

COLLECTIVE MEMORIES OF LGBTQ+ YOUTH  
IN TENNESSEE HIGH SCHOOLS

by

Tara M. Prairie

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Bethany Wrye, Chair

Dr. Joey Gray

Dr. Norman Weatherby

Dr. Jackie Eller

This dissertation is dedicated to anyone who has ever been bullied and especially to those who are no longer here. I am sorry you are not around to see that it does get better. I see you. I love you. I won't stop fighting.

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Although bullying impacts students nationwide, evidence shows that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, asexual, and pansexual (LGBTQ+) youth experience bullying victimization at higher rates than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Kann et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2013; Peterson et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2013). It is important for researchers to find adequate interventions that can help promote safe environments within schools for LGBTQ+ students. Previous research has found that participatory action research (PAR) such as collective memory work (CMW) shows potential for “developing ongoing positive social change in the environments” for transgender, queer, and questioning youth (Johnson, Singh & Gonzalez, 2014). Johnson et al., (2014) conducted a successful study utilizing CMW which led to the Georgia Safe Schools Coalition. This study seeks to replicate Johnson et al., (2014) and better understand the high school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth by examining the phenomenon through the theoretical framework of social constructionism using collective memory work (CMW) as the research method.

**Methods:** This dissertation involves collective memory work which involved recruiting (ages 12-24) to CMW stories. The first story should involve a high school memory that positively impacted their gender and/or sexual identity development and the second story should involve a high school memory that negatively impacted their gender and/or sexual identity development.

**Results/Discussion:** Replies were received from eight participants thus far with 62% attending high schools in rural areas. Specific to positive stories, participants report positive, supportive friends and allies confronting homophobic remarks or behaviors as having a positive impact. Also having a safe space such as “drama club” has a positive impact on how a participant viewed their identity. Specific to negative stories, overall schools are not supportive especially when addressing openly made homophobic remarks or tension and fighting. As reported by one student, even if unintentional, reinforcement of cisgender, heterosexual experiences as standard has a negative impact.

Preliminary results suggest that bullying of LGBTQ+ students is an issue and that schools do not adequately address or try to prevent bullying within their schools. We need to receive additional results to help build a knowledge base to guide further research.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the most recent National School Climate Survey from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2017a), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, asexual, and pansexual (LGBTQ+) youth report a lack of support from teachers and school administrators despite increased likelihood of verbal harassment, physical harassment, and assault. Johnson, Singh, and Gonzales (2014) recently noted that increased rates of LGBT+ bullying result from non-action or “looking the other way” by school administration and teachers. Further, the authors noted that some school personnel go so far as to deny the existence of LGBT+ students at their school and in turn do not hold bullying perpetrators accountable. Not punishing bullies on the basis of the idea that there are no LGBT+ students at a school only makes bullying a socially acceptable norm (Johnson et al., 2014).

However, in response to inquiries from parents, principals, school superintendents, and teachers about Title IX protections for transgender students, the United States Department of Education published a Dear Colleague Letter on May 13, 2016. To be in compliance with Title IX, a school (K-12 or higher education) “agrees that it will not exclude, separate, deny benefits to, or otherwise treat differently on the basis of sex any person in its education programs or activities unless expressly authorized to do so under Title IX or its implementing regulations” (Lhamon & Gupta, 2016, p. 2). Part of compliance

requires that schools provide a nondiscriminatory and safe environment for all students, which the letter confirms includes transgender students. According to the Dear Colleague letter, “if sex-based harassment creates a hostile environment, the school must take prompt and effective steps to end harassment, prevent its reoccurrence, and as appropriate, remedy its effects” (Lhamon & Gupta, 2016, p.2). Despite Title IX being in place, the current executive administration withdrew federal protections for transgender students and gave the determination for civil rights back to the states.

The idea of transgender student protection being determined by states’ rights is compounded by the fact there are currently seven states (Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas) in America that forbid teachers from discussing gay and transgender issues in a positive light. Two states, Missouri and South Dakota, have laws that prevent enumeration of anti-bullying policies in local school districts. Similar measures have been attempted in Tennessee with consistent efforts to pass the “Don’t Say Gay” bill aimed to prevent teachers from discussing gay and transgender issues in a positive light. The bill further seeks to prevent access to positive resources regarding LGBT+ information. Only fifteen states (California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin) have enacted nondiscrimination laws to protect LGBTQ+ students and none of them are within the southeast (GLSEN, 2017b). Unfortunately, most students not afforded a safe place within their schools or communities do not have the privilege of simply

moving to a different school or community. Still, research on best practices on how to make schools a safe place for LGBTQ+ students is growing (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Chen-Hayes, 2001; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Hirschfeld, 2001; Johnson, Singh, & Gonzalez, 2014; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Payne & Smith, 2010; Riggs, Rosenthal, & Smith-Bonahue, 2011; Singh & Burnes, 2009; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013).

### **Relevance of research**

In 2014, the Tennessee state government enacted the Religious Viewpoints Administration Act, Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-1802 which allows and arguably encourages bullying in the name of “religious freedom”. The need to assure high schools provide safe environments for LGBTQ+ students in Tennessee is great. Responses from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 2015 State Snapshot: School Climate in Tennessee survey indicate that safety is an issue for many LGBTQ+ secondary students in Tennessee schools. The majority of students report hearing anti-LGBT remarks during school with 90% hearing homophobic remarks, 86% hearing negative remarks about gender expression, and 76% hearing transphobic remarks. Further, 28% of students regularly heard school staff make homophobic remarks and almost half of students heard staff make negative remarks about gender expression (GLSEN, 2017b).

Specific to harassment in schools, 83% of secondary students experienced verbal harassment, 36% experienced physical harassment, and 18% of students experienced physical assault due to their sexual orientation. Regarding gender expression, 57% of secondary students experienced verbal harassment, 26% experienced physical harassment, and 13% of students experienced physical assault due to their gender expression. When harassment was reported to school staff, only 32% of students said it resulted in an effective intervention. Further, 42% of students experienced disciplinary action for public displays of affection when no similar actions were taken against non-LGBTQ students (GLSEN, 2017b).

Other discrimination experienced includes being prevented from bringing a same-gender date to a school dance (28%), reprimanded for wearing clothes considered inappropriate for gender (27%), being unable to use the bathroom or locker room that aligns with their gender (22%), being prevented from using preferred name or gender pronoun (21%), and being prevented or discouraged from forming or promoting a gay straight alliance (19%). In comparison, only 3% of Tennessee students report attending a school with comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies that include specific protections based on gender identity/expression and sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2017b).

Bullying victimization is a national problem and accounts for a significant part of reported incidence of school-based violence. Bullying within schools has become so prevalent that it is often referred to as an epidemic within academia,

news media, and public discourse (Cohen & Brooks, 2018). National data from GLSEN reports over half of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at school because their sexual orientation and 43.3% felt unsafe because of their gender expression. Percentages of harassment and assault on the national level were similar to Tennessee. Nationally, 63.5% of students who reported an incident to school staff were told to ignore it or faced inaction by the administration. Seventy-four percent of students on a national level faced some form of sexual minority or gender discrimination. Further, 50.9% of transgender students were prevented from using their preferred name or pronoun and 60% were denied access to bathrooms or locker rooms of the sex with whom they identified.

Experiencing discrimination and/or victimization can have a significant impact academically and mentally on LGBTQ+ students. Students who experience higher levels of discrimination and/or victimization are more likely to have poor academic outcomes (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Bouris, Everett, Heath, Elsaesser, & Neilands, 2016; D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; GLSEN, 2017a; Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006; Hirschfeld, 2001; Johnson, Singh, & Gonzalez, 2014; Kann et al., 2016; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, Greytak, 2013; Payne & Smith, 2010; Riggs, Rosenthal, & Smith-Bonahue, 2011). GLSEN (2017a) found that LGBTQ+ students who experienced discrimination and/or victimization in a hostile school climate were three times as likely to have missed school in the past month as those who had not. Additionally, LGBTQ+ students had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than their peers and considered dropping out of school. Specific to higher levels of

victimization, these students were more likely to have been disciplined and were twice as likely to report they did not plan to pursue post-secondary education.

Concerning mental health, LGBTQ+ students who experienced discrimination and/or victimization in a hostile school climate reported lower self-esteem, lower school belonging, and higher levels of depression (GLSEN, 2017a). The GLSEN (2017a) findings reinforce previous research that addressed the harmful psychological effects a hostile school climate can have on LGBTQ+ students (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Goodenow et al., 2006; Hirschfeld, 2001; Kann et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2013; Riggs et al., 2011). In addition to low self-esteem, low school belonging, and depression; students can struggle with anxiety, psychological trauma, increased substance abuse and sexual risk behaviors, and increased suicidality (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Goodenow et al., 2006; Hirschfeld, 2001; Kann et al., 2016; Peterson, Matthews, Copps-Smith, & Conard, 2017; Riggs et al., 2011).

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is a national school-based survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control that measures risk behaviors among youth such as diet, drinking, drug use, physical activity, and smoking. In 2015, two questions asking about sexual identity and sexual contact were added to the survey and distributed to 25 states and 19 large urban school districts. Analyzing the recent YRBS 2015, Kann et al. (2016) found that 42.8% of lesbian, gay, or bisexual students seriously considered attempting suicide in

comparison to 14.8% of heterosexual students. Having made a suicide plan was more prevalent among lesbian, gay, or bisexual students (38.2%) than among heterosexual students (11.9%). In regard to attempted suicide, the prevalence of having attempted suicide was higher among lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (29.4%) in comparison to heterosexual students (6.4%). The 2016 YRBS was expanded nationally to study the health risk behaviors of lesbian, gay, bisexual high school students and is piloting a question in the 2017 YRBS cycle to include transgender students (CDC, 2017). Peterson et al. (2017) addressed the paucity of research specific to transgender adolescents but reported that one quarter of all transgender youth have attempted suicide and over one third have participated in self-injurious behaviors.

Research has also found that schools with safe space programs can help provide the safe, nurturing environment that LGBT+ students need to flourish (Byrd & Hays, 2013). Further having a Gay-Straight Alliance within a school increases visibility of supportive school staff, increase a sense of belonging, and decreases verbal and physical harassment of LGBT+ students (Lassiter, 2015). A common theme of successful safe space programs is that they educate and incorporate allies dedicated to promoting safe, nondiscriminatory environments for LGBT+ students. Additionally, having a supportive adult at school means that students are less likely to be threatened and less likely to attempt suicide (Byrd & Hays, 2013).

## **Statement of purpose**

The purpose of this research was to conduct a transcendental phenomenological study using collective memory work to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals as students in Tennessee high schools. Concepts considered include positive and negative experiences in high school that may have impacted gender and/or sexual identity development and to what extent students experienced or were aware of bullying. Through a better understanding of issues LGBTQ+ secondary students face in school, it is more likely that an effective intervention can be developed to help schools evolve into supportive, safe environments. This project is part of a larger study to replicate the Johnson et al. (2014) study, “It’s complicated’: Collective memories of transgender, queer, and questioning youth in high school”, which informed a resource manual published via the Georgia Safe Schools Coalition that was distributed to over 900 elementary and secondary schools in Georgia. Johnson et al. (2014) will be discussed in greater detail within the literature review. The authors from the study did recommend that future research strive to replicate the study with a more diverse sample including looking at intersections of race/ethnicity, religious upbringing, and geographic location.

Submissions for collective memory work in the present study will ultimately be used as part of a sequential exploratory design to determine to what extent collective memory work is an effective tool in helping to create a safe place training intervention for high schools in the state of Tennessee and the

southeast. Additionally, participatory action research not only provides a platform for participants to share their story but includes them in the research process throughout the study including subsequent action planning and change implementation (Aldridge, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; McIntyre, 2000; Tuck, 2009).

### **Research question**

To help add to this body of research, the following research question will guide this inquiry: What are the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in Tennessee high schools?

### **Theoretical approach**

Despite one's own education and research experience, when trying to bring about real social change, it is important to allow the lived experiences of marginalized groups to take center stage in research (Creswell, 2013; Groenewald, 2004; Hays, 2012; Smith, 2007). With social constructionism, individuals seek to understand their world and to develop meanings of their experiences. The goal of research under the theory is to rely upon participants' views of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Embree, 2009). More recently, there has been influence within social constructionism to research the ways events are presented and modelled in language (Owen, 1995), for example collective memory work. Johnson et al. (2014) chose collective memory work because participants are viewed as collaborators in research with the goal of consciousness-raising and social justice awareness. Outside of replicating

Johnson et al. (2014), capturing the perceived social realities of LGBTQ+ individuals' high school experiences in Tennessee is the main focus of this study and why social constructionist theory was applied.

The foundation for social constructionist theory starts with the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) specific to transcendental phenomenology which involves the scientific study of how phenomena appears to an individual's consciousness (Embree, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology focuses on the concept of bracketing, which involves researchers setting aside their experiences to view a phenomenon with a fresh perspective. It requires researchers to look at a phenomenon openly without prejudgment or presupposition. Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), a student of Husserl followed his professor's work with Sociological Phenomenology. Schutz' sociological phenomenology combined Husserl's phenomenology with Max Weber's sociological concepts of ideal type construction and interpretive understanding (Embree, 2009). What resulted is the view that in their day-to-day existence, individuals have many constructs in which to interpret themselves and others. Individuals experience both an objective and subjective existence but also see the world shared with others intersubjectively. Further, because individuals bring past biography and social position to their actions, socially constructed shared experiences by individuals from different backgrounds can result in numerous views of social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Embree, 2009).

