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A Phenomenological Exploration of LGBTQ+ High School Graduates' Perspectives on LGBTQ+-related Legislation

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Thomas Foley

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

A Phenomenological Exploration of LGBTQ+ High School Graduates' Perspectives on

LGBTQ+-related Legislation

by

Thomas Foley

MA, New York University, 2018

BA, Salisbury University, 2014

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

December 2025

Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) students' social, emotional, and academic experiences and outcomes are not on par with their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Understanding how LGBTQ+ young adults experienced high school in a state with LGBTQ+-affirmative education legislation provides insight for counselors and educators to identify policies and practices that support positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ students. This qualitative phenomenological study explored how LGBTQ+-identifying high school graduates made meaning of their experiences in school as they related to LGBTQ+-affirmative education legislation. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used for the research methodology and data analysis process. Results included four themes: (a) Theme 1: Variability in School Experiences, (b) Theme 2: Lack of Recognition of LGBTQ+ Students' Needs, (c) Theme 3: School Counselors Were Not a Factor, and (d) Theme 4: Desire for More Educational Opportunities. Eight subthemes were also identified: (a) Subtheme 1.1: Schoolwide Homophobia and Transphobia, (b) Subtheme 1.2: Individual Influence of Teachers, (c) Subtheme 1.3: Peer Support, (d) Theme 2.1: School Site, (e) Theme 2.2: School District, (f) Theme 2.3: Public Policy, (g) Theme 4.1: LGBTQ+ History and (h) Theme 4.2: Inclusive Sex Education. Recommendations include moving beyond compliance-based implementation of laws to proactive, relational, and culturally responsive practices. This study promotes positive social change by highlighting the challenges LGBTQ+ students face and offering a starting point for collective action aimed at fostering affirming schools where all students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the queer kids. We are entitled to peace, prosperity, and happiness.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	3
Problem Statement.....	7
Purpose of the Study	9
Research Question	10
Theoretical Framework.....	10
Conceptual Framework.....	11
Nature of the Study	12
Definitions.....	14
Limitations	16
Significance and Summary	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	18
Literature Search Strategy.....	18
Historical Context of LGBTQ+ Legislation	19
Current LGBTQ+ Legislation Affecting High Schools.....	21
Federal Legal Protections	21
State-Level Protections	23
School District and Local Policies.....	26
The Presidential Administration’s Actions in 2025.....	28
Impact of LGBTQ+ Legislation on High School Students.....	31

Minority Stress Theory	31
Legal Landscape and LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health	33
LGBTQ+ Students’ Perspectives on Legislation	36
Inclusive Curriculum	38
“Parental Rights” Legislation	39
Political Polarization and Fear of Backlash	40
Qualitative Studies on LGBTQ+ Students’ Experiences in Schools	41
Key Findings from Existing Qualitative Research	41
Conclusions on Qualitative Research on LGBTQ+ Student Experiences	55
Role of School Counselors in Supporting LGBTQ+ Students	56
Ethical and Professional Competencies Related to Supporting LGBTQ+	
Students.....	56
Strategies to Support LGBTQ+ Students.....	58
Training and Professional Development.....	60
Challenges and Barriers Faced by School Counselors	62
New Jersey Specific Legislation.....	63
New Jersey Nondiscrimination Laws	64
NJ School Laws Related to LGBTQ+ Students.....	65
Summary and Transition to Chapter 3	69
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	71
Research Design and Rationale	72
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	74

Role of the Researcher	75
Researcher Positionality.....	75
Managing Researcher Bias	77
Methodology	78
Setting	78
Participant Selection	79
Instrumentation	82
Data Analysis Plan	83
Trustworthiness.....	84
Credibility	84
Transferability.....	85
Dependability and Confirmability	86
Ethical Procedures	86
Summary and Transition to Chapter 4.....	88
Chapter 4: Results	89
Setting	89
Demographics	90
Data Collection	90
Data Analysis	92
Discrepancies	94
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	95
Credibility	95

Dependability	96
Confirmability.....	96
Transferability.....	97
Results.....	97
Theme 1: Variability in School Experiences	98
Theme 2: Lack of Recognition of LGBTQ+ Students’ Needs	106
Theme 3: School Counselors Were Not a Factor.....	115
Theme 4: Desire for More Educational Opportunities	120
Summary and Transition to Chapter 5	126
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	128
Interpretation of the Findings.....	129
Theme 1: Variability in School Experiences	129
Theme 2: Lack of Recognition of LGBTQ+ Students’ Needs	137
Theme 3: School Counselors Were Not a Factor.....	143
Theme 4: Desire for More Educational Opportunities	145
Limitations of the Study.....	148
Recommendations and Implications for Positive Social Change	149
Conclusion	153
References.....	155
Appendix: Interview Questions	186

List of Tables

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes by Participant 93

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) students report higher frequencies of suicide ideation, dating violence, depression, anxiety, truancy, and homelessness than their cisgender and straight peers (Abreu & Kenny, 2018; Kann et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ students are bullied, assaulted, and harassed more frequently than their cisgender and straight peers, have lower GPAs, are less likely to pursue post-secondary education, and are more likely to engage in self-harm, risky sexual behaviors, and drug use (Collier et al., 2013; The Trevor Project, 2023). The existing research demonstrates that LGBTQ+ children and teens are not receiving the support they need to succeed and thrive in the school setting. A school counselor's role is to support students socially, behaviorally, and academically (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2025a). However, meeting this mandate can be challenging. It is crucial that school counselors are culturally competent and affirming to their students. Existing research related to students' experiences with school counselors is mixed (Craig et al., 2018; Roe, 2013). For example, students reported both positive and negative individual experiences with counselors, some of whom felt they received the needed support while others felt that their concerns were not addressed (Simons & Russell, 2021). The importance of school counselors being knowledgeable and competent when it comes to supporting their LGBTQ+ students is clear. (Abreu et al., 2019; Moe et al., 2015).

School counselors have a unique role in schools and are positioned to emotionally support students, advocate on behalf of students, and empower students to overcome

challenges, as well as train fellow staff members on supporting LGBTQ+ students. LGBTQ+ students consistently report hearing homophobic and transphobic remarks from peers and school staff (Kosciw et al., 2022). Additionally, the majority of students do not see their LGBTQ+ identities reflected in school lessons and curricula, despite research demonstrating the positive impact of inclusive curricula. When students are exposed to learning that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ people and terms, instances of bullying and harassment decrease (Ioverno et al., 2022; Kosciw et al., 2022). Protective legislation that promotes (a) affirming programming, (b) anti-discrimination policies, and (c) representative curricula all ensure the safety of LGBTQ+ students and allow for an optimal academic environment, and there are states such as New Jersey that mandate such protections. In this study, I explored how LGBTQ+ students understand and experience the protective and affirming laws that have been passed in New Jersey.

Despite existing research demonstrating the positive impact of legislative protections for LGBTQ+ people, there are many states with discriminatory and restrictive legislation that have implications for school counselors and other school-based professionals and their care for LGBTQ+ students, as well as the students' well-being. New Jersey (where this researcher currently resides) is a state that has passed inclusive, affirming, and protective laws and mandates. In this study, I explored the retrospective experiences of New Jersey LGBTQ+ youths' time in high school and how they felt their school experiences were impacted by LGBTQ+-related education legislation. With the results from this study, I will inform counselors on considerations to make when counseling LGBTQ+ young people and support advocacy efforts by demonstrating the

impact and importance of protective, affirming, and inclusive laws. My social change goal was to better understand how educational laws can impact children belonging to marginalized groups, such as being a part of the LGBTQ+ community. With this study, I will help educators and legislators understand youths' needs to better enable successful advocacy efforts and decrease the occurrences of homophobia and transphobia in educational settings (Aparicio-García et al., 2018).

Background

Research shows that comprehensive and inclusive health and sex education lowers risk factors in LGBTQ+ teens (Elia & Eliason, 2010). Other effective interventions and supports for LGBTQ+ students in schools include the existence of a designated club or safe space for LGBTQ+ students (Fisher & Komosa-Hawkins, 2013), the existence of gender-neutral or gender-affirming safe spaces for students to use the restroom and change for school activities such as physical education classes (Price-Feeney et al., 2021), visible signs of allyship (Roe, 2013), staff training regarding support of LGBTQ+ folks (Rivers & Swank, 2017), and visibility in the form of similar others and role models (Beck, 2020). Recent quantitative research also shows that young LGBTQ+ people's mental health has been negatively impacted by recent anti-LGBTQ+ legislation (The Trevor Project, 2023). Despite research demonstrating the significance of LGBTQ+ curricular inclusion, only eight states have laws mandating LGBTQ+ inclusion in their curricular standards (Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2025). Qualitative research on LGBTQ+ students' lived experiences as they relate to school and curricula legislation is underexplored. There is research that demonstrates that LGBTQ+ inclusive

curriculum improves school outcomes for students (Kosciw et al., 2022), but little research has been done on students' perceptions of LGBTQ+ school legislation and how students are experiencing school law.

