number one thing that I would’ve changed about my school would be the creation of a GSA. At that time in your life, when you’re a lonely high school student, companionship and understanding is the number one thing you long for, or at least that’s how it was for me.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Review of Purpose and Major Findings

The purpose of the present study was to understand the experiences of sexual minority students in K-12 schools, particularly regarding perceptions of school climate and experiences of stress. This study examined sexual minority college students’ perceptions of their K-12 experiences through reflection and discussion with peers who also identify as sexual minorities. The results from this study can be used to direct future research and suggestions for improving school climate for sexual minorities in the K-12 school setting.

Findings indicated that individuals identifying as sexual minorities reported they had experienced adversity within the K-12 school setting. Participants perceived their K-12 school climate as negative and they experienced bullying. These findings were consistent with research indicating that sexual minorities often perceive the K-12 school setting as unaccepting of sexual minorities and also where these students experience bullying and other forms of negativity (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). This negativity and bullying was unfortunately perpetrated by both students and school staff. Participants in the present study noted that school staff often witnessed negativity and bullying without interfering or providing support. Similar information regarding failure of staff to
intervene on behalf of sexual minorities experiencing bullying was noted in the literature and contributed to sexual minorities feeling defenseless against experienced adversities (Weiler, 2003).

Heteronormativity propagates negativity in the school setting and contributes to adversity experienced by participants. The participants in the present study felt that identifying as a sexual minority was deviant and that it was not acceptable for them to identify as anything other than heterosexual. They reported that the heteronormative perception was present among staff and students, where the assumption was that everyone identified as heterosexual or should identify as heterosexual. Research has shown that a heteronormative school environment places considerable stress on non-heterosexual students and also contributes to sexual minority youths’ social discomfort resulting from devaluation of an aspect of their identity (Savage & Harley, 2009). In the present study, participants reported that they either experienced a great deal of animosity for revealing their true identity or were too overwhelmed by the potential reaction that may result from them revealing their identity. Sexual minority students are more likely to withdraw from typical peer group experiences as a result of pervasive heterosexism and for fear of being ostracized if their sexual identity is revealed (Savage & Harley, 2009).

A discussion of K-12 experiences among participants in the current study led to suggestions made for improving school climate for sexual minorities. The participants all suggested that staff and students should be educated with accurate, un-biased information on issues related to sexuality and gender identity. Research has shown similar suggestions for improving school climate whereby schools can provide staff and students reliable and valid information on sexual orientation. It also provides an opportunity to
debunk false information from rumors and homophobic stereotypes (McFarland & Dupuis, 2003). Participants in the present study suggested that gay-straight alliances (GSAs) should be created within schools in order for students who identify as sexual minorities to have a visible peer support system. From the 2010 National School Climate Survey for sexual minority students, individuals in schools with a GSA reported less victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression and had a greater sense of connectedness to the school community than schools without a GSA (Kosciw et al., 2010).

In addition to a peer support system, participants reported that staff trained and willing to support sexual minorities should publicly identify as allies and be available to aid students who are experiencing difficulty in schools. Research is consistent and showed that the presence of these groups has a positive impact on the academic achievement and experiences of sexual minority youth because they are able to more clearly identify where support lies within the school either through fellow students or school personnel (Heck et al., 2011). Finally, in the present study, participants expressed that issues related to sexual and gender identity should be addressed within the school as an extension of the norm, specifically when addressing the needs of sexual minorities in schools. Presenting such issues as the norm decreases the permeation of heteronormativity within the school setting. Non-discrimination policies and education help protect teachers and other educational professionals so they are able to handle issues of sexual minority discrimination in the educational setting (Savage & Harley, 2009).

Findings in the present study further pointed to the detrimental emotional impact that can occur for sexual minority youth as a result of negative K-12 school experiences.
The participants indicated experiences with mental health difficulties, specifically anxiety and depression. Sexual minority students perceive the school setting as unsafe, creating anxiety, and ultimately inhibiting their potential for success in school and decreasing their pursuit of postsecondary goals (GLSEN, 2008). In the present study, the most prominent source of anxiety was related to revealing their sexual identity or coming out to friends, family, and in the school setting. In the research, youth who are out to their immediate family or out at school reported increased levels of happiness, optimism, acceptance and support through multiple measures and also report higher levels of active participation in LGBT organizations at school and in the community (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Anxiety was related to the fear of how they would be perceived by those around them after coming out. There was also anxiety related to rejection related to their identity. Some participants who came out experienced anxiety as a result of mistreatment due to their sexual identity.