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality* built upon Schutz' work but the authors were also influenced by Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and George Herbert Mead in their creation of social constructionism. However, it is Marx that Berger and Luckmann (1966, pp. 5) extol as having the clearest statement regarding social construction of reality in the phrase, "man's consciousness is determined by his social being". The authors elaborate on social being involving human activity of laboring together and the social relationships that emerge from the shared labor. These relationships represent the main focus of social construction theory which is to illustrate how individuals and groups partake in the construction of perceived social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Frigga Haug as part of a German feminist and socialist collective created collective memory work by combining social construction theory and feminist research approaches. Like other social constructionists, the women in the collective also found inspiration from Karl Marx citing his work in *Female Sexualization*, noting that "the organization of society and the State evolves continuously out of the life processes of particular individuals" (Haug, 1999, p. 33). Regarding feminist research, the collective expanded upon consciousness raising methods of the 1970's (Haug, 1999). Consciousness raising groups became an organizing tool of the feminist movement to provide not only a place for women to share their stories and struggles but also a way to mobilize feminist activism (Haug, 1999; hooks, 2000). With their work, the collective found that the construction of self develops from recalling events and the way these events

were subsequently constructed. According to Onyx & Small (2001, p. 774), “because the self is socially constructed through reflection, Haug et al. (1987) used memories as their initial data, hence the name of the method”.

Since this study is most concerned with obtaining first person accounts of the phenomenon of being an LGBTQ+ student within a Tennessee high school which may include how participants make meaning of their sexual and gender identities and to what extent they have experienced bullying while in high school, social constructionist theory utilizing collective memory work is the best fit for this study. It is important to share the stories and experiences of current and past LGBTQ+ secondary students to inform how bullying is addressed in high schools and to inform the development of a safe space intervention.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Introduction and purpose**

The purpose of this research was to conduct a transcendental phenomenological study using collective memory work to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals as students in Tennessee high schools. Concepts considered include positive and negative experiences in high school that may have impacted gender and/or sexual identity development and to what extent students experienced or were aware of bullying. Through a better understanding of issues LGBTQ+ secondary students face in school, it is more likely that an effective intervention can be developed to help schools evolve into supportive, safe environments.

#### **Bullying**

**Definition.** Bullying is a global problem and accounts for a significant part of reported incidences of school-based violence. According to Arora (1987), bullying is “achieving or maintaining social dominance through overtly aggressive means which occur because the victims have no sufficient skills or capacity to integrate with their peer group.” Another common definition is that bullying involves “physical or psychological abuse of an individual by one or a group of students” (Hoover, 1993). There are also different types of bullying. Physical bullying involves actual physical assault, i.e. hitting, kicking, etc. Relational or

social bullying involves damaging victim's relationships with other peers and can involve exclusion, rumors, and verbal aggression (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). Cyberbullying involves hurtful and intended communication activity using any form of technological device including internet and mobile phones (Erdur-Baker, 2010). Research has found that students most commonly report incidences of verbal bullying followed by relational, physical, and cyberbullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007).

**Health implications.** Students who are bullied, report higher levels of anxiety, depression, helplessness, loneliness, and suicide ideation in addition to poorer social and emotional adjustment (Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, & Verloove-Vanharik, 2005; Owusu, Hart, Oliver, & Kang, 2011; Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Fekkes et al. (2005) studied preceding and proceeding health issues specific to bullying victimization. The authors found that students who were bullied at the beginning of the school year had significantly higher chances of developing new psychosomatic and psychosocial problems throughout the school year. Health problems with particularly high odds ratios include bedwetting (4.71), depression (4.18), feeling tense (3.04), anxiety (3.01), and abdominal pain (2.37). In comparison, the study found students reporting anxiety, depression, or poor appetite were at higher risk of bullying victimization by the end of the school year. A potential explanation for psychosocial health symptoms preceding bullying is that anxious or depressed behavior may be perceived as a vulnerability by potential bullies (Fekkes et al., 2005).

Further, some studies report that a student does not have to participate in bullying as either a perpetrator or a victim to suffer health implications from it (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Rivers et al., 2009; Russell, Frantz & Driscoll). Out of the 2,002 students surveyed from their study, Rivers et al. (2009) 63% reported having witnessed bullying of a peer during a current term. Of those students, 30.4% identified themselves as witnesses only meaning they had not participated in bullying and did not identify as bully a victim. Even when controlling for the effect of also being a perpetrator or victim, the study found that witnessing bullying of peers significantly predicted elevated reported mental health risks (range of  $\beta = .07$  to  $.15$ ). Mental health risks from witnessing bullying include somatic complaints, depression, anxiety, paranoid ideation, and substance abuse (Rivers et al., 2009). Potential explanations for the elevated mental health risks associated with witnessing bullying include increased anxiety from observing victimization or psychological co-victimization or revictimization (Russell et al., 2001). Yet when sexual minority students have access to HIV education appropriate to lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, they report lower rates of other health risk behaviors, including high-risk sexual behaviors, planning suicide, and skipping school (Goodenow et al., 2006).

### **LGBTQ+ secondary students**

Although bullying impacts students nationwide, evidence shows that LGBTQ+ youth experience bullying victimization at higher rates than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Kann et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2013; Peterson et al., 2017;

Singh et al., 2013). The most recent results from YRBS show that while 18.8% of heterosexual students were bullied on school property, 34.2% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and 24.9% of “not sure” or questioning students were bullied on school property (Kann et al., 2016). It is important to note that the YRBS does not inquire about trans identity but a question asking about trans identity is planned to be piloted in 2017. However, a national survey conducted by GLSEN found that 87% of trans youth experienced verbal bullying, 53% experienced physical bullying, 26% were physically assaulted, and 68% of trans youth did not attend school due to fear for their safety (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). Further, Singh et al. (2013) noted that gender-nonconforming lesbian, gay, and bisexual students reported significantly higher levels of past bullying along with higher levels of current mental health symptoms in comparison to their cisgender peers.

Similar to the findings of Rivers et al. (2009), and Russel et al. (2001), D’Augelli et al. (2002) reported co-victimization or revictimization of lesbian, gay, or bisexual students who witness bullying of fellow sexual minority peers. Witnessing the bullying of sexual minority peers also resulted in similar mental health symptoms including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. Mental health difficulties including depression, suicidality, and substance abuse are generally higher among LGBTQ+ populations and experiencing bullying can exacerbate these conditions (Birkett, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2015; D’Augelli et al., 2002; Goodenow et al., 2006). In addition to drug use-related risk behaviors,

lesbian, gay, or bisexual students report a higher instance of tobacco use-related risk behaviors and sexual risk behaviors (Kann et al., 2016).

One way to counteract the negative health outcomes of bullying at schools is to employ supportive staff (Athanasas & Larrabee, 2003; Goodenow et al., 2006; Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2013). According to Greytak et al., (2013), LGBT students who could identify supportive school staff not only reported more positive wellbeing but also better academic outcomes. LGBTQ+ students report increased feelings of safety when they have access to supportive staff (Kosciw et al., 2013). Research on school gay and straight alliances (GSAs) have found that GSAs are associated with lower rates of bullying, a greater sense of belonging, and improved mental health outcomes (GLSEN, 2017a; Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw, 2013). Having access to supportive staff and GSAs at schools falls within the purview of Intergroup Contact Theory.

Intergroup Contact Theory suggests that intergroup contact causes a reduction in prejudice across a range of groups and settings (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Research has found that heterosexual individuals who know or have known individuals who identify as gay or lesbian, on average are significantly less homophobic than heterosexual individuals who have not had such contact (Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993; & Walch, Orlosky, Sinkkanen, & Stevens, 2010). GSAs bringing LGBTQ+ students, allies, friends, and supportive teachers together has the ability of reducing prejudice across a range of groups within a school. Other research has found potential for

intergroup dialogues within schools however, some of the teachers in the study were hesitant to participate out of fear, reluctance to be more affirming, and disagreement that school is not the appropriate place to have discussions pertaining to sexual orientation (Dessel, 2010). Dessel's study actually took place in Tennessee and they reported that recruitment for the study was challenged by the local conservative, religious culture.

### **“It's Complicated”**

Johnson et al. (2014) used collective memory work which is grounded in social constructionist theory to explore how transgender, queer, and questioning (TQQ) youth make meaning of their gender identity and sexual orientation through their experiences in high school. Collective memory work as a research method fits under the umbrella of participatory action research (PAR) which involves participants becoming collaborators in research for and about them instead of simply being informants. Johnson et al. (2014) recruited 15 participants ages 18-22 whose high school experiences were fresh in their memory. Participants were asked to write one positive and one negative memory from high school that impacted their gender or sexual identity development. The stories had to be written in third person and were used within focus group sessions. Three central themes emerged from their study: 1) "it's complicated", 2) "you should be able to be safe", and 3) "this is what action looks like!". Participants spoke about the complicated nature of attending high school as a TQQ student, the importance of being safe within their own schools, and

described actions educations can take to make schools safer. The participants in the study also reported frequent incidents of bullying and hostility in school and the importance of increased knowledge for school personnel specific to the unique challenges TQQ youth face. The research findings from this study resulted in two documentaries and a resource manual that has been distributed to over 900 schools within the state of Georgia. The authors recommend replicating the study with a more diverse sample and focus on intersections of identity with geographic location, race/ethnicity, religious upbringing, and socioeconomic status.

### **Prevention and intervention efforts**

Results from Russell, Kay, Ioverno, & Toomey, (2015) suggest that adopting multiple sexual orientation and gender identity focused programs and practices may be most beneficial to schools lacking current protections. This is important to note that nationally 54.5% of schools (GLSEN, 2017a) and only 3% of Tennessee students attend schools that have sexual orientation and gender identity focused programs and practices. Programs and practices recommended by Russell et al. (2015), include prohibiting harassment at schools, providing opportunities for professional development, assuring safe places and health services for LGBTQ+ students, supporting a GSA, and implementing an anti-bullying program. Most schools referenced in the articles found for this study do not meet all of these recommendations.

Intervention efforts specific to teachers seem to emphasize their potential individual roles in creating safe environments within schools for LGBTQ+ students (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Riggs et al., 2011). The interventions conducted in these studies targeted pre-service, prospective teachers with the goal of decreasing homophobia and increasing knowledge of issues affecting LGBTQ+ students. The goal is for pre-service, prospective teachers to become better advocates for the LGBTQ+ students through participation in these interventions (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Riggs et al., 2011). Additionally, their actions through the treatment of students or comfort level in intervening during a bullying event may inspire others to seek out resources for change.

While literature has documented the benefits of LGBTQ+ students having access to supportive teachers, it is important to note that any potential benefits may be mitigated by unsupportive school environments or cultures. Even with non-discriminatory policies in place, schools may still struggle with bullying if the policy is not effectively implemented and lingering prejudices or misconceptions are not adequately addressed within the culture (Human Rights Watch, 2001). For schools to make positive, social change for LGBTQ+ students within their schools a more holistic approach is recommended (Chen-Hayes, 2001; Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Hirschfeld, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Johnson et al., 2014; Payne & Smith, 2010; Singh & Burnes, 2009).

Recent literature has called for increased research in school psychology specific to LGBT+ youth (Espalage, 2015). A sample of eight school support journals found that only .3 to 3% of the journals between 2000-2014 included LGBT+ related research (Espalage, 2015; Graybill & Proctor, 2016). Intervention efforts specific to school counselors generally spoke to their role in a more collaborative approach with teachers and other school administrators, in addition to the students they work with (Chen-Hayes, 2001; Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Hirschfeld, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Singh & Burnes, 2009). Additionally, through its National Model (2012), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) emphasizes the school counselor's role "as a systems change agent to create an environment promoting and supporting student success." Building upon this idea, Gonzalez & McNulty (2010) utilized the Georgia Safe Schools Coalition resource manual as an outline that school counselors may adopt to maximize advocacy for transgender students. Effective messaging, student empowerment, educating school personnel, and legislative and community collaboration act as four strategies to provide the framework for advocacy. Particularly with student empowerment, Gonzalez & McNulty (2010) noted that under the active leadership of school counselors, GSAs can adopt a more activist approach and challenge school policies. Gonzalez' follow up research with Johnson et al. (2014) affirms this study's findings, especially regarding the importance of collaborating with LGBTQ+ youth on issues that impact them. Collaboration not only empowers them through sharing their stories but also by participating in the research

process which gives them the opportunity to advocate for positive social change that benefits them and other LGBTQ+ youth the follow.

### **Summary**

According to Athanases & Larrabee (2003, pp. 242), "self-acceptance is the best predictor of mental health, and 'a general sense of personal worth, coupled with a positive view of their sexual orientation, appears to be critical for the youths' mental health.'" Yet bullying within school for many LGBTQ+ youth has become a common daily occurrence. Knowing the long lasting physical and mental health implications of bullying victimization, researchers are trying to find interventions that can help adequately address and prevent bullying. This study operates on the premise that by creating spaces for LGBTQ+ youth to engage in the research process and collaborate with them in designing plans of action; we are providing them the opportunity to become advocates for themselves and their communities.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### **Purpose**

The current study took the social constructionist viewpoint utilizing collective memory work (CMW) research methods to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals as students in Tennessee high schools. In exploring the meaning of participants' lived experiences, particular attention was paid to positive and negative experiences in high school that impacted their gender and/or sexual identity development and to what extent they experienced or were aware of bullying in high school. Collective memory work falls within the larger scope of participatory action research which allows for collaboration between researchers and participants and has the goal of consciousness-raising and social justice awareness (Johnson, Singh & Gonzalez, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2012). With CMW, participants are involved with both the generation and analysis of data. Further, the research process allows participants to recall experiences and feelings without the interviewer directing them.