Beyond curriculum laws, other discriminatory and restrictive laws have implications for school counselors and other school-based professionals and their care for LGBTQ+ students. Some examples of discriminatory legislation that exist include bathroom bills, anti-transgender sports bills, restrictions on LGBTQ+ content in education, limits on changing official documents, allowing businesses and employers to turn away LGBTQ+ people, book bans, drag bans, and gender affirming care bans (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], n.d.). Some states have proposed or passed legislation restricting transgender individuals' access to bathrooms that align with their gender identity. These bills can lead to discrimination and stigmatization both in and out of school for students. Several states have considered or enacted laws that limit transgender students' participation in sports based on their gender identity; these laws typically restrict transgender individuals from participating in sports teams that align with their gender identity. Some states have considered or passed laws that limit the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics in school curricula. These laws restrict the inclusion of LGBTQ+ history, events, or perspectives in educational materials, potentially leading to a lack of awareness and understanding, further stigmatizing LGBTQ+ folks.

While some states seem to ignore the research related to negatives outcomes for LGBTQ+ students demonstrated by legislators' continued efforts to pass discriminatory legislation, other states have passed LGBTQ+ affirming legislation with the goal of

making the state, and schools specifically, a more affirming environment for LGBTQ+ individuals. New Jersey is a state that has passed inclusive, affirming, and protective laws and mandates. Three recently enacted laws relate to curriculum. NJ Statutes Section 18A:35-4.35 (2018) requires:

instruction on the political, economic, and social contributions of persons with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, in an appropriate place in the curriculum of middle school and high school students as part of the district's implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

Another law, Chapter 35 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes (2021) states that:

Curriculum [is] to include instruction on diversity and inclusion. Beginning in the 2021-2022 school year, each school district shall incorporate instruction on diversity and inclusion in an appropriate place in the curriculum of students in grades kindergarten through 12 as part of the district's implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

Finally, the New Jersey Health and Physical Education Standards were rewritten to be inclusive of teaching related to LGBTQ+ identities and health (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020).

While the curriculum laws detailed above are specific to schools, New Jersey also enforces the NJ Law Against Discrimination (NJLAD) which prohibits discrimination based on, among other things, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation (1945 & rev. 2021). The NJ Department of Education (NJDOE) published guidance for

school districts related to the treatment of transgender and non-binary students so that schools are in compliance with the NJLAD (NJDOE, 2018). Important features of the NJDOE guidance include:

- (a) A school district shall accept a student's asserted gender identity; parental consent is not required;
- (b) There is no affirmative duty for any school district personnel to notify a student's parent or guardian of a student's gender identity or expression;
- (c) School personnel should use a student's chosen name and pronouns regardless of whether a student has had a legal name change;
- (d) School personnel should have an open, but confidential discussion with a student about their preferences for name/pronoun use and parental communication;
- (e) Schools shall offer student identification and other documentation in a student's chosen name;
- (f) School personnel should discuss with a student the risk of their trans identity being inadvertently disclosed to others.

The NJLAD, the state's guidance for schools, and the inclusive curriculum laws were all enacted with the intention to protect and support LGBTQ+ students.

From an ethical point of view, school counselors are bound to specific competencies, which include being affirming of LGBTQ+ students and acting as advocates to advance social justice initiatives (ASCA, 2025a). Students are not typically directly involved with curricular and legislative decisions, but school counselors can be. Thus, school counselors are uniquely positioned to uplift student voices and represent young people's interests to legislators and school leaders and speak to what students are

experiencing in school, and what measures must be taken for students to feel safer and more easily able to be successful in school.

I collected and presented experiences from the student perspective, which will better enable counselors to advocate on students' behalf, thereby enhancing student outcomes. This work is more pertinent than ever before because more students are identifying within the LGBTQ+ community than ever before in history (Gallup, 2021) while simultaneously, more anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies were introduced and passed in 2023 than in any year prior in the United States (ACLU, 2024).

Problem Statement

LGBTQ+ students reported higher frequencies of suicide ideation, dating violence, depression, anxiety, truancy, and homelessness than their cisgender and straight peers (Abreu & Kenny, 2018; Kann et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2022), and are bullied, assaulted, and harassed more frequently than their cisgender and straight peers. Because of LGBTQ+ students' experiences with harassment and non-acceptance, they tend to have lower GPAs, are less likely to pursue post-secondary education, and are more likely to engage in self-harm, risky sexual behaviors, and drug use (Collier et al., 2013; The Trevor Project, 2023). While these disparities continue to exist even for young LGBTQ+ people attending affirming schools, there are interventions schools can implement that reduce negative health and academic outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth such as providing supportive clubs and safe spaces, encouraging staff to be vocal allies, and providing professional development opportunities to ensure staff members' cultural competency as

it relates to supporting students of all identities (Beck, 2020; Fisher & Komosa-Hawkins, 2013; Price-Feeney et al., 2021; Rivers & Swank, 2017; Roe, 2013).

Furthermore, inclusive and representative curricula have positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ students (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Ioverno et al., 2022). For these effective interventions to exist within schools, there must be legislation that supports these efforts, or at the very least, there must not be restrictive or prohibitive legislation. Despite existing data related to the effectiveness of the aforementioned supports, school counselors and other staff, even when willing, are sometimes unable to cultivate safe, trusting, and caring environments for LGBTQ+ students due to anti-LGBTQ+ state legislation and/or school board policies, among other factors. Anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and legislation has a clear negative impact on LGBTQ+ youth; The Trevor Project (2023) reported that nearly one in three LGBTQ young people said their mental health was poor most of the time or always due to anti-LGBTQ policies and legislation, and nearly two in three LGBTQ young people said that hearing about potential state or local laws banning people from discussing LGBTQ people at school made their mental health a lot worse. This data demonstrates the need for affirming legislation and increased advocacy efforts surrounding the removal of prohibitive and restrictive legislation.

New Jersey is a state in which affirming and inclusive laws have been enacted and youth-serving professionals, including school counselors, are expected to affirm and support LGBTQ+ students. By exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ recent high school graduates in a state with LGBTQ+-affirming laws, school counselors and school counselor preparation programs can understand what an optimal social, political, and

school climate looks like for LGBTQ+ students and what may still be lacking despite inclusive, representative, and protective legislation. The current study is essential to the field of school counseling because it adds to the ongoing understanding of how to best support LGBTQ+ students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of recent high school graduates who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community in New Jersey. There are only a handful of studies that explore the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth as they relate to legislation, but existing studies focus on the negative impact discriminatory legislation has on youth (Ellis & Cheskiewicz, 2017; Fields & Wotipka, 2022). There are no qualitative studies that specifically explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in the context of affirming legislation. Research on this topic can potentially lead to improvements in policy, research, advocacy, and legislation. Furthermore, results from my study can inform school counselors of effective intervention efforts that can be implemented in schools where supportive legislation exists and can inform youth-serving professionals about disparities that exist for LGBTQ+ students in what can be considered an optimal legislative environment for this population. This study is essential in informing advocacy efforts because youth feedback is essential to better understand how inclusive and affirming legislation has impacted their school experience.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study was: How do LGBTQ+-identifying recent high school graduates make meaning of their experiences in school as they relate to LGBTQ+-affirmative education legislation?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical orientation for this qualitative study was Smith et al.'s (2021) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA was a suitable framework for this qualitative research due to its emphasis on exploring individuals' lived experiences in-depth, understanding their subjective perspectives, and uncovering the meanings they attribute to phenomena. IPA offers flexibility in data analysis, allowing researchers to adapt their methods to the research question and context while prioritizing participants' voices. IPA's participant-centered approach fosters a holistic understanding of participants' experiences within the context of their lives, while its rich textual analysis methods enable researchers to uncover themes and patterns in participants' accounts. IPA is concerned with understanding the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they attribute to these experiences (Alase, 2017). It emphasizes the importance of understanding subjective perspectives and the context in which those perspectives emerge.

The use of IPA allows researchers to delve deeply into the lived experiences of individuals, exploring their perceptions, emotions, and meanings attached to specific phenomena (Alase, 2017). I examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth as they related to legislation and explored how legislation has impacted the lived experiences of

LGBTQ+ youth in New Jersey high schools. Using IPA allowed me to prioritize understanding my participants' subjective experiences, and by understanding and presenting the experiences of youth, school counselors may be better enabled to advocate for LGBTQ+ youth. IPA was the most appropriate fit for my research question because it emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which experiences occur, including cultural, social, and historical factors that may influence meaning-making processes. With the use of IPA, I conducted a detailed and systematic analysis of the qualitative data I collected through processes of coding and interpretation, which led to rich and nuanced understandings of the participants' experiences as they related to legislation.