For participants who reported depression, it often resulted from rejection from peers and friends, experiences of bullying, and feeling that there were no allies or available support system. This was also a significant factor in previous research where the most anxiety provoking experience for sexual minority adolescents was not having family and friend acceptance and experiencing conflict within the family related to their sexual orientation (Diamond et al, 2011). Participants also recommended that staff and students receive further education related to mental health in order to help those in need of such support. This is consistent with research suggesting that schools develop methods to help sexual minority adolescents manage stressful situations may assist them in
developing more effective coping methods, increase resilience, and reduce the effects of stress on their mental health (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2008).

Negativity and rejection as a result of identifying as a sexual minority or coming out were also commonly reported among the participants in the current study. A recent study similarly indicated that sexual minority youth reported higher sexual abuse, as well as blame and stigmatization, than an at-risk heterosexual group (Mitchell et al., 2015). As previously mentioned, anxiety and depression were associated with coming out and identifying as a sexual minority. Participants in the current study shared personal experiences related to rejection from their parents, community, school, and peers. One participant indicated that she wanted to be treated “like a normal person,” suggesting her own negative perception of her sexual minority status. Sexual minority students are more likely to withdraw from typical peer group experiences as a result of pervasive heterosexism and for fear of being ostracized if their sexual identity is revealed (Savage & Harley, 2009). This statement resonated with several other participants, where they expressed a struggle to feel “normal” and a great desire to feel accepted. Those interviewed in a previous study conveyed a similar discomfort in disclosing information about their sexuality to heterosexual friends, because their heterosexual friends appeared uncomfortable discussing sexual identity outside of their own (Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002). An aspect of the K-12 school setting that hindered sexual minorities from seeking acceptance from others was the difficulty in finding genuine allies and support. Previous research suggests that schools could ask supportive staff within a high school to display “safe zone” stickers in their classrooms to make schools feel safe and supportive for LGBT students and allies (Griffin et al., 2004). Oftentimes, participants reported that
teachers or students claimed to be allies, but would later prove otherwise in their actions. As mentioned previously, the participants expressed a need for a known support system, especially in schools where individuals identifying as sexual minorities are just coming to terms with their sexual identity and would benefit most from a clear and genuine support system. Schools that create and organize student support groups such as gay-straight alliances (GSA) allow sexual minority adolescents to positively connect to others with similar experiences, thus promoting resilience (Vaughn & Wachler, 2009).

One aspect of the literature that did not manifest within the present study was the increased risk of sexual minority youth to engage in unsafe behaviors related to sex and illicit drugs. This is not to say that the participants did not engage in this activity, but it was not discussed within either of the focus groups. Previous research indicates that sexual minority youth are at an increased risk for engaging in risky behaviors as a result of anxiety and depression experienced (Weiler, 2003). One study anonymously surveying sexual minority youth reported higher rates of illicit drug use, including cocaine, marijuana, inhalants, heroin, methamphetamines, ecstasy, and painkillers with no prescription (Bowers et al., 2015). Anxiety and depression were a common factor mentioned throughout the previous study; however, participants in the present study did not mention use of drugs or alcohol. Even though it was not mentioned in the focus groups, the youth may have participated in these activities, or were at an increased risk for engaging in these behaviors.

**Limitations**

The present study is not without limitations. First, this study had a small demographic lens; participants were recruited from local colleges and universities.
limiting the demographic and geographic diversity of participants. Having a larger sample size and more diverse sample may have provided even further information on experiences of sexual minorities within the K-12 setting.

Given the focus group design, some participants were more actively involved in the discussion than others. Participants may have had more opportunity to contribute if the larger focus group was smaller in number or if individual interviews were conducted.

Another limitation may be the lack of representation from all sexual minority groups. Represented were only gay, lesbian, and bisexual members. There were no individuals who identify as transgender, intersex, or questioning who participated in the focus groups. Having full representation of all sexual minority groups may have provided additional information on perceptions of the K-12 school climate.

**Implications for Future Research**

The findings from the present study can be used to direct future research efforts in improving the K-12 school climate for individuals identifying as sexual minorities. This study provided information on adversities experienced by sexual minority youth in schools as well as suggestions made by college students identifying as sexual minorities reflecting on their K-12 school experiences. Future research efforts should explore heteronormative views that exist in K-12 schools and the prominence of such views by school staff and students. Furthermore, future research should investigate effective interventions, education, and means of successfully decreasing negative perceptions of sexual minorities in order to create a more positive school climate for all students.
Another suggestion for future research is to examine various methods of educating staff and students on issues related to sexual minorities. The present study found that education may decrease negativity associated with sexual minorities and also increase awareness of the needs of sexual minorities in schools. A goal of future research should include implementation of sexual minority issues within the general education curriculum and an examination of whether this would reduce the likelihood of adversity for sexual minority students.

Future research might also evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs available for school-based bullying prevention. Future research may also investigate mental health intervention programs associated with anxiety and/or depression and their applicability to sexual minorities and problems experienced as a unique minority population.