#### **Study design**

**Collective memory work.** Minors are generally marginalized and excluded from conversations that directly impact their public and/or political lives (Aldridge, 2015). Identifying as LGBTQ+ can compound upon existing marginalization as another layer of oppression (Campbell & Deacon, 2006).

Because of the unique insights minors can offer, recently there has been greater recognition about the importance of including minors in participatory action research (PAR) (Aldridge, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014) since PAR emphasizes that research for and about a population involve that population as collaborators and not simply informants. The present study design involved participatory action research (PAR) using collective memory work as the research method with both minor and adult LGBTQ+ populations.

According to McIntyre (2000, pp.128), most PAR projects are guided by the following principles: “1) the collective investigation of the problem, 2) the reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand the problem, and 3) the desire to take individual and/or collective action.” Collective memory work, as a subset of PAR, meets these general guidelines since it perceives participants as collaborators within the research study and the goal of the research is to develop, ongoing positive social change for the marginalized group you are working with (Johnson et al., 2014). Further, PAR draws on qualitative research approaches such as collective memory work in order to better understand the circumstances impacting the population they are studying (McTaggart, 1991). Collective memory work has become a mechanism for deliberation, learning, and activism. As a method, CMW takes place in three phases. The first phase involves the actual writing of the memory. The guidelines for writing a memory involve:

- writing a memory of a particular episode, action, or event,
- writing the piece in third person,

- providing as much detail as possible including inconsequential or trivial details, and
- not importing biography, explanation, or interpretation (Easpaig, 2017; Onyx & Small, 2001; Small, 2004).

The second phase involves the participants discussing the collective stories in focus or nominal groups which are often recorded. The third phase involves further examination and feedback from group members which can be used for recommendations and/or social change (Kippax, Crawford, Benton, Gault, & Noesjirwan, 1988; Onyx & Small, 2001; Small, 2004). Also referred to as social memory, CMW is grounded in social constructionist theory (Kansteiner, 2002; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Onyx & Small, 2001) which supports the rationale for applying the theory as the theoretical framework for this project.

**First phase.** For the purposes of this study, only the first phase will be addressed in this dissertation. While the primary investigator met with five individuals in person, only two of them provided written stories and one of them submitted their story via Facebook. The other two participants were hesitant to participate – one because of fear of political climate and not being “out” and one that found the study triggering. The individual that found the project triggering disclosed during the initial meeting that his mother conspired with high school administration to assure he and his boyfriend remained separated throughout the school day. This individual was already seeing a therapist and they discussed the triggering event. The primary investigator reminded each of the participants that

they have the right to decline participation at any time during the research process. Other potential participants expressed concern with confidentiality of the study. Placing the study online was approved as an amendment to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to help recruit additional subjects. While guidelines to writing a memory are provided, participants seemed less likely to provide as much detail as possible and follow-up is not an option in this case due to the anonymous survey because of its sensitive nature.

**Bias exploration and bracketing.** A distinct procedure for transcendental phenomenology involves, "... bracketing out one's experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, pp. 80). Conducting a phenomenological study will help obtain a fresh perspective of the high school environment for LGBTQ+ students in Tennessee by focusing more on the experiences of the participants versus the interpretations of the researcher. While even Moustakas (1994) acknowledges bracketing can be a challenge, most researchers address their own experiences with the phenomenon at the beginning of their project before addressing the experiences of their participants.

In this case, I as the primary investigator have experience with being bullied in high school for "being a nerd" and also participating in bullying behavior as a member of a Panhellenic sorority. Since then, I have participated in several anti-bullying campaigns and am dedicated to decreasing bullying in not only education but other fields including medicine. Additionally, as an instructor and

researcher of stigma and how it impacts the LGBTQ+ population in education and health, it is necessary for me to acknowledge and attempt to bracket these experiences.

Further, I worked closely with the dissertation committee which is comprised of professors experienced with qualitative research. Tufford & Newman (2010) recommend memo or note writing as a potential method of bracketing research bias. I began keeping a journal in November 2017. Immediately after introductory meetings, I wrote notes regarding the meeting and my impressions of the behaviors and mannerisms of the potential participants. I did not write notes during the meeting because I wanted the participants to have my full attention. I also wrote about my struggles with recruiting subjects and my frustrations with what seem like almost daily news articles about the current executive administration and/or states rescinding the protections and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. While reading the online statements and organizing them into significant statements and themes, I also wrote in my journal. Throughout the research process I shared my journal entries with committee members.

### **Instrument development**

This project is part of a larger study to replicate Johnson et al. (2014). Mirroring the original study, participants were asked to write about two memories (1-2) pages each. One memory involved a positive high school experience that impacted their sexual identity and the second memory involved a negative high school experience that impacted their sexual identity. Demographic information

(gender, race, sexuality, religious upbringing, geographic location, age, and Tennessee high school graduation date) was also collected.

### **Data collection and entry**

**Sampling.** Stratified purposeful sampling was employed to obtain a sample of LGBTQ+ individuals who attend or have recently attended a high school within the state of Tennessee. Stratified purposeful sampling allows researchers to consider potential distinguishing features of subgroups of the phenomenon being studied. In this case, the inclusion criteria to participate in the study requires participants be adults ages 18-24 who have recently graduated from high school or minors ages 14-17 who are currently attending high school within the state of Tennessee. Potential adult participants were recruited from university LGBTQ+ groups and/or centers through the organization e-mail. Additional inclusion criteria for minor participants is that they belong to a positive youth development program in the south east exclusively focusing on LGBTQ+ young people. As long as potential participants meet the above criteria, no one was excluded from the study.

**Procedures.** The primary investigator drafted and with approval from the faculty advisor, submitted the appropriate IRB forms to the Research Compliance Office. Subsequent to the receipt of the IRB approval letter, the primary investigator recruited adult participants (ages 18-24) from university LGBTQ+ groups and/or centers within the state of Tennessee and minor participants (ages 14-17) were recruited with permission from the director of a positive youth

development program. A 30-minute orientation was held for individuals who were interested in participating in the research study. Individuals who participated online, read an introductory consent page prior to participating in the study.

As part of the collective memory work, individuals who assented or consented to participate in the study were asked to provide two memories (written 1-2 pages each) in preparation for the focus group session. Traditionally, the memories are written but some participants may be hesitant to provide written work. Because of this, all participants were given the choice to provide their stories via audio tape. Additionally, individuals were given the option to participate in an online version of the study to address hesitation to participate in the study due to confidentiality. Participants were given one (1) week to write the stories and submit them to researchers.

### **Phenomenological analysis**

Following notification of the online submissions, each participant was numbered and any reference of names in their stories were either given a pseudonym or changed to their general title. For example, one story referenced a specific school principal so in this case, the identifying name was dropped, and was referred to as “the Principal” in the story. Gender neutral pseudonyms were given to all participants. The primary investigator read the submissions multiple times to gain an understanding of each participant’s experience. Notes were taken, labeling statements or themes using in vivo terms or the actual language of participants. Most online participants only provided a few statements for both

their positive and negative stories; however, significant statements were documented and are presented in Table 1. Once meanings were formulated from the significant statements, the formulated meanings were clustered, which allowed for the emergence of themes common throughout the participants' responses. These data are presented in Table 2. The primary investigator then developed a textural description by writing about what the participants experienced which includes verbatim examples. Next, a structural description of participant experiences was developed to provide a context that may have influenced how the participants experienced a phenomenon. Finally, the principal investigator combined the textural and structural descriptions to convey an overall "essence" of the phenomenon or shared experiences of the participants.

**Trustworthiness.** According to Creswell (2013) validation, also known as trustworthiness, is an approach to ensure credibility of research findings. Mirroring, Johnson et al. (2014), there are several validation strategies that the primary investigator implemented into the research process. Member checking of participant data was conducted to ensure accuracy and participants approved their data. Member checking was also conducted to identify themes within participant responses.

**Table 1: Selected examples of significant statements from collective memories of LGBTQIA+ youth in Tennessee high schools**

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning
<p>The one moment that positively impacted my sexual identity is when I was in my government and economics class and a male was being absolutely homophobic. He was talking about how any gay person would go to hell and how marriage can't be legal that way. I was closeted at the time but the entire class defended the gay community despite the fact that it was not something that was typically accepted.</p>	<p>Allies willing to step up and challenge homophobic attitudes or behavior can make a positive impact on LGBTQ+ students out or not. By challenging toxic individuals or bullies, allies create an environment of validation and a safe space even if for that brief moment.</p>
<p>Pretty much the entire high school experience negatively impacted my development. Everyone talks bad about people that are gay/trans. I was closeted so many people felt comfortable talking negatively about the community around me so I could not truly express myself until I left everyone behind.</p>	<p>Schools that do not adequately address homophobia and/or LGBTQ+ bullying create negative school environments where LGBTQ+ students may feel the need to dissimulate instead of be themselves.</p>
<p>The drama club was probably the most LGBT friendly part of my high school. That is where all the LGBT kids went to escape the mostly homophobic rest of the high school. Many great memories were made in drama club.</p>	<p>Having a safe space where students can feel free to be themselves can have a positive impact.</p>
<p>The coach stopped me after lunch one day after he saw me wearing my Dairy Queen nametag that said Devin. He pulled me aside and told me that "God made me a girl, I'm not a boy, I'll never be a boy, my birth certificate says female, and that I need to stop". He made me miss class time to harass me.</p>	<p>Transgender students can face transantagonism and bullying from school administrators in addition to their peers.</p>
<p>So there is a transgender male (1) that is passing at school. Everyone treats him like a "regular guy". However, he notices that another trans male is at his school. This trans male doesn't present as masculine as a transgender male.</p>	<p>Passing within the transgender community is considered a privilege because those who pass are seen "as one of the girls/guys" and it legitimizes their identity. Others that do not pass, are often ostracized.</p>
<p>Turns out a woman at the school, age 45, mother of 2 that had attended the school found the Instagram account and instead of telling the truth, made up lies. The anime the girl watched was her being a Satanist, her liking girls made her a child pornographer. She got kicked out of the school, she lost all her friends, and it impacted her forever, she learned not to be so open about her views or who she loves even around her friends.</p>	<p>A student was kicked out of her home school co-op due to the bullying and ignorance of an adult parent of other students.</p>

Table 2: Theme clusters with their associated significant statements

Theme Clusters	Significant Statements
Allies willing to intervene and challenge homophobic attitudes or behavior	<p>I was closeted at the time but the entire class defended the gay community despite the fact that it was not something that was typically accepted.</p> <p>I would not have made it through my senior year if it wasn't for a few amazing, supportive and wonderful faculty members and teachers.</p> <p>The teacher would find ways to make them feel better and get resources and advice.</p>
Negative school environments	<p>Every day of high school negatively impacts most people's sexual identity.</p> <p>Pretty much the entire high school experience negatively impacted my development. I was closeted so many people felt comfortable talking negatively about the community around me.</p> <p>It always felt like tensions were high in my high school. You could never be yourself.</p> <p>Gay was still used to describe anything opposite of "cool," and bisexual meant promiscuous. Lesbians meant a young woman was ugly and unlikable.</p>
Friends/validation	<p>One friend said it was okay to not have any interest and that I might be asexual.</p> <p>Looking back I know I didn't need anyone else's approval or permission to adopt a sexual identity but at the time it was validating that I didn't only feel the way I did because of my age or experience.</p> <p>I made a lot of friends who were queer and encouraged me to look into and question my orientation/gender and helped me when I was doing so.</p> <p>Despite the fact that she turned them down, she explained that it was alright for them to be interested in people of either gender or both.</p> <p>She went on to say that it was normal, healthy, and that they would meet someone one day that loved them as they were for who they were.</p> <p>My friends that I was open with about my sexuality acted positively towards me and didn't treat me any different.</p>
Safe space	<p>The drama club was probably the most LGBT friendly part of my high school. That is where all the LGBT kids went to escape the mostly homophobic rest of the high school. Many great memories were made in drama club.</p>
Transantagonism and bullying from school administrators	<p>The chaos first started with me having to quit choir when my choir director refused to let me wear anything other than a dress to concerts.</p>

Table 2 (cont.)	<p>I started using the nurse's restroom so I would not have to use the Women's. A female teacher I had never even been in a class with learned about this and stopped me in the hall, refused to let me pass to go the nurse's room, and told me that the women's restroom was "right there" when i tried to explain, she continued to block my access to the hallway. I ended up crying in the bathroom for 20 minutes because I was so uncomfortable.</p> <p>The office administrator refused to call me by my chosen name over the intercom, even when a counselor asked him to because it wasn't my "legal name" when several other people were called by their nicknames or middle names all the time.</p>
Passing	<p>So there is a transgender male (1) that is passing at school. Everyone treats him like a "regular guy". However, he notices that another trans male is at his school. This trans male doesn't present as masculine as a transgender male. They make fun of this kid with slurs and judge him for painting his nails and dressing slightly more feminine.</p>
Dissimulation	<p>She got kicked out of the school, she lost all her friends, and it impacted her forever, she learned not to be so open about her views or who she loves even around her friends.</p> <p>My school never made me feel comfortable enough to be open about my sexuality.</p>

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## Protection of human subjects

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Middle Tennessee State University granted approval for this study (Protocol Number: 17-2244).