Conceptual Framework

To frame my exploration of LGBTQ+ young adults' high school experiences, minority stress theory (MST) served as an appropriate conceptual framework. The use of MST allows for the examination of the unique stressors and challenges faced by individuals belonging to marginalized or minority groups, particularly in relation to their social identity (Meyer, 2003). It also highlights how both external stressors such as discrimination and prejudice, and internal stressors such as internalized stigma contribute to chronic stress and adverse mental and physical health outcomes among minority populations. While MST was initially developed to understand mental health disparities among sexual minorities, it has since been applied to a range of marginalized groups, including gender-variant individuals, ethnic minorities, and other socially stigmatized populations (Lei et al., 2022; Poteat et al., 2014). In this study, I employed MST to

contextualize participants' experiences and examine how high school environments may have contributed to stress, resilience, and identity development for the LGBTQ+ participants. A more comprehensive discussion of MST and its application to LGBTQ+ youth experiences is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I chose qualitative methodology for this study as the purpose was to better understand the perspectives and experiences of recent high school graduates who identify as LGBTQ+. Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of context in people's experiences and allows researchers to explore the social, cultural, and personal factors that influence individuals' perspectives (Patton, 2015). A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because existing quantitative research demonstrates the efficacy of inclusive policies and curricula in improving mental health outcomes and school experience for LGBTQ+ students, but there is little existing research related to *how* students experience and perceive inclusive policies and curricula (Kaczkowski et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is no existing research that focuses specifically on one state in the U.S. with affirming and inclusive LGBTQ+ legislation. By interviewing LGBTQ+ young people in New Jersey and gathering rich qualitative data, legislators, counselors, and educators can better determine what students understand about how and why inclusive policies and curricula improve mental health outcomes and decrease harassment in schools. Additionally, by focusing on New Jersey, a state with inclusive education policies, comparisons and implications can be drawn for LGBTQ+ students in states

lacking inclusive policies and for states where the laws outright prohibit support of LGBTQ+ students and are discriminatory.

In this study, I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). In phenomenological research, researchers identify themes, patterns, and structures that characterize the essence of a particular phenomenon, allowing for a deeper understanding of the subjective aspects of people's thoughts and experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Phenomenological research gives valuable insight into how people make sense of and interpret their experiences. The use of IPA specifically enables researchers to present their findings in the form of themes derived from interview excerpts, accompanied by descriptive and interpretive comments (Erdoğan, 2023). I began by analyzing one case and then proceeded by conducting additional interviews. Connections between the interviews were explored, and theme saturation was achieved.

In this study, I asked participants to talk about their experiences in school related to their LGBTQ+ identities and the legislation that has been passed in New Jersey mandating an inclusive curriculum and the honoring of students' chosen names, pronouns, and identities. I explored how students felt their school experiences were impacted by their LGBTQ+ identities, to what degree the students were knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ related legislation, and how they felt the legislation may have played a part in their high school experiences. Guided by the minority stress framework, I created a document comprised of open-ended questions to assess minority stressors specific to LGBTQ+ students' experiences. The questions asked provided a way to gather detailed information about the participants' high school experiences and allowed me to better

understand their perceptions on how legislation impacted the school experience. Developing a greater understanding of LGBTQ+ students' experiences will promote awareness to readers about the importance of affirming and inclusive laws and curriculum, and can contribute to advocacy efforts related to legislation, thus encouraging and enabling positive social change.

Definitions

Keywords used in this study are defined below. Definitions enable the reader to have a general understanding of the terminology frequently used. The definitions that follow are all borrowed from Nadal (2023) except where otherwise noted.

Bisexual: A sexual orientation that is based on having sexual attractions toward more than one gender and the identity that is developed based on these attractions.

Cisgender: A term used to describe someone who identifies with their sex assigned at birth; someone who is not transgender. The term cis is commonly used as a shortened form of cisgender.

Gay: A sexual orientation that is based on having sexual attractions toward one's own gender and the identity that is developed based on these attractions. The term is often reserved for gay men; however, many women also identify as gay.

Lesbian: A woman whose sexual orientation is based on sexual attractions toward her own gender and the identity that develops because of these attractions.

LGBTQ+: An acronym used as an umbrella term to describe people who do identify with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities—typically referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning people, but also inclusive of

other identities such as asexual, nonbinary, genderqueer, pansexual, demisexual, and others. Sometimes a plus sign is used (LGBTQ+) to be more inclusive of other identities.

Mental health: The World Health Organization (2014) defines mental health as overall mental well-being; it is the ability to cope with stress and lead a productive life.

Non-binary: A term used to describe someone who does not subscribe to gender binaries (i.e., they do not identify exclusively as women or men). Non-binary can also be used as an umbrella term for other gender identities that do not conform to gender binaries (e.g., genderqueer, agender, bigender, gender fluid, ma-hu-, two-spirited, or gender nonconforming).

Queer: An umbrella term used to identify individuals who are not heterosexual. While initially an antigay epithet, the word has been reclaimed as an empowering identity.

School counselor: School counselors are licensed professionals working in public schools under the title of School Counselor or Guidance Counselor (ASCA, 2025a). School counselors, in the State of New Jersey, must graduate with a 48-credit master's degree in school counseling. Required courses must cover content related to counseling, career counseling, counseling theory, testing and evaluation, sociological foundation, community agencies, psychology, statistics, and students must undergo a supervised practicum and internship (NJDOE, 2015). School counselors may be employed at the elementary, middle, or high school level.

Trans: A shortened version of the word "transgender," often used as an umbrella term for people of transgender experience (e.g., non-binary people, genderqueer people).

Transgender: An umbrella term that can be used to refer to anyone for whom the sex they were assigned at birth is an incomplete or incorrect description of themselves.

Limitations

It was important for me to maintain my role as a researcher (rather than a counselor) so as not to influence the emerging themes. As a school counselor and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I had to actively reflect on my biases and manage them within the IPA qualitative framework using methods such as reflexivity and bracketing. To engage in reflexivity, I continuously examined my assumptions and perspectives throughout the research process. Bracketing refers to the process by which I temporarily set aside my preconceived notions, assumptions, and biases about the phenomenon being studied and prioritized participants' responses and experiences (Smith et al., 2021). Recognizing that my questions might have been distressing to some participants, I informed participants of potential risks and obtained informed consent. My participants were recruited from all around the state of New Jersey and were contacted through an LGBTQ+ non-profit organization that hosts social support groups for queer teens, so I also informed the social worker who facilitates the support groups that some attendees participated in my study in case they wanted to talk about it further. I gave the social worker my contact information should any of the youth want to have a follow up conversation and provided a telephonic counseling resource to provide debriefing and support as needed.

Significance and Summary

I explored the retrospective experiences of LGBTQ+ youths' time in high school and how they felt their school experiences were impacted by LGBTQ+-related education legislation. With this study, I hoped to inform counselors on additional considerations to take when counseling LGBTQ+ young people and will also support advocacy efforts in states where people are advocating for LGBTQ+-affirming legislation by demonstrating the impact and importance of protective, affirming, and inclusive laws. If people had a better understanding of how educational law can impact children belonging to minority groups such as being a part of the LGBTQ+ community, it may help educators and legislators understand youths' needs and better enable successful advocacy efforts. Lastly, understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ youths' experiences may also decrease the occurrences of homophobia and transphobia in educational settings and in general (Aparicio-García et al., 2018).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I used a variety of academic sources to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in schools, particularly in relation to how these experiences are influenced by LGBTQ+-related education legislation. Research exists on LGBTQ+ youth mental health and their school experiences, but there is a notable gap in research that explicitly explores the intersection of LGBTQ+ youths' experiences and existing legislation (Duarte et al., 2022; Fields & Wotipka, 2022). This gap makes it challenging to fully understand how legislation intended to support LGBTQ+ youth is impacting their lived experiences. To address this gap, I organized this review around recurring themes identified in the literature, categorizing these themes into subsections that explore different facets of the topic. With this review, I provide essential background information to help the reader understand the problem at hand and the study's objectives.

Literature Search Strategy

I collected information from scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles that are located throughout library databases, including EBSCOhost, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, APA PsycInfo, PsychArticles, PsychBooks, and ScienceDirect. Additionally, I searched specific academic journals such as the Journal of LGBT Youth, Journal of LGBT Health Research, and the Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling. The keywords searched were *lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA, LGBT rights, LGBT legislation, LGBT law, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, SOGI, SOGIE, heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, LGBT intersectionality, school counselor, school counseling, guidance counselor, guidance*

counseling, American School Counselor Association, inclusive curriculum, and LGBT representation. Additionally, I cited data published by The Trevor Project and GLSEN (which formerly stood for Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network but now only goes by the acronym), both of which conduct robust annual to semi-annual surveys on LGBTQ+ youth mental health.

Due to the nature of my study, I also needed to access information related to legislation and the rights of LGBTQ+ people across the country. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) maintains a comprehensive LGBTQ+ legislation tracker on their website which was crucial to use when discussing current and proposed legislation. I also cited GLSEN and the MAP, both of which have webpages dedicated to each individual state's LGBTQ+ legislation. For discussing the national landscape for LGBTQ+ folks, I accessed the White House website which contained information about recent executive orders put in place by the current administration. I interviewed New Jersey high school graduates to better understand the impact of affirmative legislation, and therefore needed to familiarize myself with New Jersey laws, so I cited documents published by the New Jersey state legislature and the NJDOE.