Finally, future school-based research might examine the long-term impact for sexual minorities who experienced adversity in the K-12 setting. It would be helpful to determine if positive long-term experiences occurred, what characteristics or interventions were attributed to individual success. If sexual minority youth were unsuccessful in their future pursuits, it would be important to examine what factors contributed to a lack of success. Success may be measured by postsecondary pursuits, versus lack of success, which may be indicated by dropping out of high school or deciding to forgo postsecondary goals.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings from the present study can be used to make suggestions for school psychologists. School psychologists are in an excellent position to serve the needs of
LGBTIQ youth and reduce the anxieties they experience. They have broad knowledge of various evidence-based interventions targeted at reducing harassment and bullying, the resources to implement interventions at multiple tiers, and access to resources to train staff to work effectively with LGBTIQ youth. School psychologists should receive training for applying effective strategies for working with LGBTIQ students, be familiar with the best practices for implementing supportive programs in schools, and allow for an enriched and diversified environment for all students (Weiler, 2003). According to Murphy (2012), school psychologists are in an ideal position to serve as an advisor for GSAs because of their training in counseling, which will allow students to receive help and support relating to social and emotional struggles within the school setting. They also have the adequate knowledge to create social support and a safe place for LGBTIQ adolescents. School psychologists, along with teachers, administrators, and counselors, can play a key role in promoting positive emotional development and academic success for LGBTQ students (Fisher et al., 2009).

**Intervention.** Sexuality can be a controversial issue that elicits a variety of emotions and reactions. It is important for the school psychologist to be educated in the area of sexuality and be able to convey this information to others as a means of creating a supportive system for all students. School psychologists should also be responsible for informing educators and other school personnel about the issues facing sexual minority students as a means of providing a positive support network that the students may not have elsewhere by serving as both advocates and allies (Weiler, 2003). School personnel should be mindful of interventions to promote safe schools in order to address varying student attitudes about sexual minorities in terms of race, gender, ethnicity and also
religious beliefs, which should be taken into consideration upon implementing an intervention (Gastic, 2012). Continued education and implementation of new and innovative methods of intervention are necessary to warrant continued and effective support for sexual minority students.

**Advocacy.** The role of the school psychologist should include social justice and advocacy for minority groups within the school setting. Sexuality can be a controversial issue that elicits a variety of emotions and reactions. It is important for the school psychologist to be educated in the area of sexuality and be able to convey this information to others as a means of creating a supportive as well as supported system for all students. School psychologists should also be responsible for informing educators and other school personnel about the issues facing LGBTIQ students as a means of providing a positive support network that the students may not have elsewhere by serving as both advocates and allies (Weiler, 2003). School personnel should be mindful of interventions to promote safe schools in order to address varying student attitudes about sexual minorities in terms of race, gender, ethnicity and also religious beliefs, which should be taken into consideration upon implementing an intervention (Gastic, 2012). Continued education and implementation of new and innovative methods of intervention are necessary to warrant continued and effective support for sexual minority students.

**Conclusion**

Research has shown that the K-12 school environment is often a difficult and anxiety-provoking environment for adolescents who identify as sexual minorities. This study added to the current literature indicating that college students identifying as sexual minorities reflecting on their K-12 experiences reported experiencing hardship. The
experiences reported by participants in the present study included bullying and negative school climate for sexual minorities. There was also a pervasive heteronormative view within the school setting reported and which promoted anxiety and adversity for adolescents identifying as sexual minorities. Suggestions to improve school climate include educating staff and students on issues related to sexual and gender identity, promoting a positive school climate for all students and interventions for students who are impacted by negativity within the school setting. Mental health difficulties, specifically anxiety and depression, are of significant concern for individuals identifying as sexual minorities within the K-12 school climate. There is also a need for genuine support available for sexual minority students in the educational setting.
REFERENCES


Carvalho, K. (2006, April). Effects of a gay-straight alliance on the perceived climate at a continuation high school. Presentation to faculty and staff of the College of Social Work. San Jose State University, San Jose, CA.


educators should know about adolescents who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual (pp. 32-35). Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.


APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON - CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE of STUDY: Reflections of K-12 School Climate by Individuals Identifying as Sexual Minorities

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Sarah Drought, a graduate student from the University of Dayton. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this research study, because you identify as Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Intersex or Questioning (LGBTIQ) and are a college student.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to provide insight into the experiences of LGBTIQ students in K-12 school environment. The information provided in the current study is intended to illuminate the experiences of the LGBTIQ youth population in schools. By identifying sources of adversity for this population and evaluating perceptions of the K-12 school environment, suggestions can be made to create a more positive and supportive setting for LGBTIQ students in schools.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: Participate in a focus group session that will be held at your college or university. During the focus group, you will be asked to reflect on and discuss your experiences in the K-12 school setting.