**Informed consent.** Per the Common Rule, Code of Regulations, 45 C.F.R. § 46.116, all elements of consent are included in both consent and assent documents. Prior to introducing collective memory work, the primary investigator assured potential participants comprehended the purpose and procedures of the study, risks and benefits, and how confidentiality is protected in the study. Potential participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and how

consent is a continuous process. Potential participants were informed that they have a choice in how they provide their stories. They had an option to provide written work in-person or online, a voice recorded video chat, or an in-person voice recorded interview. Potential participants were reminded that they can cease participation anytime throughout the study without any repercussions to them or their standing with the university in which this study is housed. The principal investigator then introduced all live consented/assented participants to collective memory work via a 30-minute orientation.

Specific to minors, parents bring their children to the positive youth development program and are aware of their child's identity as LGBTQ+. Therefore, parental consent was obtained due to the parent's knowledge and acceptance of their child's identity. Parental consent forms were sent home with the minors and collected at a follow up visit. Prior to obtaining assent from the minors, they were reminded that even though their parents consented for them to participate, they still have the right to decline participation any time prior to and during participation. Assent was the obtained from the minors following the same procedures set forth above for adult participants.

### **Other ethical considerations**

Each participant was assigned a number prior to participating in the collective memory work. Participants were given the opportunity to choose the method of participation they prefer, specifically, online, typewritten e-mail, e-mailed digital recording, or video conference. To assure that confidentiality was

maintained, only the research team has access to the online submissions, transcriptions, and instrument data.

Participants could cancel or retract participation at any time without negative repercussions. Potential risks of participation included experiencing stress, discomfort, guilt, embarrassment, etc. when thinking and talking about experiences and opinions on being an LGBTQ+ student in a Tennessee high school. Participants were informed of this risk during the initial meeting and reminded that they have the right to not answer any questions they do not feel comfortable answering. Additionally, a list of counseling services were available for referral in case emotional distress occurs from sharing their stories. At the positive youth development program, counselors were on staff to help minor participants should they need someone to talk to.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

The current study took the social constructionist viewpoint utilizing collective memory work (CMW) research methods to explore the phenomena of being an LGBTQ+ student in Tennessee high schools. Concepts considered include positive and negative experiences in high school that may have impacted gender and/or sexual identity development and to what extent students experienced or were aware of bullying. Initially potential adult participants were hesitant to submit their stories in person. Once the study was placed online, eight respondents submitted their stories via the online link and one respondent submitted their study via Facebook. Additionally, two minor participants provided their handwritten stories in person at the positive youth development center. After the submissions were obtained, the primary investigator thoroughly read the statements to identify recurring patterns or themes. With a low response rate and general shortness of the stories, Excel software was used to conduct open coding of the nine online submissions. Any themes and descriptors emerged from the language of the statements themselves. Applying a phenomenological perspective allowed the primary investigator to explicate the online submissions through the social realities of the participants.

## **Participant pool**

The participant pool, while diverse in gender and sexuality, was limited. Replies were received from nine participants thus far with 55% attending/ed high schools in rural areas, 27% from suburban areas, and 18% from urban areas. Participants report graduation dates between 2011-2021. Nine participants identified as Caucasian with one participant identifying as mixed race, and one participant identifying as Hispanic/Mexican. Four participants identified as Christian, followed by three agnostics, two atheists, and one pagan. Out of the eleven participants, one identified as asexual, one identified as bisexual, one identified as a demisexual pansexual, one identified as straight, one identified as pansexual, two identified as gay, two identified as lesbian, and two identified as queer. In regard to gender, one identified as a man, four identified as women, three identified as transgender, and three identified as other, which included agender (2) and gender neutral (1).

Acquisition of participants throughout the state of Tennessee has been a struggle. The primary investigator met with student groups and individuals. While potential participants expressed interest, and felt this study was important, individuals were still hesitant to participate in the study. One potential participant who is a Caucasian, age 22-24, heterosexual, cross-dresser, male, that practices Reformed Judaism works for the federal government and was concerned about being accidentally outed while working in a potentially unsupportive environment.

Upon reflection as to why potential participants may be hesitant to contribute their stories to the project, the current political environments of Tennessee and on the federal level offer potential explanations. Johnson et al. (2014) conducted their study during President Barack Obama's administration which saw an increase in civil rights for LGBT+ citizens which included establishing a task force for bullying and strategies to protect all students including LGBTQ+ under Title IX (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016). While the state of Georgia might have been conservative leaning in its politics, the country as a whole was moving in a direction where LGBT+ individuals were gaining equality. The study reached out to supportive schools for initial adoption of the Georgia Safe Schools Coalition program and it expanded from there leading to over 900 schools adopting their program. In comparison, the present study started at a time where federal protections are being rescinded by the current federal administration and the majority in Tennessee government has been traditionally homophobic in their legislation. Since the 2016 presidential election the current executive office has rolled back rights and protections of LGBT+ individuals and hate crimes toward LGBT+ individuals have increased (Blum, 2017; de Vogue, Mallone, Grinberg, 2017; Levin & Grisham, 2016). With legislatures within state and federal governments that speak openly about their homophobic views, LGBT+ individuals have expressed genuine concern about loss of civil rights (Steinmetz, 2017). Additionally, previous research has found that potential LGBTQ+ participants may be hesitant to participate in research due to a history of discrimination, stigmatization, and violence (Meyer & Wilson, 2009).

### **Transcendental phenomenological perspective**

To gain a better understanding of common or shared experiences of LGBTQ+ students in high schools, the methodology of phenomenology was integral to explicate the online submissions. The following analysis reflects the foundational principles of transcendental phenomenology of obtaining a fresh perspective by focusing more on the experiences of participants versus the interpretations of the researcher.

### **Themes and significant statements**

A variety of themes emerged during the phenomenological analysis of responses to the positive and negative stories from high school that impacted views of sexuality. During the readings, the primary investigator wrote notes on significant statements and in vivo terms from each statement. These significant statements and themes were organized in Excel.

The initial themes recognized were: friends, dissimulate, allies, negative language, validation, status quo, unhealthy relationships, safe space, tension, environment, unsupportive school, transantagonism, barriers, bullying, passing privilege, genderism, religion, and discovery. Upon initial reflection, the themes dissimulate, negative language, status quo, unhealthy relationships, tension, unsupportive school, transantagonism, barriers, bullying, passing privilege, and genderism were all related to or resulted from a negative environment and became subcategories under the theme. Since passing privilege is related to genderism, it became a subcategory under the theme. Barriers and unsupportive

school were also combined into one theme. The primary investigator combined friends and validation since discussion of supportive friends and feeling validated occurred within the same statements. Allies and having access to safe spaces remained individual themes that were referenced only in participants' positive stories.

Follow up review of the statements and themes the primary investigator, concentrated on the frequency of themes. The primary investigator highlighted themes referenced between 6-9 times green, 5-4 times yellow, and 3-1 times red. Upon further reflection, status quo was changed to allosexism since experiencing sexual attraction is what is considered "status quo" in this instance. Since negative language and bullying are interrelated, these two themes were merged under the bully label. Genderism was added as a subcategory under transantagonism since the theme was addressed specifically with one story submitted from Roan, a transgender participant. Additionally, the sentence "Hi! I went through two abusive relationships and many abusive friendships so like, I am a veritable gold mine of bad memories. <3" was removed along with the theme "unhealthy relationships". Unhealthy relationships appeared only once in the analysis with this sentence and the participant did not elaborate on the unhealthy relationships and how they may have impacted their views on sexuality during high school. The primary investigator determined it to not be a significant statement. Tension was only referenced once, and it was specific to fighting and students feeling like they could not be themselves. The statement was relabeled under dissimulate. The resulting themes are represented in Figure 1 by diagram.

For the paper, the themes were organized by their initial reference in either the positive or negative stories. The primary investigator placed discovery under negative stories but kept it a distinct theme from environment because high school is known to be a time of discovery on several issues all of which can result in positive or negative stories. However, the specific reference to discovery in this study was within the context of a negative story.

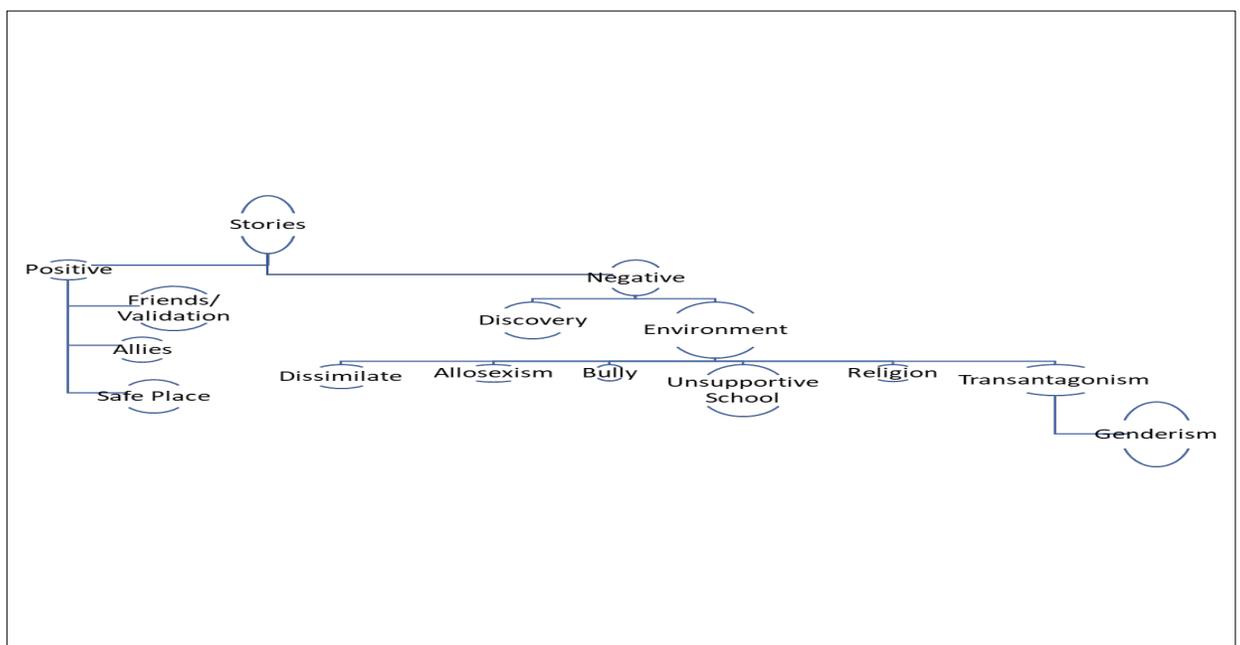


Figure 1: Themes and Subcategories

**Positive stories.** The statements that follow were in response to the prompt that participants provide a story that involves a high school memory that positively impacted their gender and/or sexual identity development. Within the positive stories, participants spoke about supportive friends, allies willing to intervene and challenge homophobic attitudes or behavior, safe spaces, and validation.

**Friends/validation.** Five of the eleven participants referenced having supportive friends as reasons they have positive memories of high school experiences that shaped their views on sexuality. Specifically, one online participant stated having, “supportive friends” was their positive memory (Val, Gay, Male). Another online participant noted that, “my friends that I was open with about my sexuality acted positively towards me and didn’t treat me any different” (Frances, Lesbian, Female). Of the five participants, three either specifically cited validation or spoke of feelings of validation in relation to their friendships.

I was talking to a group of friends about sexual preferences and I said I didn't have any interest in it. I'd heard of asexuality before but I didn't feel like I had reached a point where I could identify with it. One friend said it was okay to not have any interest and that I might be asexual. Looking back I know I didn't need anyone else's approval or permission to adopt a sexual identity but at the time it was validating that I didn't only feel the way I did because of my age or experience. (Alex, Asexual & Agender)

I made a lot of friends who were queer and encouraged me to look into and question my orientation/gender and helped me when I was doing so. (Blake, Asexual & Agender)

A young person, around 15, asked a young woman in their friend circle on a date. Despite the fact that she turned them down, she explained that it was alright for them to be interested in people of either gender or both.

She went on to say that it was normal, healthy, and that they would meet someone one day that loved them as they were for who they were.

(Glenn, Pansexual, Gender Neutral)

The above statements reflect how much of a difference friends can make to LGBTQ+ students learning in an unsupportive environment. Allowing individuals to be comfortable in expressing their true selves either through actions or words, validates their existence.

**Allies.** The primary investigator kept friends and allies as separate themes. While friends can be allies, not all LGBTQ+ students may be out to their friends or the students may be witness to an ally unknown to them intervening on someone's behalf. Only four participants wrote about allies having a positive impact on their high school experiences.

The one moment that positively impacted my sexual identity is when I was in my government and economics class and a male was being absolutely homophobic. He was talking about how any gay person would go to hell and how marriage can't be legal that way. I was closeted at the time but the entire class defended the gay community despite the fact that it was not something that was typically accepted. (Charlie, Bisexual, Female)

A young person, around 15, asked a young woman in their friend circle on a date. Despite the fact that she turned them down, she explained that it was alright for them to be interested in people of either gender or both.

She went on to say that it was normal, healthy, and that they would meet

someone one day that loved them as they were for who they were.

(Glenn, Pansexual, Gender Neutral)

All this after being kicked out in the middle of my senior year by my foster parents. I would not have made it through my senior year if it wasn't for a few amazing, supportive and wonderful faculty members and teachers.

(Devin, Demisexual, Pansexual, Transgender)

So a 16 year old transgender boy came out to his teachers personally.

The first teacher he came out to was very accepting. The teacher wasn't the best at getting their preferred name and pronouns right. However, she was trying and that was the most the boy could have asked for. She

repeatedly asked after class if she said their name right or their pronouns.