Historical Context of LGBTQ+ Legislation

To effectively discuss the current scope of LGBTQ+ education legislation and its impact, it is important to provide a brief history on LGBTQ+ civil rights in the United States. Starting in the mid-20th century with the founding of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, among other social and advocacy groups, societal attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals began to shift, culminating in increased activism and legal

reforms (Garretson, 2018). The Stonewall Riots of 1969 were a pivotal moment and often considered a turning point for gay liberation, sparking a movement that demanded recognition and equal rights for LGBTQ+ people (Duberman, 2019). The American Psychological Association (APA) declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973, which reduced stigma (Silverstein, 2009). However, it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that LGBTQ+ issues began to be more prominently addressed within schools. The creation of groups like GLSEN in 1990 marked a turning point in advocating for and recognizing the importance of policies that promote safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students.

The 2000s brought further legislative changes, with many states enacting anti-bullying laws that included protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The 2011 *Dear Colleague* letter from the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) emphasized the importance of protecting students from harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This federal guidance was intended to encourage schools to adopt more inclusive policies and practices but was rescinded under the first Trump administration (U.S. DOE, 2011).

With the outcome of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) case, marriage equality was legalized in all 50 states in 2015. Despite significant progress in the fight for LGBTQ+ equality, challenges remain—especially in educational settings. Legal battles and social discourse over the rights of transgender students, curriculum inclusivity, and anti-discrimination policies continue to shape the educational landscape. As the discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ rights evolves, educators' commitment to creating safe and

supportive educational environments must remain a critical focus, and research on outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth plays an important role in determining where advocacy efforts should be focused.

Current LGBTQ+ Legislation Affecting High Schools

The scope of anti-discrimination policies in U.S. schools as they relate to LGBTQ+ students varies widely by state, district, and local school districts. There are several key aspects that shape the landscape for LGBTQ+ students and families. The following sections contain an overview of the main legal and legislative components that influence how LGBTQ+ students are protected and in what aspects they may not be. This information is integral to my study because I will be examining how recent high school graduates have experienced the legislative landscape. By understanding students' experiences as they relate to legislation, counselors may be better positioned to support students and advocate for affirmative policies.

Federal Legal Protections

Historically, there has been a lack of uniform federal protections specifically for LGBTQ+ students, but there have been some notable developments. Title IX (Education Amendments of 1972) is a federal law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in federally funded schools. In recent years, courts and the U.S. DOE have interpreted this law to include protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Weiss, 2013). This interpretation was solidified by the 2020 Supreme Court decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020), which ruled that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is a form of sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil

Rights Act of 1964, and by extension, Title IX. This ruling has been cited to support the argument that LGBTQ+ students are entitled to protections in educational settings. The Equal Access Act (1984) mandates that public secondary schools that receive federal funding must allow student clubs, including LGBTQ+ groups, as long as other extracurricular clubs are also allowed. While this law does not directly address anti-discrimination within schools, it is a key factor in protecting LGBTQ+ students' rights to form clubs such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances and provides access to school resources. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) [2015] focuses on academic performance and accountability, and it allows for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students in broader efforts to address bullying and ensure safe schools. Many states and school districts use ESSA as a framework for addressing the needs of marginalized student groups, including LGBTQ+ students (Penuel et al., 2016). Like the ESSA, FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) is not explicitly focused on LGBTQ+ rights, but it can have significant implications for transgender students' experiences in school, particularly in relation to privacy, the disclosure of personal information, and how schools handle sensitive information about a student's gender identity (Zeide, 2015). Schools are generally prohibited from disclosing any information about a student's gender identity, medical history, or transition process to unauthorized individuals including parents if the student is over 18 or if the student's education record is not otherwise available to the parent under FERPA. Under FERPA, students, current or former, also have a right to seek to amend their school records if the records are inaccurate, misleading, or in violation of the student's rights of privacy. Transgender

students wishing to change their name and gender marker on their educational records can seek such an amendment under this federal law, though schools have handled these requests differently (Mayo, 2021; Stiegler, 2016). One thing that advocates continuously make clear is a need for specific protections written into policy at the local school district level.

State-Level Protections

State laws play a critical role in determining the protections for LGBTQ+ students. While federal laws provide a baseline, many states have additional provisions that either strengthen or weaken protections for LGBTQ+ youth in schools. A growing number of states including California, New Jersey, Oregon, and Colorado have enacted laws that specifically prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in schools (*Student Nondiscrimination Policies*, 2024). These states often have clear and explicit anti-bullying policies, inclusive curriculum requirements, and health and safety provisions related to gender identity such as allowing transgender students to use bathrooms and locker rooms that align with their gender identity. In most other states, there are no statewide laws offering explicit protections for LGBTQ+ students. This means that protections can be left up to individual school districts, which may result in varying degrees of protection. Four states have laws that expressly prohibit discrimination in schools based on sexual orientation but have schools that have adopted policies that require or encourage discrimination based on gender identity—these states are North Dakota, Virginia, New Hampshire, and Iowa (*Student Nondiscrimination Policies*, 2024). Two states—Missouri and South Dakota—have laws

prohibiting the inclusion of language related to sexual orientation and gender identity in local anti-bullying policies, so even if anti-bullying policies exist within a school, LGBTQ+ students are not explicitly protected and are at risk. In some states, laws that protect LGBTQ+ students have been countered by religious exemption laws that allow schools, particularly private schools, to refuse services or protection to LGBTQ+ students if doing so conflicts with religious beliefs. For example, in states like Texas and Florida, recent legislation has allowed for religious institutions to opt out of certain anti-discrimination provisions. Twenty-two states have no policies protecting LGBTQ+ students, which is part of the reason this research is so vital—if educators and counselors can understand the impact of legislation on LGBTQ+ youth, that data can be used to advocate for and on behalf of youth.

While the center of the conversation regarding LGBTQ+ youth protections lies in anti-discrimination policies, curriculum laws have also become a focal point. Eight states have passed LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum laws that set a standard for academic curriculum, created by local districts, to include affirming representation of LGBTQ+ people in schools K-12. Those states are California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington (MAP, 2025). Additional states have policies encouraging, but not requiring, the adoption of inclusive curricula and/or mandating LGBTQ+ inclusion in one or more specific content areas such as sexual health education and history/social studies.

However, in recent years there have been more anti-LGBTQ+ curricular policies passed than inclusive curricular policies. Between 2021 and 2024, seven states enacted

laws requiring parental notification of LGBTQ+ inclusive instruction; these laws either permit parents to opt their child out (Arkansas, Florida, Montana, New Hampshire) or mandate that parents opt into their child receiving such instruction (Arizona, Tennessee, Wyoming) [*Inclusive Curricular Standards Policies*, 2024]. Additionally, eleven states have passed laws that censor instruction on LGBTQ+ people and topics. Between 2022 and 2024, eight states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida (2022 and 2023), Indiana, Iowa (with enforcement paused), Kentucky, Louisiana, and North Carolina—have implemented “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” K-12 laws. These laws prohibit instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity, with some imposing total bans and others enacting partial, grade-specific restrictions. Notably, Florida’s 2023 law and Iowa’s law explicitly restrict access to LGBTQ+ inclusive school library books and resources. In response, a March 2024 settlement with the Florida State Board of Education neutralized several vague provisions in Florida’s 2022 law, such as allowing teachers to respond to student questions and permitting students to write about LGBTQ+ topics in class projects, though the statutory ban on inclusive instruction remains intact (Archibald, 2024). Enforcement of Iowa’s law has been paused pending a legal challenge that could permanently invalidate the law (*Inclusive Curricular Standards Policies*, 2024).

Earlier efforts to limit inclusive learning beginning in the 1980s and 1990s led to the implementation of “No Promo Homo” laws in seven states—Alabama, Arizona, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah, and Texas—which prohibited the affirmation of homosexuality in K-12 sex or health education and these laws remain in effect today (Hoshall, 2012). Furthermore, fifteen states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida,

Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah—have laws that censor instruction on race and sex-based structural inequality in K-12 schools (*Inclusive Curricular Standards Policies*, 2024). These laws often include provisions that stigmatize LGBTQ+ individuals. Arizona’s 2021 law on race and sex-based structural inequality was later struck down by the state’s Supreme Court, while Utah’s law restricts access to inclusive school libraries and specifically enumerates sexual orientation as a prohibited subject. The lack of clear federal policies related to LGBTQ+ discrimination and curriculum enables states to make their own laws, but in many states, there is also no clear law or guidance for local districts to reference. In most states that have LGBTQ+-related education laws, legislators have failed to take research on youth outcomes and mental health into account when crafting these policies and have passed laws that further discriminate against LGBTQ+ folks, sending the message to our LGBTQ+ youth that they are not welcome.

School District and Local Policies

Many school districts create their own policies to address LGBTQ+ student rights, even in the absence of state mandates (Russell et al., 2010). Some districts have comprehensive anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies that explicitly protect LGBTQ+ students, while others may not have specific language addressing LGBTQ+ issues or may have less robust protections. In districts with more inclusive policies, measures exist such as: LGBTQ+ students being explicitly protected under anti-bullying and harassment codes, gender-neutral bathrooms and policies that allow transgender

students to participate in sports according to their gender identity, existence of an affinity group or club for students such as a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), professional development for teachers and staff on LGBTQ+ inclusivity, and curriculum reforms that include LGBTQ+-related issues like history, literature, and discussions around gender identity and sexual orientation. In other districts, LGBTQ+ students may face a lack of protection or even hostile policies. For example, some districts may not have anti-bullying policies that explicitly mention LGBTQ+ students, or that may enforce “bathroom bills” that limit transgender students’ access to facilities corresponding to their gender identity (Sadowski, 2020). Book bans have also become a common practice to censor topics and discussions related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (McClure, 2022). In addition to formal policies, the local school climate plays an essential role in determining the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ students, as does the existence of out queer educators and allies within the school community (Espelage et al., 2023). The presence of supportive school staff, inclusive curricula, and active LGBTQ+ student groups can significantly enhance the experiences of LGBTQ+ students even in the absence of formal legal protections.