Formal signed consent forms for participation will be obtained from you at the session. In exchange for participation, you will be provided food and beverages. While the focus group is conducted, you may choose to share your experiences. I will be there to ask questions, to listen, and to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to share. The session is expected to last 30-45 minutes with about 5-10 participants in
the group. At the end of the session, you will be asked to complete a brief and demographic survey.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**
During the focus group, we will discuss your experiences as an LGBTIQ individual in the K-12 school setting. The purpose is to share these experiences as a means of illuminating and making suggestions for positive change within the school setting for LGBTIQ individuals. Sharing these experiences may be difficult for you, but the intention is to provide a supportive discussion to share and any negativity will be prohibited within the group setting. At the end of the session, you will be provided information on local LGBTIQ resources within the community.

While steps will be taken to assure that your identity is not revealed, we cannot guarantee that others in the group will do the same. Please do not share information about yourself that you do not want revealed outside the group. Because this risk exists, we urge you not to disclose the participation of others and not to reveal what was said in the group to persons outside of the group.

**ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS**
For your participation, food and beverages will be provided during the focus group session. At the end of the session, you will be provided with a packet on local LGBTIQ resources within the community. This will also be an opportunity to share and hear the experiences of others within the K-12 school setting.

**PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**
There will be no payment for participation.

**IN CASE OF RESEARCH RELATED ADVERSE EFFECTS**
For University of Dayton students, if you are experiencing any kind of discomfort as a result of your participation in this study, you agree to promptly notify the Principal Investigator. You may contact the University of Dayton Counseling Center at (937) 229-3141. The Counseling Center is available free of charge to undergraduate students. If you find yourself experiencing distress after the Counseling Center is closed for the day, you may call the number and you will be connected to an answering service, and a counselor will return your call.”

For non UD students, if you are experiencing any kind of discomfort as a result of your participation in this study, you may contact Sarah Drought at (937) 750-3057 or Elana Bernstein at (937) 229-3264.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**
When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. Audio-tape recordings of you will be used however your identity will be protected or
disguised by transcribing the audio-tape recordings and replacing your name with a pseudonym. The audio recordings collected during each focus group session will only be accessed by the primary researcher. After completing the data analyses, recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed to insure privacy. Participants’ identities will be protected on the transcription by replacing names with a pseudonym.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, that will not affect your relationship with the university or other services to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice or penalty. The investigator may withdraw you from participating in this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS
If you have any questions about this research, please contact one of the investigators listed below.
Sarah Drought, Principal Investigator, University of Dayton, Department of Counselor Education and Human Services, 937-750-3057, droughts1@udayton.edu.

Elana Bernstein, Faculty Advisor, University of Dayton, Department of Counselor Education and Human Services, 937-229-3264, ebernstein1@udayton.edu.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Dayton: Dr. Mary Connolly, (937) 229-3493, Mary.Connolly@notes.udayton.edu.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT (or legal guardian)
I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

Name of Participant (please print)

______________________________________________
Signature of Participant
________________________________________Date___________
APPENDIX B

QUESTIONING ROUTE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory</td>
<td>“Thank you for attending today’s focus group session on sexual minority experiences in schools. My name is Sarah Drought and I am a school psychology graduate student at the University of Dayton. The purpose of tonight’s focus group is to reflect on and discuss experiences of individuals identifying as sexual minority in K-12 schools. There are no correct or incorrect answers and you may have different points of views on the topics discussed, but I encourage you to share your viewpoint even if it differs from others. I am here to ask questions, to listen, and to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to share. I am recording the session and I will also take notes during the session. I am interested in hearing from everyone, although you should not feel obligated to respond to every question. Feel free to eat and drink during this session.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>“What was your experience like in high school? Describe this for us, tell a story or use a metaphor that epitomizes your K-12 experience.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Key                 | • Describe an experience where you felt you were discriminated against or treated unfairly. Tell us about a time that you felt your identity was not valued or appreciated.  
How would you describe your interactions in the K-12 environment? With staff or teachers? Other students? Coaches?  
Describe a time, if it all, where you felt unsafe, anxious or depressed, especially in school. What did you do?  
How did your K-12 experiences influence the person you are today?  
What would you have changed about your school to make it a more supportive environment for LGBTIQ individuals?  
Suggestions for educators?                                                                                                                                 |

61
| Conclusion | • Briefly summarize main discussion points and ask if the summary is accurate  
|           | • Ask if participants have additional questions or comments  
|           | • Say “Thank you for participating in tonight’s focus group and sharing your thoughts.” |
APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Gender Identity: 

Age: 

Sexual Orientation: 

Ethnicity: 

Please indicate the following information on your K-12 School:

1. Public  Private  (Circle one)

2. Rural  Urban  Suburban  (Circle one)

3. State located: 

63