Then if she didn't he would tell her and she would apologize and still tried until she had it right. He just found that so great because he also

understood that this was the first time this teacher has met a kid like him.

Eventually that was the teacher he most trusted and came to when

something was wrong. The teacher would find ways to make him feel

better and get resources and advice. She made him feel comfortable with

his gender/sexuality. (Roan, Straight Trans Male)

The above statements point to the importance of having allies within schools. While having allies in schools may not be strong enough to completely counteract negative school environments, LGBT students who can identify supportive school staff not only report more positive wellbeing but also better

academic outcomes. LGBTQ+ students also report increased feelings of safety when they have access to supportive staff. In Charlie's case, while not out to their community, witnessing allies intervene and challenge homophobic attitudes or behavior, made a positive impact on how they view their sexuality. Supportive staff and teachers may even be viewed as creating safe spaces for students. With Roan's statement about his teacher providing him with resources, research has found that providing LGBTQ+ students with resources can increase their connection and engagement with school (Kosciw et al., 2013).

**Safe space.** Research has shown that having a safe space at schools can have a positive impact on students (GLSEN, 2017a; Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw, 2013). Yet, only one participant referred to a place within the school that could be considered a safe place as a positive memory: "The drama club was probably the most LGBT friendly part of my high school. That is where all the LGBT kids went to escape the mostly homophobic rest of the high school. Many great memories were made in drama club." (Taylor, Gay, Transgender)

Here, the drama club acted as a safe place for Taylor and other LGBTQ+ students. The club provided a refuge for students to go to in an otherwise homophobic environment. The above statement speaks to the importance of students having safe places within their schools. The lack of participants referring to safe spaces could reflect an overall lack of support within the state.

**Negative stories.** The statements that follow were in response to the prompt that participants provide a story that involves a high school memory that

negatively impacted their gender and/or sexual identity development. Within the negative stories, participants spoke about feeling the need to hide or dissimulate while in school, dealing with implicit allosexism, bullying behaviors, transantagonism, and facing barriers and/or dealing with an unsupportive school.

**Discovery.** Discovery here refers to the process of discovering oneself through self-discovery. While humans may evolve as individuals, research has found that it is during adolescence that individuals start to develop a stronger sense of self and developing identities (Marcia, 1980). The stories submitted to this study fall with this self-discovery stage in life which occurs approximately between the ages of 10-18 (Marcia, 1980). Specific to sexuality, research has found the average age of sexual attraction is age ten for both heterosexual and LGB adolescents (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). How others react to youth during this time of discovery predicates how resulting memories are associated. For instance, the positive stories within this study describe friends or allies that helped participants during their process of self-discovery. The statement below refers to a negative experience.

In seventh grade there was a girl who went to a small Christian co-op, although she was not religious her Mom enrolled her so she could make friends. During the end of the 7th grade, she took some time off from school for mental health reasons. While she was out she spent a lot of time on her Instagram page which she posted about what animes she

loved & how much she liked girls. She started discovering herself during that time and had developed a crush on a friend who in fact was another girl. She decided to post about it on the Instagram account. She thought she was safe on this account and that the people following it would understand.

A few days after posting about her sexuality she was going to go to a Valentines dance being held at the school and was going to start attending it again in the near future. She was texting her best friend about what they were going to do there and how much fun they were going to have. Not long after talking to her friend she started getting swarms of messages from friends of hers saying they couldn't be friends anymore. Not long after that her mom barged in screaming, "Satan-worshipper?!" She yelled, "child pornographer?!"

Turns out a woman at the school, age 45, mother of 2 that had attended the school found the Instagram account and instead of telling the truth, made up lies. The anime she watched was her being a Satanist, her liking girls made her a child pornographer. She got kicked out of the school, she lost all her friends, and it impacted her forever, she learned not to be so open about her views or who she loves even around her friends. (Ash, Queer, Female)

Part of Ash's self-discovery journey took place through creative expression via their Instagram account online which they felt was a safe space.

What could have been a positive memory turned into an instance of bullying, ostracizing, and left Ash with the feeling that she cannot be her true self. At the time this story occurred, Ash was 13 and home schooled. The small Christian co-op she refers to was part of the home school program. It is important to note, that during intermittent discussion as she was handwriting her story, Ash was thankful for her mother supporting her identity as queer and pagan. It seemed that her mother's support helped her overcome this incident. Ryan et al. (2010) also noted the potential importance of familial support and reported family acceptance is correlated with positive health outcomes and protects young adults from negative health outcomes such as depression and suicide.

**Environment.** Environment was chosen as the overarching theme here because the subcategories below can be the result of or exacerbated by negative school environments. In general, negative school environments have been found to have a negative impact on physical and psychological wellbeing in addition to poor educational outcomes.

*Dissimulate.* Five of the eleven participants referenced feeling the need to hide as a reason for having negative memories of high school experiences that shaped their views on sexuality. Val, a gay man, wrote simply that "feeling need to hide" as having a negative impact on their views on sexuality. Frances, a lesbian, woman also noted, "My school never made me feel comfortable enough to be open about my sexuality." Other participants noted:

Pretty much the entire high school experience negatively impacted my development. Everyone talks bad about people that are gay/trans. I was closeted so many people felt comfortable talking negatively about the community around me so I could not truly express myself until I left everyone behind. (Charlie, Bisexual, Female)

Whenever a fight would occur between my friends and the homophobic classmates. It always felt like tensions were high in my high school. You could never be yourself. (Taylor, Gay, Transgender)

While Val did not elaborate on why they felt the need to hide in high school, the other four participants spoke to negative environments. Fighting, tensions within the school, and negative language caused Charlie, Taylor, and Frances to remain closeted within their school communities. In comparison, referencing Ash's previous story, her feelings to not be open about her views or who she loves was a direct result of bullying not from peers or even school administrators but a parent. The parent's words and actions led her to lose friends and be expelled from the home school co-op. It's important to recall that Tennessee is one of the 35 states that has not enacted any non-discriminatory protections for LGBTQ+ students within schools. Additionally, an investigation found that numerous religiously affiliated private schools have open discriminatory policies against LGBTQ+ students and staff (Klein, 2017).

*Allosexism.* Being allosexist involves the preferential treatment to individuals who experience sexual attraction and discrimination and prejudice

against asexual persons (Ginicola, Smith, & Filmore, 2017). It is important to note that allosexism does not require overt prejudice to have a negative impact on individuals. Because experiencing sexual attraction is treated as “normal” or the “standard”, the idea becomes implicit in society including representation in culture and media. One participant wrote about an allosexist experience at a slumber party they attended.

This will sound stupid. I was at a sleepover with mostly the same group of friends and we were talking about sexual preferences in the hypothetical because as far as we knew none of us had ever had sex before. One girl we didn't know as well admitted she had sex once and most of my friends started cheering. I know it was just a spontaneous reaction and lighthearted but I felt awkward at the time because it reinforced the idea that having sex was a milestone to be reached that fulfilled your high school experience and I was weird for not having any desire to experience what everyone was cheering about. (Alex, Asexual & Agender)

For Alex, they recognized their friends' reaction as spontaneous and lighthearted but acknowledge that they still felt awkward because sexual intercourse was treated as something to cheer about at a slumber party. In this case, allosexism as expressed by the friends was likely unintentional but still had a negative impact on the way Alex perceived their sexuality during that instance.

*Transantagonism.* Merriam-Webster (2018) defines antagonism as, “actively expressed opposition or hostility”. Therefore, transantagonism involves

actively expressed opposition or hostility toward individuals who identify as transgender. Devin, a demisexual, pansexual, transgender man wrote about his experiences attending a rural, Tennessee high school.

The chaos first started with me having to quit choir when my choir director refused to let me wear anything other than a dress to concerts. Wearing a dress made me so uncomfortable that the last concert I attended that I wore a dress in, I had a panic attack. I felt embarrassed, miserable, and ashamed. After begging him several times to let me wear the slacks, shirt, and bowtie, and asking the counselor to speak to him, he still refused and I had to quit choir. This broke me, because I saw the choir director as a father figure. I had been in his choir for 6 years, and I will always have a permanent scar on my heart because of how I was treated. Because I was not able to be in choir my Senior year, I was not able to audition for the All-Northwest Tennessee Honor Choir, which I had made my freshman and sophomore year. I lost potential scholarships because of this.

The office assistant in the office refused to call me Devin over the intercom, even when a counselor asked him to because it wasn't my "legal name" when several other people were called by their nicknames or middle names all the time.

I started using the nurse's restroom so I would not have to use the Women's. A female teacher I had never even been in a class with learned about this and stopped me in the hall, refused to let me pass to go the

nurse's room, and told me that the women's restroom was "right there" when i tried to explain, she continued to block my access to the hallway. I ended up crying in the bathroom for 20 minutes because I was so uncomfortable.

And now we come to the yearbook. Oh boy. Yes, I did take a tux picture, and I was not in the yearbook, but that's because I was forced to take myself out. The Principal informed me that it is Tennessee state law to have your full legal name in the yearbook (Which is a complete and utter lie) He refused to put Devin Val Dagata (which is now my legal name but was not at the time) So, i had to sign a piece of paper in front of the yearbook staff saying to take me out of the yearbook. I was not going to be remembered as my old name. That was not me. (Devin, Demisexual, Pansexual, Transgender)

In Devin's statements above, they refer to not only facing verbal bullying by school officials but school officials attempting to control or suppress Devin as a transgender male. Devin was essentially forced to quit choir because the director would not accept him as male and not allow him to dress as such. Because of this Devin lost the opportunity to participate in the Honor Choir, lost access to potential scholarships, and lost a mentor. Other school staff such as the office assistant, yearbook staff, and a teacher also refused to acknowledge Devin as male with the yearbook staff blocking Devin from being in the senior yearbook. However, the teacher physically bullied Devin with the teacher

blocking Devin's access to the nurse's restroom. While Devin was dealing with bullying by school officials, they were also kicked out of their foster parent's home. During the initial meeting, Devin disclosed they were from a rural area with little support and other LGBTQ+ high school students also struggle in this rural county.

*Genderism.* Genderism involves discrimination against individuals who do not fit within the strict binaries of what society defines as "woman" or "man" (Browne, 2004). Gender fluid individuals are often met with hostility and even have been killed for not fitting within these standards. Violence against transgender individuals continues to rise. A recent study found that the annual murder rate of black transgender women in the United States is 1 in 2,600 in comparison to the overall murder rate of individuals ages 15-34 which is 1 in 12,000 (Astor, 2017). A related issue to genderism is passing privilege. Passing privilege refers to the benefits a transgender individual may possess based on their ability to pass as cisgender within society. The term passing itself is controversial in the community because it implies that transgender individuals are being surreptitious when presenting their authentic selves (Urquhart, 2017). Additionally, passing is seen by some individuals within the LGBTQ+ community as striving towards societal ideals of gender versus accepting all individuals despite how well they may conform to gender ideals (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). One participant reported this dynamic within their own school:

So there is a transgender male (1) that is passing at school. Everyone treats him like a “regular” guy. However, he notices that another trans male is at his school. This trans male doesn’t present as masculine as transgender male (1). They make fun of this kid with slurs or judge him for painting his nails and dressing slightly more feminine. Trans male (1) doesn’t seem to understand why some people were okay with him and judged the other guy a little bit more. It was upsetting for trans male (1) because he could only imagine if he wanted to present more feminine. To clarify, he loves the way he is and is not like he is scared to act more feminine -this is only if he did want to though. He just feels useless because he doesn’t know how he can prevent the other kid from bullying when he sees it happening at school. (Roan, Straight Trans Male)

Roan's story is reflective of previous research which found, "harassment of transgender youth was explained by youth within the context of “passing” and fitting into a gender binary as a transsexual [*sic*], with little accommodation of fluid gender presentations. This interpretation suggests that transsexual [*sic*] youth experience less harassment when they conform to their new gender and remain closeted about their identity" (McGuire et al., 2010, p. 1176). Also, it seems that Roan’s statement, “to clarify, he loves the way he is and is not like he is scared to act more feminine -this is only if he did want to though” speaks to general insecurities of fitting in or passing as a “regular guy”. While Roan may seem to express these insecurities, they also write that they feel, "useless" and do not know how to prevent the "feminine" transgender boy from being bullying at

school. This statement speaks to the importance of having adequate resources within the school including ally/bystander training. Ally/bystander training can help all school personnel and students learn how to intervene when a witness to gendered harassment or bullying. Another participant reported being harassed by a coach with genderist language:

The coach stopped me after lunch one day after he saw me wearing my Dairy Queen nametag that said my chosen name. He pulled me aside and told me that "God made me a girl, I'm not a boy, I'll never be a boy, my birth certificate says female, and that I need to stop". He made me miss class time to harass me. (Devin, Demisexual, Pansexual, Transgender)

With Devin's statement, the coach harassed him to the point of missing class time to impose his very stringent ideals of what it means to be male or female. Not only did the coach verbally bully Devin but he also physically bullied him by stopping in the hall. It seems that the coach feels justified with his actions by including "God" within the context of his statement of what it means to be female or male.