Many school districts have adopted anti-bullying laws that, in theory, should protect LGBTQ+ students from discrimination and harassment. However, the effectiveness of these laws often depends on how they are enforced. LGBTQ+ students continue to face significant bullying, harassment, and discrimination in schools across the U.S., and many of these issues are linked to the lack of clear or consistently enforced anti-discrimination policies. Some of the most harmful practices recently put into place at

state and local levels include forced outing policies (*Mapping Attacks...*, 2025). Although there have been significant strides in federal protections, such as through Title IX and court rulings like *Bostock v. Clayton County*, the scope and implementation of these protections are uneven across the country. In some states, LGBTQ+ students have strong legal safeguards, while in others, protections are minimal or nonexistent, and the legal landscape is continually evolving. Ultimately, the legal context is one important part of a picture that also includes school climate, local policies, and community attitudes which all significantly impact the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in educational settings.

The Presidential Administration's Actions in 2025

While it is hard to yet measure the current presidential administration's impact on schools and LGBTQ+ students, it must be noted that since January 2025, several executive orders were signed by President Trump related to LGBTQ+ individuals and education that may have state and local level implications. Those relating to LGBTQ+ individuals and education include (in the order they were signed): (a) Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing (Exec. Order No. 14,151, 2025); (b) Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government (Exec. Order No. 14,168, 2025); (c) Protecting Children From Chemical and Surgical Mutilation (Exec. Order No. 14,187, 2025); (d) Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling (Exec. Order No. 14,190, 2025); (e) Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports (Exec. Order No. 14,201, 2025); and (f) Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities (Exec. Order No. 14,242, 2025).

The total impact these executive orders will have is not yet clear, as several are being challenged in court, and there is no clear method of enforcement of the orders. Nevertheless, the goals of the orders are clear. The potential impact on schools and LGBTQ+ students includes prohibiting transgender girls from participating in school sports teams that align with their gender identity (Exec. Order No. 14,201, 2025) and removing discussions about gender and sexuality from school curricula entirely (Exec. Order No. 14,190, 2025). Executive Order No. 14,190 (2025) also encourages criminal prosecutions of teachers for affirming LGBTQ+ students. Other ways the orders may impact youth include restricting access to gender affirming care for young people under the age of 19. Executive Order No. 14,187 (2025) includes removing coverage for gender-affirming care from federal health insurance policies, modifying requirements under the Affordable Care Act, and preventing hospitals or other medical providers who accept Medicare or Medicaid, or receive federal funding for research or education from providing gender-affirming care, including puberty blockers or other medication. While enforcement of the orders has not yet taken place in any meaningful way, hospitals and institutions in states including New York, Colorado, D.C., and Virginia that were previously providing gender affirming care to transgender and non-binary children have pre-emptively begun ceasing care for these patients (NBC, 2025; Rodriguez, 2025), and this can have life-threatening repercussions. Tordoff et al. (2022) reported that for children who had access to gender affirming care such as puberty blockers or hormones, there were 60% lower odds of experiencing moderate to severe depression and 73%

lower odds of reporting self-harm or suicidal thoughts compared to those who did not receive these interventions.

Another executive order impacting the transgender and non-binary communities includes the reinstatement and expansion of the military ban on transgender servicemembers (Exec. Order No. 14,183, 2025), though this has been blocked by a federal judge (NBC, 2025b). Executive Order No. 14,168 (2025) places restrictions on federal gender markers, such as passports, and will require a person to use their sex assigned at birth. The White House stated that it intends to continue honoring previously issued unexpired passports that reflect a person's gender identity, including those that have an "X" gender designation, but that they will not renew or issue new passports that reflect anything other than one's assigned sex at birth. The executive orders involving trans-erasure also seemingly prompted the removal of the mention of transgender individuals from governmental websites. For example, the government's travel advisories page for queer travelers used to mention transgender folks but now only gives guidance to LGB travelers. There has also been a removal of mentions of transgender individuals from national parks and monuments and their affiliated websites; there is now no mention of transgender folks on the Stonewall monument's website despite transgender people being an integral part of the Stonewall Riots (Sanders, 2019).

Without a clear indication of how these new executive orders will be enforced and which orders may be blocked by the judiciary system, it is impossible to determine all the implications for LGBTQ+ people and for schools. It is possible that threats to cut funding will encourage local school boards to no longer consider or to simply remove protections

in place for LGBTQ+ students, but it is too early to collect meaningful data on the repercussions of the executive orders signed in 2025.

Impact of LGBTQ+ Legislation on High School Students

Qualitative research on LGBTQ+ students' school experiences is plentiful, but qualitative research on LGBTQ+ youths' perspectives on legislation is limited. There is plenty of existing quantitative research in which LGBTQ+ youths have been surveyed about legislation's impact on their mental health, but the qualitative piece is missing—how exactly are students experiencing LGBTQ+ education legislation? The quantitative research consistently shows that LGBTQ+ students are more likely to feel safe and supported when anti-discrimination laws are in place for things like housing, employment, and education (Fields & Wotipka, 2022). Anti-discrimination policies can reduce experiences of bullying, harassment, and exclusion, which LGBTQ+ people have historically faced. LGBTQ+ students attending school in states whose anti-discrimination policies include protections surrounding gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation reported higher feelings of safety and were less likely to experience bullying or harassment compared to those in states without such laws (Ridings, 2020).

Minority Stress Theory

To explore the essence of this study's participants' high school experiences in a state with LGBTQ+-affirming legislation, it is important to consider MST as a framework to explore themes that may emerge. Meyer (2003) discussed MST as a conceptual framework that explores the unique stressors and challenges faced by individuals belonging to marginalized or minority groups, particularly in the context of

their social identity. The theory was initially formulated to highlight the mental health disparities experienced by sexual minorities, but it has since been extended to other minority and/or marginalized groups such as gender variant folks (Poteat et al., 2014), non-believing and atheist folks (Brewster et al., 2014), undocumented people (Valentín-Cortés et al., 2020), and individuals belonging to ethnic and cultural minority groups (Lei et al., 2022). The central premise of MST is that individuals from minority groups often encounter stressors that are specific to their minority status. Because this theory was designed to understand the experiences of people belonging to marginalized groups, I deemed it appropriate for use in this study.

MST suggests that members of minority groups face chronic stress due to external factors, otherwise known as distal factors, such as discrimination, stigma, and prejudice; members of minority groups, particularly sexual and gender minority groups, also experience internal or proximal factors such as internalized homophobia or transphobia (Meyer, 2003; Poteat et al., 2014). Experiences with harassment, discrimination, bullying, stigma, and prejudice faced by LGBTQ+ youth because of their sexual and/or gender identities contribute to both psychological and physical stress. Fear of rejection and concealing one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity can put someone in a constant state of vigilance and hypervigilance, leading to chronic stress and its related effects (Correro II & Nielson, 2020; Rostosky et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ high school students may internalize negative societal attitudes toward their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, or self-hatred. This internalized homophobia or transphobia can contribute to mental health issues including depression

and anxiety, as well as difficulties forming a positive view of oneself (Longares et al., 2016). Furthermore, navigating the process of self-discovery while dealing with societal expectations and potential rejection can be overwhelming. Persistent exposure to hostile environments, particularly hostile school and home environments, may contribute to a sense of hopelessness and increased vulnerability to mental health and substance use issues. Overall, LGBTQ+ people face a heightened risk of generalized anxiety, major depression, disproportionate alcohol and drug use, and attempting and completing suicide (Lick et al., 2013). Physical consequences of minority stress on LGBTQ+ individuals include activity limitations, disability, disease risk factors, and overall poor health. The use of MST is appropriate for my study and consistent with common applications of the theory because the minority stress model can help researchers understand how to reduce stigma and exposure to minority stress, as well as help people increase their resilience in the face of minority stress (Frost & Meyer, 2023).