*Bully.* Bullying can occur in many forms including physical, relational or social, verbal, and/or cyberbullying. Research has found that students most commonly report experiencing verbal bullying followed by relational bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Correspondingly, the participants' responses described situations that could be described as verbal bullying and/or relational bullying. For instance, the following story describes verbal bullying:

'Gay' was still used to describe anything opposite of "cool," and bisexual meant promiscuous. Lesbians meant a young woman was ugly and unlikable. Every day of high school negatively impacts most people's sexual identity, or it did 8+ years ago. Given the current stories, it doesn't seem like much has changed aside from visibility. (Glenn, Pansexual, Gender Neutral)

Devin's story describes various forms of bullying from faculty and school administrators and said, "my senior year was a living hell and a few High School faculty members were the main source." (Devin, Demisexual, Pansexual, Transgender)

Glenn does not specify as to whether the language was direct, indirect, or both. Whereas the slurs and judgement referenced by Roan's previous story regarding a feminine transgender boy speaks to direct verbal bullying by fellow classmates. Even if not directed at specific individuals, unchecked homophobic language in schools, can become pervasive enough to be considered bullying (UNESCO, 2012). A potential reason verbal bullying would become pervasive is that teachers may struggle with identifying verbal bullying in comparison to physical bullying. Another reason could be that some teachers do not consider verbal bullying to be a serious enough issue (Bradshaw, 2007). Glenn does not address whether the bullying language came from classmates or school officials, but as Devin and Ash described in their stories, school officials and even other parents can be a source of bullying for LGBTQ+ students. In Ash's situation, the

parent's bullying resulted in relational bullying from her classmates and she ultimately lost friends and was expelled from school.

*Barriers/Unsupportive school.* LGBTQ+ students report school administration trying to control or suppress their behavior through policing their actions or creating barriers preventing access to resources available to other students. Examples include disallowing same sex dates at dances, wearing clothing representative of the gender students identify with, refusing to acknowledge a student by their preferred name, and barring access to bathrooms or locker rooms that align with a student's gender. According to GLSEN (2017b) data, 19% of Tennessee high school students report being prevented or discouraged from forming or promoting a gay straight alliance.

I tried to start a Gay-Straight Alliance club as CCHS, which is basically a support group for LGBT students and allies. Legally, they had to allow it to exist, but they had to treat all clubs equally. So their response was to bar clubs from meeting during CCR {college and career readiness} time like they used to and bar clubs from putting up any posters. I made a poster talking about the suicide and bullying statistics for LGBT students for the Anti-Bullying poster concert and wrote "Sponsored by the GSA" in the bottom left corner and the principal gave me ISS. (Devin, Demisexual, Pansexual, Transgender)

From Devin's statement, it seems that under the rationalization of treating all clubs equally, the school chose to apply collective punishment to the clubs.

Instead of simply allowing the GSA to become a club and coexist with other clubs under the previous rules; it is implied by the above statement that the school chose to suppress all clubs equally by preventing them to meet or promote their organizations. As a result, Devin received in school suspension (ISS) for posting a poster for an Anti-Bullying poster concert.

Further some private and/or religious schools have open discriminatory policies against LGBTQ+ students for which students can be expelled which corresponds with Ash's experience, "she got kicked out of the school, she lost all her friends, and it impacted her forever, she learned not to be so open about her views or who she loves even around her friends." (Ash, Queer, Female) Ash was expelled from the Christian co-op she attended as part of being homeschooled. A parent of classmates saw an Instagram post of Ash's and turned other students and ultimately the school against her under the guise of Christianity.

*Religion.* As a theme, religion was organized under negative environment because in this case, the context with which religion was referenced was as a pretext for bullying. Further the state of Tennessee enacted the Religious Viewpoints Antidiscrimination Act, T.C.A. § 49-6-1802 which protects students who may bully LGBTQ+ students as long as the bullying occurs in the name of "religious freedom". It is important to note that while some individuals have previously cited religious freedom as a reason to discriminate against the LGBTQ+ population, others speak to their religion as prohibitive of discrimination (Prairie, Wrye, & Murfree, 2017). However, both Devin's and Ash's stories

represent students who were bullied by adults under the premise of religious freedom specifically in the context of Christianity.

Both Devin and Ash were hurt by adults who were using Christianity to hurt LGBTQ+ students under the idea of “religious freedom”. Ash attended a small Christian co-op but Devin attended a public school where generally the separation of church and state from the first amendment is recognized.

Tennessee allowing bullying in schools under the guise of religious freedom provides a platform for a hostile environment to develop where students are ostracized and do not feel safe.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

Within the current study, using collective memory work as a research method helped to better understand the experiences of current and/or former LGBTQ+ high school students within the state of Tennessee. As addressed in the previous chapter, the study was conducted with nine participants. Sixty-seven percent attended high schools in rural areas. Out of the nine participants, one identified as asexual, one identified as bisexual, one identified as a demisexual pansexual, two identified as gay, two identified as lesbian, one identified as pansexual, and one identified as queer. Regarding gender, one identified as a man, three identified as women, two identified as transgender, and three identified as other, which included agender (2) and gender neutral (1). While limited, the participant pool was diverse in gender and sexuality.

#### **Reasons for limited participation**

The limited participant pool can be potentially explained by a history of discrimination, stigmatization, and violence toward the LGBTQ+ community and a regression in civil rights due to the current political climate. Until relatively recent, homosexuality was considered a mental illness within the United States. In 1975, the American Psychological Association (APA) determined that homosexuality is in fact a normal and positive variation of human sexual orientation (APA, 1975). Despite the APA determination, prejudices remained and even in 2009, Meyer & Wilson noted that still

sexual minority identity is highly stigmatized. Despite improvements in the social environment of LGB individuals, LGBs have much to lose from disclosing their sexual minority status. LGBs can be legally discriminated against in employment (e.g., “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in the U.S. military) and are subject to rejection and violence (Herek, in press). With much to lose, LGBs may not be willing to disclose their identity to researchers (p.24).

The Meyer & Wilson (2009) study was published within the first year of the Obama administration which throughout his eight-year tenure, saw a repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and George W. Bush’s religious liberty executive order, the legalization of same sex marriage, and confirmation that Title IX protections extend to transgender students in schools. So while there were still issues with discrimination and bullying of the LGBTQ+ population, people saw hope with the advancement of civil rights of the group. In comparison, subsequent to the election of the current president, there has been a regression of civil rights protections for the LGBTQ+ population. In 2016, over 100 bills were introduced in state legislatures across 22 states in America. Most of the bills involved religious freedom bills often referred to as First Amendment Defense Acts or Religious Freedom Restoration Acts. In the first sixty days of 2018, there have been 39 pieces of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation across the United States (ACLU, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

On a federal level just within 2017, the Justice Department declared federal civil rights does not apply to sexual orientation, the reenactment of the religious liberty executive order (allows denial of services to LGBTQ+ individuals based on religious observation), and the reversal of the determination that Title IX protections applies to transgender students (Globe Staff, 2018). Coinciding with the loss of civil rights is a reported increase of bullying in schools and hate crimes throughout the country (Human Rights Campaign, 2017; Levin & Grisham, 2016). A nationwide survey conducted by the Human Rights Campaign found that 79% of 50,619 participants ages 13-18 saw an increase of bullying, harassment, and hate messages since the election. Seventy percent of respondents reported incidents based on race and ethnicity, 59% of incidents occurred due to immigration status, 63% of incidents occurred due to sexual orientation, and 55% occurred because of gender.

Outside of increased reports of bullying and hate crimes, the reversal of the determination that Title IX protections apply to transgender students occurred with documented evidence that bullying of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students occurs at a rate almost double in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts. Kann et al. (2016) found that 28% of LGB students reported electronic bullying in comparison to 14.2% of heterosexual students and 34.2% of LGB students reported bullying on school grounds in comparison to 18.8% of heterosexual students. A separate study conducted by National Center for Transgender Equality found that 77 % of respondents experienced verbal harassment or

physical assault while in school (James et al., 2016). High levels of intolerance and/or harassment are also reflected in the statements made by participants.

### **Conclusions of results**

Reading the participants' narratives was crucial in determining how positive and negative experiences in high school impacted their gender and/or sexual identity development and how that development may have been impacted by bullying. While some participants in this study did not provide the immense amount of detail that is required as part of the CMW methodology, their statements still had a poignant impact to better understanding the phenomenon of being an LGBTQ+ high school student in Tennessee. From a phenomenological perspective, the participants' rehashing of their memories helped in assessing how their experiences may have paralleled the research of Johnson et al. (2014). While none of participants in this study elaborated on navigating identity, they did share similar concerns with the participants in Johnson et al. (2014) regarding the fact students should feel safe in their schools.

### **Themes**

During the analysis of the significant statements and formulated meanings, themes were organized under the positive and negative stories they were referenced. More negative themes emerged from the analysis than positive themes. This could be a reflection of the overall environments in Tennessee high

schools, but more data collection is needed to determine whether the results are generalizable.

**Positive.** Within these themes, participants wrote about supportive friends, validation, allies (both peer and teacher), and safe spaces. Relationships with peers is considered a critical part of healthy development for adolescents (Hong & Garbarino, 2012). When discussing supportive friends, four participants either specifically cited validation or spoke of feelings of validation. In these instances, having supportive friends helped to validate the participants' sexual or gender identity and expression. While these supportive friends would likely be considered allies, references to allies in the stories also involved bystanders and a teacher. An economics classroom challenged a student's homophobic rhetoric in a classroom. The teacher referenced in Roan's story initially took it upon themselves to learn Roan's preferred pronouns and names but eventually became a source of support and resources. Having the teacher's support was significant for Roan and for them, their teacher became a point of trust almost as an individual safe space.

From a phenomenological lens, these positive themes speak to the capacity of gay and straight alliances (GSAs) making a positive impact in schools. Research has found that GSAs are associated with lower rates of bullying, a greater sense of belonging, and improved mental health outcomes (GLSEN, 2017a; Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw, 2013). GSAs can provide safe places for LGBTQ+ students and their friends and allies to gather and are often

associated with helping students find supportive school staff. GSAs can promote intergroup contact at schools by bringing LGBTQ+ students, allies, friends, and supportive teachers together. These potential interactions have the ability of reducing prejudice across a range of groups within the school.

Additionally, Novick and Isaacs (2010, p. 284) found that teachers “play a critical role as front-line responders” to bullying and how they respond sets the tone for the rest of the school. It seems that it is integral for teachers to have adequate training and support to recognize and intervene on bullying situations. While the possibility of positive change for LGBTQ+ students in school is an obtainable goal, it is important to recognize that without allies and adequate interventions, schools can also reproduce and reaffirm normative ideas about gender and sexuality (Ngo, 2003).

**Negative.** Within these themes, participants wrote about implicit allosexism, discovery, feeling the need to hide, bullying behaviors, transantagonism, facing barriers and/or dealing with an unsupportive school. From a phenomenological lens, these negative themes speak to hostile environments for LGBTQ+ students within schools and also within their own personal networks. Implicit allosexism within this group was an exception in that the significant statements associated with this theme, described a story that while it had a negative impact on the participant, the actions of the perpetrators seemed unintentional. This example speaks to the need of including language awareness within anti-bullying campaigns. Negative language can be

unintentional but may fall within implicit societal biases. Here, Alex's story spoke of girls cheering at a slumber party because one of them had sex which made Alex feel awkward as an asexual.

The theme of discovery was also an exception in that while all adolescents go through a period of self-discovery which can have both positive and negative results, the only reference to self-discovery was within the context of a negative story. Adolescence is a crucial time in individuals' lives as they become more self-aware of how they identify themselves and prepare to transition into independent adults. The age range for adolescence occurs approximately between the ages of 10 and 18 (Marcia, 1980). The age range for the sample for this study was ages 15-24. Since earlier stages of discovery are associated with higher levels of distress, it is important for children have access to supportive environments. Unfortunately, this is not always the case as reflected in Ash's story. While discovering her identity as queer, Ash used Instagram as a creative outlet. Her creative expression was used against her by a parent of a classmate that chose to bully Ash, convince her peers to no longer be her friend, and ultimately Ash was expelled from the Christian co-op with which her homeschool was attached.

The rest of the participants' stories of bullying and hostility are consistent with previous literature regarding the issues LGBTQ+ students face in school (Bradshaw et al., 2007; GLSEN, 2017a; Greytak, et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2013; Peterson et al., 2017). The majority of stories describing bullying involved

verbal and/or relational bullying. Per Devin and Roan's statements, genderism and transantagonism seem to be a problem within their schools. Five participants reported environments so negative they felt the need to hide their true identities. While bullying and hostility is documented within literature, research has also found that communities struggle on how best to address the needs of LGBTQ+ students in public schools (Ciardullo, 2005; Dessel, 2010; Macgillivray, 2004). Different scenarios within school settings can also impact bullying.

With lack of LGBTQ+ positive curricula, education programs, and resources, teachers who want to make their classrooms a welcoming environment are limited in their ability to do so. Research has found that non-action or "looking the other way" by teachers or school administrators perpetuates a system of inequality and increases the rates of LGBTQ+ bullying (Dessel, 2010; Johnson et al., 2017). Schools not supporting and/or creating barriers to resources including gay/straight alliances also can create negative environments within a school. LGBTQ+ students have reported receiving infractions for behaviors that heterosexual or cisgender students do not - including public displays of affection or clothing. Treating groups of students differently within a school can create divisiveness between the groups. Then there is the unfortunate circumstance of adults participating in bullying of students which is reflective in Devin and Ash's statements. Other LGBTQ+ students report the fear of being blamed or getting in trouble for being bullied which is reflected in GLSEN's 2015 National Survey. Correspondingly, the survey

found that students who experience high victimization are more likely to be disciplined.

### **Implications**

Results from this study substantiate previous literature that bullying of LGBTQ+ students is an issue and not all schools adequately address or try to prevent bullying within their communities. The results also show that collaborating with LGBTQ+ youth and young adults through collective memory work, can result in powerful narratives. These narratives in turn will help establish a foundation for future collaborative work in activism and positive change within Tennessee schools for LGBTQ+ students. Advocacy efforts towards this issue will require patience and the tireless efforts of researchers, educators, and students with the current documented increase of bullying and hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals that is coinciding with a decrease in civil rights protections at Federal and state levels (Blum, 2017; de Vogue et al., 2017; Human Rights Campaign, 2017; Levin & Grisham, 2016).

Just within the state of Tennessee, the majority of students report hearing anti-LGBT remarks during school with 90% hearing homophobic remarks, 86% hearing negative remarks about gender expression, and 76% hearing transphobic remarks. Further, 28% of students regularly heard school staff make homophobic remarks and almost half of students heard staff make negative remarks about gender expression (GLSEN, 2017b). Specific to harassment in schools, 83% of secondary students experienced verbal harassment, 36%

experienced physical harassment, and 18% of students experienced physical assault due to their sexual orientation. Regarding gender expression, 57% of secondary students experienced verbal harassment, 26% experienced physical harassment, and 13% of students experienced physical assault due to their gender expression. Continued collection of CMW with the ultimate goal of creating a resource manual may be key in counteracting the amount of bullying currently occurring in Tennessee schools.

Without an effective intervention, significant bullying and harassment will continue, along with the negative academic and health outcomes that result from victimization. LGBTQ+ students who experience higher levels of discrimination and/or victimization are more likely to have poor academic outcomes along with psychosomatic and psychosocial problems including higher attempted suicide rates in comparison to their heterosexual peers (Kann et al., 2016; Peterson, et al., 2017). Additionally, research has found that the physical health, emotional, and psychological problems associated with bullying continue into adulthood (Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013). According to Wolke et al., (2013) adults who were victims or were both bullies and victims during school, were associated with diminished health, social relationships, and wealth in adulthood.

### **Future study recommendations**

With the discussion of intergroup contact theory specific to how gay/straight alliances and supportive staff can have a positive impact on not only LGBTQ+ students but school environments in general, a future study may build

upon Dessel's (2010) work with intergroup dialogue. In their study, Dessel found intergroup dialogue as a research method to be statistically significant in creating positive change in the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of teachers toward LGBTQ+ students. Intergroup dialogue like collective memory work is a research method under social constructionist theory. Within their study, Dessel utilized a documentary, stereotype activities, media coverage, and teacher resources as their interventions to start dialogues regarding LGBTQ+ issues within schools. As long as the sources of the stories could not be identified, it would be interesting to see to what extent collective memory work is an effective tool to decreasing stigma and discrimination within schools and other areas that affect access for the LGBTQ+ community. One way to protect confidentiality would be to collect stories from similar but different counties or even states.

Another potential study would involve religion and how LGBTQ+ students are impacted by religious beliefs within schools. Two participants in the present study were bullied by adults under the idea of their religious freedom to practice Christianity. Within Tennessee bullying of LGBTQ+ students is currently protected under the Religious Viewpoints Antidiscrimination Act, T.C.A. § 49-6-1802. Outside of Tennessee, one study in Canada found that religiously based homophobic bullying occurred in both secular and religious schools and was often seen as a permissible and acceptable form of harassment in schools (Newman, Fantus, Woodford, & Rwigema, 2017). It would be interesting to conduct a similar study within the United States looking not only at secular versus religious schools but also geographic location. Within the United States, it

would also be important to track federal case law especially if conducting a longitudinal study. In 2016, U.S. District Court Judge for Mississippi, Carlton Reeves found in *Barber v. Bryant* that “religious freedom” legislation drafted to discriminate against the LGBTQ+ population violates the U.S. Constitution. The reasoning for his ruling is that discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community is not a common practice of any one religion and therefore cannot be a valid defense under the Establishment Clause of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment (Prairie et al., 2017). The case was appealed and the U.S Court of Appeals, 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit Judge Jerry E. Smith reversed the decision and the Supreme Court denied the Petition for Writ of Certiorari (*Barber v. Bryant*, 2018). Within the current political environment, court rulings seem to evolve at such a rapid pace, it is hard to know how laws will be applied or even accepted. Hopefully future plaintiffs against religious freedom laws can use Judge Reeves’ ruling within their arguments for civil rights.

### **Limitations**

Since collective memory work involves a collaboration between the researcher and participant, traditionally CMW is conducted in person so the stories can be reviewed along with the participants. This is done to assure participants agree with what is being said in their stories and ultimately the collaboration continues to making recommendations for activism and policy change regarding the issue being addressed by the research. However, in the present study due to the sensitive nature of the subject, potential participants

were initially hesitant to take part in the project. After the IRB approved an amendment to place the CMW online, the study very quickly received participants. The study online was anonymous with participants being told to follow up with the primary investigator if they had any questions or wanted to participate in a future focus group.

A limitation to an anonymous online study is not being afforded the ability to follow up with participants in order to ask them to elaborate on statements. Some of the statements were sparse and being able to ask participants to elaborate on their experiences would have added to the discussion. Additionally, the sample is from the state of Tennessee and may not be generalizable to other places within the United States.

### **Final thoughts**

The stories shared by the participants in this study provided a frank and sometimes heartbreaking perspective of the phenomenon of being LGBTQ+ in a Tennessee high school. While current state laws and an overall hostile environment may slow progress, there is optimism that changes can and will be made to cultivate a safe and more affirming climate for LGBTQ+ students. By assuring schools are a safe and affirming place for LGBTQ+ students, the overall school environment should improve. It is my hope that the findings of this study can provide the platform for schools to start implementing changes to diminish bullying in schools.

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APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following terms from the Human Rights Campaign (2017) have been defined for the purposes of this study.

1. Asexual describes a person who lacks sexual attraction or desire for other people.
2. Bisexual describes a person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to people of more than one sex, gender or gender identity, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.
3. Cisgender describes a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.
4. Coming Out is defined as the process in which a person first acknowledges, accepts and appreciates their sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others.
5. Cultural Competence is defined as the ability to know one's culture and to interact effectively with people of different cultures. In a school this includes behaviors, attitudes, policies and structures that enable educators to work effectively cross-culturally.
6. Gay describes a person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to some members of the same gender.

7. Gender is defined as a person's internal sense of self as male, female, both or neither (gender identity), as well as one's outward presentation and behaviors (gender expression). Gender norms vary among cultures and over time.
8. Gender Binary is defined as the idea that there are two distinct and opposite genders—male and female. This model is limiting and doesn't account for the full spectrum of gender identities and gender expressions.
9. Gender-Expansive is an adjective used to describe people that identify or express themselves in ways that broaden the culturally defined behavior or expression associated with one gender.
10. Gender Expression is how a person expresses their gender through outward presentation and behavior. This includes, for example, a person's name, clothing, hairstyle, body language and mannerisms.
11. Gender Identity is defined as an internal, deeply felt sense of being male, female, a blend of both or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same as or different from their sex assigned at birth.
12. Gender Role is defined as a set of social and cultural beliefs or expectations about appropriate behavior for men/boys or women/girls. Gender roles can vary from culture to culture. Strict gender roles can limit a person's development.

13. Gender Role Stereotyping are stereotypes based on social and cultural beliefs or expectations about appropriate behavior for men/boys or women/girls. This can limit children's aspirations, achievements and well-being.
14. Gender Spectrum is defined as the broad range along which people identify and express themselves as gendered beings or not.
15. Genderqueer refers to people that typically reject the binary categories of gender, embracing a fluidity of gender identity. People who identify as "genderqueer" may see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories.
16. Heteronormative is defined as the assumption of heterosexuality as the given or default sexual orientation instead of one of many possibilities, and that the preferred or default relationship is between two people of "opposite" genders.
17. Heterosexism is defined as the attitude that heterosexuality is the only valid or "normal" sexual orientation. This can take the form of overt negative comments or actions towards LGBTQ+ people or subtle actions or assumptions that marginalize LGBTQ+ people.
18. Heterosexual: describes a person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to people of a different gender. Also known as straight.
19. Homophobia is defined as the fear and hatred of or discomfort with people who are attracted to members of the same sex or gender.

20. Homosexual describes a person who is attracted to members of the same sex or gender. It is usually used in medical or scientific references.
21. Intersex is the term used for 2% of babies who are born with naturally occurring variations in chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and other sex characteristics.
22. Lesbian describes a woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to some other women.
23. LGBTQ+ is defined as an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning. Additions to this acronym can include A, for “asexual” or “ally,” I, for “intersex”, and P for “pansexual”.
24. Non-binary is an umbrella term for people who transcend commonly held concepts of gender through their own expression and identities. Other terms for this might include gender expansive, gender creative, or genderqueer. Some non-binary people also identify as Transgender.
25. Outing is defined as exposing someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity to others without their permission.
26. Pansexual describes a person who can be attracted to any sex, gender or gender identity.
27. Queer is a term some people use to identify themselves with a flexible and inclusive view of gender and/or sexuality. Also used interchangeably with LGBTQ to describe a group of people such as “queer youth.” It is also seen in academic fields, such as queer studies or queer theory. Historically it has been used as a

negative term for LGBTQ people. Some people still find the term offensive while some embrace the term as an identity.

28. Sex is defined as one's biological and physical attributes—external genitalia, sex chromosomes and internal reproductive structures—that are used to assign someone as male or female at birth.
29. Sex Assigned at Birth is generally determined by external genitalia at birth—female, male or intersex.
30. Sexual Orientation describes a person's emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.
31. Sexuality describes how one experiences and expresses one's self as a sexual being. It begins to develop in early childhood and continues over the course of one's lifetime.
32. Transgender or Trans is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth: A term used to describe people who identify as a different gender from the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation; transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.
33. Transphobia is defined as the fear or hatred of, or discomfort with, transgender people.

APPENDIX B  
IRB APPROVAL

**IRB**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**  
 Office of Research Compliance,  
 010A Sam Ingram Building,  
 2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd  
 Murfreesboro, TN 37129



**IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE**

Monday, August 07, 2017

Principal Investigator **Joey Gray (Faculty)**  
 Faculty Advisor NONE  
 Co-Investigators Corey Johnson (University of Waterloo), Samantha Perez (Metro Human Relations Commission), Nicky Wu, Tara Praire, Sarah Standridge, and Jackie Eller  
 Investigator Email(s) *joey.gray@mtsu.edu; corey.johnson@uwaterloo.ca; samantha.perez@nashville.gov; nicky.wu@mtsu.edu; tara.praire@mtsu.edu; sarah.standridge@mtsu.edu; jackie.eller@mtsu.edu*  
 Department Health and Human Performance  
 Protocol Title **Collective memories of LGBT+ youth in TN high schools**  
 Protocol ID **17-2244**

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated as shown below:

IRB Action	APPROVED for one year from the date of this notification
Date of expiration	<b>8/31/2018</b>
Participant Size	65 (SIXTY FIVE)
Participant Pool	General adults 45 and minors 20
Exceptions	1. Combined parental consent/child assent is permitted. 2. Voice recording to collect data is permitted with restrictions.
Restrictions	1. <b>Mandatory informed consent; The PI must provide a signed copy of the informed consent document to each participant.</b> 2. <b>Active parental consent.</b> 3. <b>Child assent must be administered by the researchers.</b> 4. <b>Voice recordings must be stored, analyzed and destroyed as described in the protocol.</b> 5. <b>NO identifiable information must be collected or recorded.</b>
Comments	The PI is currently seeking external funding for this study.

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (8/31/2020) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to 8/31/2018. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study MUST be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

## Continuing Review Schedule:

Reporting Period	Requisition Deadline	IRB Comments
First year report	7/31/2018	TO BE COMPLETED
Second year report	7/31/2019	TO BE COMPLETED
Final report	7/31/2020	TO BE COMPLETED

## Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
NONE	NONE	NONE

The Investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website.](#) Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Amendments to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. Inclusion of new researchers must also be approved by the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, Investigator information and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board  
Middle Tennessee State University

## Quick Links:

[Click here](#) for a detailed list of the post-approval responsibilities.  
More information on expedited procedures can be found [here](#).

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Joey Gray**

**Study Title: Collective Memories of LGBT+ Youth in TN High Schools**

**Institution: Middle Tennessee State University**

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about this study and the information given below. You will be given an opportunity to ask questions, and your questions will be answered. Also, you will be given a copy of this consent form.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are also free to withdraw from this study at any time. In the event new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this research study or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision whether or not to continue your participation in this study.

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the MTSU Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918.

1. **Purpose of the study:** This project aims to reduce inequality of LGBT+ students by addressing the following research question: what is the current campus climate specific to LGBT+ students in Tennessee high schools and universities?
2. **Description of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study:** A 30-minute orientation will be held introducing the research study. Should you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to provide two memories (1-2 pages each) in preparation for a focus group session. These memories can be written, provided in a voice recorded format, or provided through video chat. Please note, should you choose the video chat option, only the audio portion of your story will be recorded with a digital recording device. A video recording will NOT occur for collective memory work.

The first story should involve a high school memory that positively impacted your sexual identity development and the second story should involve a high school memory that negatively impacted your sexual identity development. You have one (1) week to submit the stories to researchers. The stories should be provided in third person in order to leave out identifying information.

IF chosen, we will contact you to participate in a focus group. Researchers will distribute random stories from the initial data collection to be read by participants prior to the focus group session. The session will consist of group discussion of the stories and guided by semi-structured

interview questions. The focus groups themselves will be 1-2 hours in length and with only the audio portion being recorded with a digital recording device.