Legal Landscape and LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health

The rise of anti-trans legislation—such as bans on transgender students’ participation in sports or accessing gender-affirming healthcare—has provoked fear and anxiety among students (The Trevor Project, 2023). A 2023 survey by the Trevor Project found that 85% of LGBTQ+ youth felt that anti-trans laws made them feel less safe in school. Many also reported that such laws contribute to increased mental health challenges. Laws like Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” laws, which restrict discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in K-12 classrooms, also fuel concern among LGBTQ+ students (Levengood & Hadland, 2022). These laws can contribute to feelings

of invisibility, invalidation, and isolation, as well as heightened stress, especially for students who rely on school as a place for support. It is important to note that for many LGBTQ+ young people, school is the only in-person place they can find support. Young people find the most affirming environments to be online spaces, followed by school, with home being the last place young LGBTQ+ people feel affirmed (Charmamaran et al., 2021; Nath et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of LGBTQ+ affirming school laws, because if young people are not feeling affirmed at home *or* at school, rates of depression and suicidality exponentially increase. In the Trevor Project's 2019 survey, it was found that just one supportive adult at school reduced suicide attempts by 40 percent. Therefore, every youth-serving professional involved in direct contact with students at schools should be educated and empowered with the knowledge to be supportive of students of all identities; but, without laws that encourage and mandate LGBTQ+ support, educators are less likely to know and understand the urgency and importance of being affirming to these students.

Academic Outcomes

LGBTQ+ students often face disparities in academic achievement compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers due to factors such as in-school victimization, discrimination, and isolation (Kosciw et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience verbal and physical harassment compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Kosciw et al., 2022; Nath et al., 2024). This can have serious consequences on the mental health and academic performance of these students. In-school victimization heightens LGBTQ+ students' fears and anxiety, leading to increased rates of depression, suicide ideation, and

a higher likelihood that LGBTQ+ students will drop out of school (Espelage et al., 2023; Myers et al., 2020). In-school victimization can also impact students' social and emotional development by contributing to students' feelings of isolation (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Gorczynski & Fasoli, 2022). Accepting one's own sexual orientation or gender identity is difficult enough for many young people, and non-affirming school environments heighten the stress related to coming out and self-acceptance. It is imperative for educators, administrators, and policymakers to take proactive measures to create safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ students to prevent negative outcomes for LGBTQ+ students.

Students also experience stressors in school when they are unable to use the facilities that align with their gender identity or participate in sports and other activities because of their identity (Nath et al., 2024; Kelley et al., 2022). The lack of visibility and representation in school staff and curricula can also cause students to feel isolated (Millers et al., 2025). The victimization, discrimination, and isolation LGBTQ+ students are experiencing in schools often results in LGBTQ+ students reporting a lack of focus and motivation to perform well in school, obtaining lower grade point averages, performing worse than their peers on standardized test scores, having less involvement in extra-curricular activities, and having a higher likelihood of skipping school and dropping out of school (Hazel et al., 2019; Nath et al., 2024). LGBTQ+ students also experience higher rates of discipline, often as a result of their own victimization (Samimi et al., 2024). Due to factors related to discrimination, victimization, and isolation, many LGBTQ+ students report less of a desire to pursue post-secondary education—

particularly transgender, non-binary, and those who identify sexually with labels other than gay or lesbian (Feldman et al., 2022). The cumulative effects of the victimization, discrimination, and isolation that LGBTQ+ students experience can lead to a cycle wherein lower academic achievement reinforces feelings of isolation and inadequacy, making it even more challenging for LGBTQ+ students to succeed academically.

Legislation and advocacy efforts should take the effects of victimization, discrimination, and isolation into account to reduce the disparities faced by LGBTQ+ students and make schools optimal learning environments for all.

LGBTQ+ Students' Perspectives on Legislation

Substantial research exists about what LGBTQ+ youths experience in schools, and much of that research recommends that educators and legislators advocate for more inclusive and protective policies (Abreu et al., 2019; Fields & Wotipka, 2022). However, there is not much research that explores the thoughts and perspectives of youth on the actual legislation that directly impacts their high school experiences. Studies show that LGBTQ+ students report a desire for safe spaces, vocal allies, and an inclusive curriculum (Kosciw et al., 2022; Snapp et al., 2015), but it is difficult to determine whether LGBTQ+ students are even aware of the different laws that impact their school experiences.

While research is scarce on high schoolers' perceptions and opinions regarding legislation, surveys have been conducted on college campuses regarding students' thoughts on legislation in general. There is existing research on college students' perspectives on LGBTQ+-related issues such as same-sex marriage and the rights and

inclusion of transgender people. Kaufman et al. (2022) found that most college students are supportive of same-sex marriage. Yadava (2022) found that cisgender students understand the need and relevance of creating gender inclusive spaces for transgender folks in higher education. There have also been studies conducted with LGBTQ+ participants on their experiences in higher education. One study by Goldberg et al. (2019) highlights the policies that transgender students find to be important. Transgender college students felt that gender-inclusive restrooms, nondiscrimination policies that explicitly include gender identity protections, and the ability to change one's name on campus records without requiring a legal name change were essential to a positive post-secondary experience. The researchers also stated that those who were aware of trans-inclusive policies and supports being in place reported both a stronger sense of belonging on campus and more positive perceptions of the overall campus climate (Goldberg et al., 2019).

While conversations are being had on college campuses, none of the existing research retrospectively looks at LGBTQ+ young people's experiences in high school and how those experiences were shaped by legislation. This is particularly important to consider now because more young people are identifying within the LGBTQ+ community than ever before (Jones, 2025; Twenge et al., 2024) and more anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is being proposed and passed in states across the country than ever before (ACLU, n.d.; Choi, 2024). These two trends occurring simultaneously are antithetical to one another and could have major repercussions for LGBTQ+ students in schools now and going forward.

Inclusive Curriculum

While there is no existing research on LGBTQ+ students' perspectives of legislation's impact on their high school education, there is data that shows the positive impact of inclusive curricula (Kosciw et al., 2022; Nath et al., 2024). When asked, LGBTQ+ students generally express a strong desire for inclusive curricula across subject matters that reflect their identities and experiences (Schey, 2023; Snapp et al., 2015). LGBTQ+ topics must be integrated into sex education and general education curricula to more greatly impact a school's climate and culture (Tran et al., 2023), but the places students report seeing inclusion, if they are seeing it, are mostly limited to the humanities (Snapp et al., 2015). Most traditional sexuality education programs have historically failed to address LGBTQ+ identities, relationships, and unique health needs adequately (Gowen & Wings, 2014). Members of the LGBTQ+ community face unique health disparities and challenges, including higher rates of mental health issues, substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS. Only 7% of gender- and sexual- minority youth report that their sex education was inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities (Rabbitte, 2020), and the lack of LGBTQ+ inclusion in sexual health education can leave youth feeling invisible or excluded and have very real consequences for their health and well-being. Gowen and Wings (2014) found that LGBTQ+ students want comprehensive and inclusive education that is reflective of their real-world experiences and that contains information specific to LGBTQ+ relationships and sexuality. When laws restrict LGBTQ+ inclusion in school curricula (such as the "Don't Say Gay" laws or "No Promo Homo" laws), students report feeling marginalized and erased (Abreu et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022;

Nath et al., 2024), contributing to the mental health factors discussed earlier. Ensuring that all youth have access to comprehensive and inclusive sexual health education and LGBTQ+ education across content areas may dispel myths and reduce stigma surrounding the LGBTQ+ community, thereby enhancing the school environment for LGBTQ+ students and reducing the negative mental health and academic outcomes they face.

“Parental Rights” Legislation

Some LGBTQ+ people express discomfort with legislation that seeks to prioritize parental rights over students’ autonomy or privacy; bills requiring schools to notify parents about students’ gender identity or sexual orientation have sparked negative reactions from LGBTQ+ people (Reed, 2024). LGBTQ+ students, particularly those who are not out to their families, can potentially be harmed if their identities are disclosed without their consent. In McCauley et al. (2024), youth who were outed to their parents reported higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower amounts of LGBTQ+ family support. LGBTQ+ students from unsupportive families are particularly vulnerable under “parental rights” and forced outing laws which can create concerns including rejection, abuse, or homelessness. 23.1% of Gen-Z young adults identify as LGBTQ+ (Jones, 2025), but LGBTQ+ youth are 2.2 times more likely to experience homelessness (Morton et al., 2018), demonstrating that LGBTQ+ young people are disproportionately represented in the unhoused youth population.

Political Polarization and Fear of Backlash

LGBTQ+ young people are witnesses to political polarization around LGBTQ+ rights and are aware that legislation is used as a tool to either affirm or challenge their existence, and being witnesses to these discussions impacts their mental health. The Trevor Project's 2023 survey found that nearly two in three LGBTQ+ young people said that hearing about potential state or local laws banning people from discussing LGBTQ+ people at school made their mental health a lot worse. That same survey found that nearly one in three LGBTQ+ young people said their mental health was poor most of the time or always due to anti-LGBTQ+ policies and legislation. The social and political polarization regarding LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion creates a sense of instability in LGBTQ+ people, particularly young people who are trying to navigate their identities in environments that feel unpredictable or hostile. Gonzalez et al. (2020) found that LGBTQ+ folks reported higher levels of sexual orientation rumination, increased daily experiences of harassment and discrimination, and more symptoms of depression and anxiety following the 2016 presidential election in which President Trump was elected to his first term. Nath et al. (2024) reported in the Trevor Project's 2024 survey that 90% of the LGBTQ+ young people said their well-being was negatively impacted due to recent politics and that 45% of transgender and nonbinary young people reported that they or their family have considered moving to a different state because of LGBTQ+-related politics and laws. Hobaica et al. (2021) also reported that LGBTQ+ students in politically conservative areas experienced heightened anxiety about the future of their rights due to the fluctuating nature of LGBTQ+ policy and political discourse, as well as higher instances

of in-school victimization. LGBTQ+ protections at the federal level are unlikely to be passed during the current presidential administration making advocacy at the local level more important than ever.