Upon completion of the focus group sessions, you will be asked to provide an individual audio digital response to the focus group session. This response should include your recommendations to administrators, counselors, and teachers on how to create safer schools for LGBT+ youth. Responses from the focus group interviews and your individual stories will aid in the creation of a resource/training program with a strong web presence for teachers, administrators, and counselors in the Middle Tennessee area.

3. **Expected costs:** There are no expected costs to you as a participant.
4. **Description of the discomforts, inconveniences, and/or risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this study:** Some of the research questions may make you uncomfortable or upset. You are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to, or to stop the interview at any time. As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk. Specifically, all data will be kept on a password protected computer and in a secured locked location. All names will be removed from initial stories and pseudonyms will be used for any discussion and/or publication after the study.
5. **Compensation in case of study-related injury:** MTSU will not provide compensation in the case of study related injury.
6. **Anticipated benefits from this study:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study however, some people find that sharing their stories is an empowering experience. Your participation will help add to the current body of knowledge about the challenges LGBT+ individuals may face as high school students within the state of Tennessee. Your participation in this study could provide high schools and school districts improved supports and resources needed to better serve LGBT+ students in educational settings.
7. **Alternative treatments available:** There are no alternatives to participation however, refusal to participate or withdrawing from participation at any time during the interview will involve no penalty or loss of benefits.
8. **Compensation for participation:** Other than serving light refreshments at the interview, there is no compensation for participation.
9. **Circumstances under which the Principal Investigator may withdraw you from study participation:** There are no foreseeable circumstances for which the PI would withdraw a participant from the study.

- 10. What happens if you choose to withdraw from study participation:** The study is *voluntary*—you do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do not take part, it will have no effect on you or your standing with MTSU. You are free to decline to answer any questions you don't wish to, or to stop the interview at any time.
- 11. Contact Information.** In the event of questions or difficulties of any kind during or following the study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Joey Gray at:(615) 904-8359 or Joey.Gray@mtsu.edu. For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the MTSU IRB Office at (615) 494-8918.
- 12. Confidentiality.** All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with MTSU or the government, such as the Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board, Federal Government Office for Human Research Protections, if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.
- 13. STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY**  
**I have read this informed consent document and the material contained in it has been explained to me verbally. I understand each part of the document, all my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this study.**

---

 Date

---

 Signature of patient/volunteer

Consent obtained by:

---

 Date

---

 Signature

---

 Printed Name and Title

### A. PARENTAL PERMISSION (Parents' Copy)

Primary Investigator(s)	Dr. Joey Gray	
Contact information	Alumni Memorial Gym, Room, 203, (615) 904-8359, joey.gray@mtsu.edu	
Department Institution	Health & Human Sciences, Middle Tennessee State University	
Study Title	Collective Memories of LGBT+ Youth in TN High Schools	
<b>IRB ID</b>	<b>17-2244</b>	<b>Expiration 08/31/2020</b>

Child's Name (Age 12+) (type or print)

The following information is provided to you because your child may qualify to participate in the above identified research study. Please read this disclosure document carefully and feel free to ask any questions before you agree to enroll your child. The researcher must adequately answer all of your questions before your child can be enrolled. The researcher **MUST NOT** enroll your child without an active consent from you. Also, a copy of this consent document, duly signed by the investigator, must be provided to you for future reference.

Your child's participation in this research study is absolutely voluntary. You or your child can withdraw from this study at any time. In the event new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this research or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision whether or not to continue your participation in this study.

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact the MTSU Office of Compliance (Tel 615-494-8918 or send your emails to [irb\\_information@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_information@mtsu.edu)). Please visit [www.mtsu.edu/irb](http://www.mtsu.edu/irb) for general information and visit <http://www.mtsu.edu/irb/FAQ/WorkinWithMinors.php> for information on MTSU's policies on research with children

**Please read this section and sign Section C if you wish to enroll your child. The researcher will not enroll your child without your physical signature.**

#### 14. Purpose of the study:

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study because we are interested in their experiences as an LGBTQ high school student in TN with the hope to improve campus climates in TN high schools.

#### 15. General description of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study:

The MTSU's classification of this study is

- Educational Tests** – Study involves either standard or novel education practices which consists educational testing and such studies expose the minors to lower than minimal risk
- Behavioral Evaluation** – Although the study may or may not involve educational tests, the specific aim is to probe the child's behavioral ability.
- Physical Evaluation** – The children will be asked to perform or part-take in physical activities or procedures. Examples of such studies simple physical exercises, medical or

clinical intervention, pharmaceutical testing and etc. Due to the nature of these studies, your child may be exposed to more than minimal risk.

There is no evaluation. Your child will be asked to share stories regarding their experience as a high school student and may be invited to participate in a focus group interview to discuss the shared but anonymous stories.

**16. What are we planning to do to your child in this study?**

We are asking your child to freely participate in sharing high school experiences that may have impacted their sexual identity development and potentially a focus group interview.

**17. What will your child be asked to do in this study?**

A 30-minute orientation will be held introducing the research study. Should your child choose to participate in the study, they will be asked to write two stories (1-2 pages each) in preparation for a focus group interview.

The first story should involve a high school experience that positively impacted their sexual identity development and the second story should involve a high school experience that negatively impacted their sexual identity development. They will have one (1) week to write the stories and submit them to researchers. The stories should be written in third person (like a story) in order to leave out identifying information.

IF chosen, we will contact your child to participate in a focus group. Researchers will distribute random stories from the initial data collection to be read by participants prior to the focus group session. The session will consist of group discussion of the stories and guided by semi-structured interview questions. The focus groups themselves will be 1-2 hours in length and be recorded.

Upon completion of the focus group sessions, your child will be asked to provide an individual digital story. These individual stories will address their interpretations of any positive and negative experiences that they personally experienced or witnessed while in high school. We will also ask them to share recommendations to administrators, counselors, and teachers on how to create safer schools for LGBT+ youth.

**18. What are we planning to do with the data collected using your child?**

Responses from the focus group interviews and individual stories will aid in the creation of a resource/training program with a strong web presence for teachers, administrators, and counselors in Tennessee.

All stories and interviews shared, will remain confidential. No identifying information will be shared nor included in reports and/or research articles that may result from the research.

**19. What are your expected costs, effort and time commitment:**

Outside of bringing your child to the Oasis Center, there are no additional expected costs, efforts, or time commitments for you.

**20. What are the potential discomforts, inconveniences, and/or possible risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this study:**

For the Child: Some of the interview questions may make them uncomfortable or upset. Your child is free to decline to answer any questions they do not wish to, or to stop the interview at any time. Additionally, counselors are available at the Oasis Center should your child feel the need to speak with someone. As with all research, there is a minimal chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk. Specifically, all data will be kept on a password protected computer and in a secured locked location. All names will be removed from initial stories and pseudonyms will be used for any discussion and/or publication after the study.

For you the Parent: There are no expected discomforts, inconveniences, and/or possible risks to you as the parent.

**21. How will you or your child be compensated for enrolling in this study?**

There is no compensation available for study participation but food and refreshments will be served at the focus groups.

**22. What are the anticipated benefits from this study?**

There are no direct benefits to your child for participating in the study however, some people find that sharing their stories is an empowering experience. Their participation will help add to the current body of knowledge about the challenges LGBT+ individuals may face as high school students within the state of Tennessee. Your child's participation in this study could provide high schools and school districts improved supports and resources needed to better serve LGBT+ students in educational settings.

**23. Are there any alternatives to this study such that you or/and your child could receive the same benefits?**

There are no alternatives to participation however, refusal to participate or withdrawing from participation at any time during the interview will involve no penalty or loss of benefits.

**24. Will you or/and your child be compensated for study-related injuries?**

Though unlikely, MTSU will not provide compensation in the case of study related injury.

**25. Circumstances under which the Principal Investigator may withdraw your child from study participation:**

There are no foreseeable circumstances for which the PI would withdraw a participant from the study.

**26. What happens if you choose to withdraw from study participation?**

The study is voluntary—your child does not have to take part if they do not want to. If they do not take part, it will have no effect on them or their standing with the Oasis Center or MTSU. They are free to decline to answer any questions they don't wish to, or to stop the interview at any time.

**27. Can you or/and your child stop the participation any time after initially agreeing to give consent/assent?**

You or your child can stop participation in this study any time after intially agreeing to consent/assent.

**28. Contact Information.** If you should have any questions about this research study or possibly injury, please feel free to contact Dr. Joey Gray by telephone 615) 904-8359 or by email joey.gray@mtsu.edu. OR my faculty advisor, \_\_\_\_\_, at \_\_\_\_\_.

**29. Confidentiality.** All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your child's research record private but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with MTSU or the government, such as the Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board, Federal Government Office for Human Research Protections, *if* you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

Consent obtained by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name and Title of the Researcher

## B. CHILD ASSENT

**(To be retained by the participating child who is over 12 years of age)**

Primary Investigator(s)	Dr. Joey Gray	
Contact information	Alumni Memorial Gym, Room, 203, (615) 904-8359, joey.gray@mtsu.edu	
Department Institution	Health & Human Sciences, Middle Tennessee State University	
Study Title	Collective Memories of LGBT+ Youth in TN High Schools	
<b>IRB ID</b>	<b>17-2244</b>	<b>Expiration 08/31/2020</b>

Child's Name (Age 12+) (type or print)

The following information is provided to you because your parents/guardians have agreed to enroll in the above identified research study. Please read this sheet carefully and feel free to ask any questions before you agree to enroll. The researcher must answer all of your questions before he/she asks you to do anything. Before you start:

- Make sure this sheet is signed by the researcher.
- Your participation is absolutely voluntary; you can decline anytime and your parents/guardians will not be notified.
- You are entitled to decline or withdraw at any time.
- Any new information on this research will be notified to you and you can decide whether to continue your participation based on the new information.

Please visit <http://www.mtsu.edu/irb/FAQ/WorkinWithMinors.php> or email [irb\\_information@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_information@mtsu.edu) or call 615 494 8918 more information.

### 1. Why are you doing this research?

You were invited to be part of this research study because we are interested in your experiences as an LGBTQ high school student in TN with the hope to improve campus climates in TN high schools.

### 2. What will the researcher do and how long will it take?

A 30-minute orientation will be held introducing the research study. Should you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to write two stories (1-2 pages each) in preparation for a focus group session.

The first story should involve a high school experience that positively impacted your sexual identity development and the second story should involve a high school experience that negatively impacted your sexual identity development. You have one (1) week to write the stories and submit them to researchers. The stories should be written in third person (like a story) in order to leave out identifying information.

IF chosen, we will contact you to participate in a focus group. Researchers will distribute random stories from the initial data collection to be read prior to the focus group interview. The interview will consist of a group discussion of the stories and guided by semi-structured interview questions. The focus groups themselves will be 1-2 hours in length and be recorded.

Upon completion of the focus group sessions, you will be asked to provide an individual digital story. These individual stories will address your interpretations of any positive and negative experiences that you personally experienced or witnessed while in high school. We will also ask you to share recommendations to administrators, counselors, and teachers on how to create safer schools for LGBT+ youth. Responses from the focus group interviews and your individual stories will aid in the creation of a resource/training program with a strong web presence for teachers, administrators, and counselors in Tennessee.

**3. Do I have to be in this research study and can I stop if I want to?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you can stop at any time. Stopping the study will not effect you or your standing with the Oasis Center or MTSU.

**4. Will anyone know that I am in this research study?**

No one will know you are participating in this study. However, information we collect on you may be shared with others ONLY if you or someone else is in danger or if we have to do so by law.

**5. How will this research help me or/and other people?**

The research may not directly help you but some people find that sharing their stories to be empowering experience. Your participation will help add to the current body of knowledge about the challenges LGBT+ individuals may face as high school students within the state of Tennessee. Your participation in this study could provide high schools and school districts improved supports and resources needed to better serve LGBT+ students in educational settings.

**6. Can I do something else instead of this research?**

We do not have any alternatives to this study but your participation is voluntary and you can quit the study at any time.

**7. Who do I talk to if I have questions?**

If you have any questions, you can call Dr. Joey Gray or e-mail her at:(615) 904-8359 or Joey.Gray@mtsu.edu.

---

Date

---

Researcher's Signature

---

Print Name and Title of the Researcher

**C. Signature Section  
(Researchers' Copy)**

Primary Investigator(s) Dr. Joey Gray  
 Contact information Alumni Memorial Gym, Room, 203, (615) 904-8359, joey.gray@mtsu.edu  
 Department Institution Health & Human Sciences, Middle Tennessee State University  
 Study Title Collective Memories of LGBT+ Youth in TN High Schools  
**IRB ID NOT APPROVED Expiration NOT APPROVED**

Child's Name (Age 12+) (type or print)

**PARENT SECTION**

- No Yes I have read the parental consent document pertaining to the above identified research
- No Yes The research procedures to be conducted have been explained to me verbally
- No Yes I understand each part of the interventions and all my questions have been answered
- No Yes I received a signed copy and I am aware of the potential risks of the study

By signing below, I give permission for my child, whose name is identified above, to participate in this study. I understand I can withdraw my child from this study at any time without facing any consequences.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date Signature of the Parent

**CHILD SECTION**

- No Yes I have read this child assent document and I received a signed copy
- No Yes The researcher explained what they planned to do and all my questions were answered
- No Yes I understand what I was told
- No Yes I know the risks and I also know I can withdraw at any time

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date Signature of the Child

Parental Consent obtained by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date Signature Print Name & Title

Child Assent Administered by:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Print Name & Title