Qualitative Studies on LGBTQ+ Students' Experiences in Schools

Most research on LGBTQ+ students' mental health and experiences in school is quantitative, wherein information about this population is gathered through self-report surveys (Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2022; Nath et al., 2024). Despite the dearth of qualitative research related to students' perspectives on legislation, there are some existing qualitative studies containing data indicating what LGBTQ+ students are experiencing in schools. By understanding LGBTQ+ students' experiences, counselors can be better equipped to support students, and implications for advocacy work regarding legal protections and inclusions can be drawn. My study asked LGBTQ+ students directly about their thoughts and experiences regarding LGBTQ+-related education legislation to then enable counselors and advocates to amplify the voices of those directly impacted by the laws. Before doing that, it was important to have a general understanding of what LGBTQ+ students are experiencing in schools and how researchers have gone about collecting that information.

Key Findings from Existing Qualitative Research

There are common themes that tend to emerge in qualitative research conducted with LGBTQ+ students, and these themes can be broadly categorized as relating to positive and negative experiences. In the following sections, I will provide an overview of recurrent themes in existing research.

Adverse Experiences

Existing research on LGBTQ+ students is often focused on the challenges LGBTQ+ students face. Students often report experiences of victimization, discrimination, and isolation. It is also clear in the research that non-white LGBTQ+ individuals experience unique challenges. This section will focus on the challenges LGBTQ+ students report facing and address concerns related to intersectionality.

Victimization. LGBTQ+ students often report verbal bullying and harassment by their peers. In Earnshaw et al. (2020), one student shared, “I was called the f-slur many times, as well as told that I should be killed or ‘converted.’ I was too scared to tell anyone, even my parents, because I was not out yet” (p. 287). Another student reported the following of a school resource officer: “he kept asking me if I was gay or if I knew I was going to hell” (Craig et al., 2018b, p. 235). Reports of LGBTQ+ students experiencing being called slurs is supported by quantitative findings regarding LGBTQ+ young people as well (Crothers et al., 2017). The majority of LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing verbal harassment (Kosciw et al., 2022). Quantitative data also shows that verbal harassment increases students’ self-reported levels of depression and anxiety and makes them more likely to skip school (Espelage et al., 2023; Nath et al., 2024).

Students are subject to physical harassment in schools as well. In Craig et al. (2018b), one student shared:

There is a lot of violence here [at school], and it is worse for gay kids... I don’t think that people notice it if they have always been here, but I just moved here

and I don't feel safe... My gay friends don't feel safe at school. I would like us all to feel safe. (p. 235)

A student in Rostosky et al. (2025) shared:

A student spat while looking at me, really challenging me. I thought it was funny but kind of unsettling. Then a different male student in my anatomy lab 'warned' me I would 'get the shit kicked out of me.' (p. 362)

A transgender female student in another study shared that they had been sexually assaulted, describing, "since I started growing breast buds, I've had multiple people grab me and feel me up," and that, "when I wear a skirt... students try to lift it and pull it down. I am groped weekly" (Earnshaw et al., 2020, p. 288). According to several qualitative and quantitative studies, instances of physical and sexual assault often occur in restrooms and other gender segregated spaces (Aslam et al., 2022; Berry, 2016; Tillewein et al., 2023).

Students also shared experiences related to cyberbullying. In Berry (2016), one student shared:

It was just so easy to say horrible words online without consequences. None of us ever had the guts to say anything to each other in person. We threatened each other physically online, but none of us said those same words to each other at school. (p. 55)

In their quantitative research, Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) found that 60% of LGBT participants reported being harassed based on their sexual identity and 41% of LGBT participants claimed to have been harassed due to their gender identity/expression.

Palmer et al. (2013) found that more than four in ten LGBT youth (42%) reported having been bullied or harassed online, with 8% reporting that it occurred at least once a week during the past year.

It is evident in research that LGBTQ+ students face higher rates of discrimination in schools than non-LGBTQ+ students (Goldbach et al., 2023; Martin-Storey et al., 2018; Payne & Smith, 2018). Despite that, students express fear that school officials will not take any action should they report instances of harassment and violence (Martin-Storey et al., 2018; Tillewein et al., 2023). In Weise et al. (2023), one student shared, “I did not think [verbal harassment] was something worth reporting. I am used to things like that” (p. 612). Another barrier to students reporting instances of victimization is their fear of being outed; one student shared, “I was too scared to tell anyone, even my parents, because I was not out yet” (Earnshaw et al., 2020, p. 287). My study explored if and how LGBTQ+-affirming legislation has impacted the experience of recent high school graduates; if affirmative legislation seemed to decrease the amount of victimization and discrimination experienced by students, and I could effectively interpret the student experience and amplify their voices, it may make it clearer to counselors and legislators the importance of LGBTQ+-affirming legislation and demonstrate its clear impact on the student experience.

Discrimination. In addition to overt verbal and physical violence and harassment, LGBTQ+ students often encounter discrimination in more subtle forms of bias such as microaggressions. A microaggression is “a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a

marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Cramwinckel et al. (2018) described microaggressions as “everyday brief, low-intensity events that convey negative messages about LGBTQ people” such as “someone [saying] or imply[ing] that LGBTQ people engage in unsafe sex because of their sexual orientation” and hearing “someone say ‘that’s so gay’ to describe something as negative, stupid, or uncool” (p. 190). In school settings, microaggressions occur in various forms. One example is through teachers’ use of non-affirming language or use of the incorrect name or pronouns for a student. Transgender and non-binary people often refer to their given names as “deadnames.” In Sinclair-Palm and Chokly (2022), one student shared, “I think people just don’t realize...the frustration, the trauma, and how upsetting it is to hear someone say it” regarding their deadname (p. 377). Another way microaggressions show up in the school setting is in curriculum that is not inclusive of LGBTQ+ stories and identities but instead reflects heteronormative perspectives. While often unintentional, the message the lack of inclusivity subtly sends to students is that they are not “normal,” not welcome, or do not belong (Schey, 2023; Snapp et al., 2015).

Another way in which students encounter discrimination within the school setting is through lack of access to appropriate facilities such as restrooms and locker rooms. Thirteen states have passed laws that require students to use the restroom associated with their sex assigned at birth, disregarding their gender identity entirely (Human Rights Campaign, 2024). In some schools, students are expected to use entirely separate facilities such as a single stall restroom in the nurse’s office. In Jandernoa (2024), the author highlighted Gavin Grimm’s case, which the Supreme Court decided not to hear.

Regarding his experience having to use separate facilities, Grimm stated it was “stigmatizing to use a separate [bathroom]” (p. 650). Lack of access to restrooms and facilities that correlate with students’ gender identity negatively impacts transgender students’ educational outcomes and overall well-being (Wernick et al., 2017). Existing literature overwhelmingly highlights the maltreatment of LGBTQ+ students but does not indicate as many positive experiences, and my study bridged that gap by understanding how affirmative legislation has impacted the student experience.

Isolation. Another recurring theme in research involving LGBTQ+ students is their reporting of feelings of exclusion and isolation. Quantitative findings show that students’ experiences in gendered spaces, the lack of inclusive curriculum, and experiences of harassment and discrimination related to their identities all contribute to LGBTQ+ students’ feelings of isolation (Harris et al., 2021; Kosciw et al., 2022). Harris et al. (2021) explored the lived experiences of isolation that students are feeling. One student shared, “I just want to feel like I’m part of everyone else” (p. 169). Beyond feeling emotionally isolated, students may also experience physical isolation. Another student in Harris et al. (2021) shared, “I’d be in the girls’ changing rooms and I’d be literally forced to go into the toilets otherwise people would say I’m perverting on them” (p. 163). Evans et al. (2017) effectively summarized the different factors contributing to LGBTQ+ students’ feelings of isolation: (a) students may feel the need to self-monitor their behaviors so as not to be perceived as being part of the LGBTQ+ community; (b) students often fear for their safety; (c) students often fear rejection; and (d) students

experience hostility, harassment, and discrimination which discourages them to share their identity and can lead students to disengage with their school environment.

LGBTQ+ students' familial experiences also often contribute to feelings of isolation. One young person shared their experience coming out to their mother: "I said: 'I'm gay.' I was holding her hand and she pulled her hand away and ... her face just fell" (Van Bergen et al., 2020, p. 1124). Another individual from the same study shared:

I think it's just never being fully in an environment that's safe. Even at home, even though my mother is neutral about how she feels about my identity, there is a lot of sly negative comments about you're not gonna be accepted. (p. 1126)

In Clark et al. (2022), the researchers found that negative familial responses to their child's gender- and sexual- minority status correlated with higher reporting of recent worry and anxiety from the LGBTQ+-identified child. For many young LGBTQ+ young people, neither school nor home are reliable spaces of support, and there may be no third space that feels comfortable or safe for youth to be their authentic selves.

Intersectionality. All the adverse experiences described above profoundly impact LGBTQ+ students of color in general more so than white LGBTQ+ students, with the most vulnerable group being black queer and trans students. One in ten black cisgender queer youth attempted suicide in 2022 and one in four black transgender youth attempted suicide in 2022 (The Trevor Project, 2023). Regarding discrimination in school and their negative experiences with a teacher, one Asian student shared, "The teacher's disrespect was twofold, as it was both racially insensitive and dismissive of my true [gender] identity" (Yoon et al., 2024, p. 5). In Garvey et al. (2019) students discussed their

experiences as queer students of color, and one Native Hawaiian and sexually fluid student simply stated, “I was a student of color in addition to being LGBT, and those two communities did not mix well” (p. 161).

Beyond the general difficulties that come with holding multiple marginalized identities, it is also important to acknowledge the complexities within LGBTQ+ support spaces themselves. While LGBTQ+ safe spaces like GSAs are demonstrably beneficial, some students, particularly non-white students, may experience exclusion or marginalization even within these spaces. One Black bisexual woman in Garvey et al. (2019) shared this of her experiences with white-centric LGBTQ+ spaces and with white peers:

The problem was that I didn't have LGBT friends who would understand my perspective on things. I just never felt like I could truly be myself, and that had an overwhelmingly negative impact on my academic performance and social life. (p. 164)

Another student in Earnshaw et al. (2020) shared, “I feel like white LGBTQ students have an easier time being accepted, while I have to deal with racism, queerphobia, and transphobia” (p. 288). The experiences of feeling excluded from queer spaces due to either a lack of understanding from peers or experiencing overt racism illustrate the importance of considering intersectionality when looking at social support and ensuring that schools are truly inclusive for all LGBTQ+ students.

Positive Experiences

Most existing research on LGBTQ+ students highlights students' negative experiences in school and the impacts on their mental health, and while it is crucial for counselors and educators to understand students' adverse experiences, it is equally important to understand students' positive experiences and the associated outcomes. Despite the discrimination they often face, LGBTQ+ students exhibit resilience and employ various coping mechanisms to navigate hostile school environments (Craig et al., 2018; Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015). Seeking support from affirming individuals plays a crucial role in students' ability to cope, and allyship from friends and school staff can provide a buffer against the negative impacts of the daily harassment, discrimination, and microaggressions students face (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2024).

Teachers as Allies. LGBTQ+ students have shared that having just one adult ally in school can contribute positively to their school experience. In Craig et al. (2018b), one student shared:

Miss Alvarez is my rock. She listens and helps me feel better by helping me think about the future and manage my feelings. She also has helped me talk to the principal about some issues in the school [to] try to make it safer. She has this group, which is my favorite part of the school week, and helps us understand that school is for us too. (p. 236)

Dessel et al. (2017) conducted quantitative research that found that the presence of a trusted adult in school and a student's comfort when they talked with teachers about gender and sexuality were both positively associated with self-esteem. Generally, when a

school staff member is involved in a student's academic and social life outside of the direct instructional time, students are more likely to feel safe and connected to their school community which may result in fewer bullying occurrences (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Hong & Eamon (2012) investigated the experiences of middle and high school students in general, but the implication is that all students can benefit from a safe adult at school. This can be particularly critical for LGBTQ+ identifying youth who may not have a safe adult elsewhere. In Goodenow et al. (2006), LGB students who perceived that there was no adult at school with whom they could speak to about a problem were more likely to have received threats at school, and to have attempted multiple suicides during the previous year. Having a safe adult at school is also associated with higher rates of academic engagement (Seelman et al., 2015) and a decreased likelihood that an LGBTQ+ student will engage in substance abuse (De Pedro et al., 2017).

GSAs. As is the case with having supportive educators, the existence of a club or designated safe space for LGBTQ+ students is also often associated with positive outcomes for students. The acronym "GSA" has historically been used to mean Gay-Straight Alliance but is now often used to mean Gender and Sexuality Alliance (Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network, n.d.). While most of the data on high school GSAs and their impact on students is quantitative, the data paints the clear picture that in schools that have a GSA, LGBTQ+ students report feeling safer in school, feeling less inclined to skip school, reported less instances of harassment and victimization, and reported higher feelings of belonging (Porta et al., 2017; Truong et al., 2021). However, there is a lot of variability in the perception and effectiveness of a school's GSA that relates to the size,

presence, and effectiveness of a school's club (Seelman et al., 2015). Truong and Zongrone (2022) found that the existence of a club had little impact on LGBTQ+ students and that associated outcomes were related to students' level of participation in the club itself. Despite the discrepancies in the quantitative research, existing qualitative research helps researchers and educators to understand the value a GSA can play in a student's life. In Porta et al. (2017), one transgender and asexual student shared:

I was pretty excited to join, and I noticed that the other kids didn't really care. It didn't really affect them, but for me it affected me a lot because I wanted to meet others like me. I wanted to meet others that would support me or that were supportive of this community. (p. 493)

Another gay male student from the same study reported:

There's nobody in there that's going to say anything against me or anyone else there. And everybody in there is absolutely for sure accepting of the LGBTQA+ community, like, all those people. So I guess that's kind of [why] I feel at home. (p. 493)

Anti-Bullying Policies. Another factor that can shape an LGBTQ+ student's experience into a positive one is attending a school that has an anti-bullying policy, and specifically an anti-bullying policy that is inclusive of protections specifically regarding gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. In their quantitative study of Oregon school policies, Hatzenbuehler and Keyes (2013) found that 31% of lesbian and gay adolescents attempted suicide in counties where school districts were the least likely to adopt inclusive anti-bullying policies, but only 17% attempted suicide in counties with

the greatest proportion of school districts with inclusive policies. Similarly, Kosciw et al. (2022) found that instances of suicidality, victimization, and harassment were lower in schools that had anti-bullying policies inclusive of protections surrounding gender and sexuality. Despite the demonstrated effectiveness of inclusive anti-bullying policies on enhancing LGBTQ+ students' experiences in school, there is a dearth of qualitative research in peer-reviewed journals related to how students are experiencing anti-bullying policies. Due to the lack of published articles in refereed journals, I opted to explore dissertations related to the topic. A teacher in Holliday (2016) shared about their school's anti-bullying policy:

I would say that I know we have one and is something that there would be severe consequences if you got caught bullying, but I feel like I've never really had to use the policy myself and I haven't been, that I can remember, walked through, 'this is what you do if someone is bullied.' (p. 56)

If teachers lack the training or knowledge necessary to implement an anti-bullying policy, it is possible that students may be unaware of their school's policy or unaware of how to appropriately report instances of bullying. As stated in previous sections of this paper, LGBTQ+ students are often hesitant to speak up about bullying and harassment due to their perceived lack of support from school staff or their fear of being outed, which is why students' perspectives on anti-bullying policies in research may be limited. In this study, I explored how students attending schools with inclusive policies have perceived and experienced them, and the findings revealed what aspects of affirming policies have proven effective for the study's participants. With that information, school counselors,

teachers, legislators, and allies can advocate for effective policies in less inclusive schools.

Inclusive Curriculum. Students that attended schools with curriculum that is inclusive and representative of LGBTQ+ identities reported a higher sense of belonging and increased engagement in academics (Kosciw et al., 2022). Seeing oneself reflected in instructional materials can have a profound impact on LGBTQ+ students. One student in Snapp et al. (2015) shared that they felt:

Learning about LGBTQ issues in my school helps stop bullying...people in my class became more aware of things...were simply more educated afterwards and had a little bit of an easier time talking about LGBTQ issues. [It] opened up debate of how people view the world...It helps a lot of students feel comfortable. (p. 257)

Another student from the same study shared:

The curriculum was very supportive of LGBTQ people...it gave them a place to talk about things they might otherwise avoid talking about. What had the greatest effect was the history videos. Seeing that LGBTQ people have been present and fighting for rights and visibility as long as any other group helped my classmates accept and understand them. (p. 257)

A third student shared:

I had never been so happy or smiled so much during a lesson, just to know that the group of people that I most strongly identified with, we were being accounted

for, right there in the Power Point in class! It really was a life changing moment in my high school career. (p. 258)

Where there might be a lack of clarity around anti-bullying policies and their implementation, inclusive curriculum can be felt in a more direct way.

Coping Strategies and Resilience. Beyond external support like teacher allies, comprehensive anti-bullying policies, and inclusive curriculum, LGBTQ+ students also utilize a range of individual coping strategies. These can include consciously ignoring instances of harassment, being strategic about when and to whom they disclose their LGBTQ+ identity, adopting a “straight-passing” appearance to avoid unwanted attention, using humor and logic to deflect negative comments, and when necessary, resorting to physical self-defense (Asakura, 2016; Craig et al., 2018). Some students may also employ self-isolation as a protective mechanism to avoid further harassment (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2015). One student in Goldbach and Gibbs (2015) shared:

I just don't know if it's okay to come out so I'm just going to wait until I'm older and I get to leave the house before I tell them so if they disown me, I'm leaving the house anyways. (p. 301)

While some of these methods are less than ideal, they demonstrate the astounding amount of resilience and tenacity LGBTQ+ young people are often forced to display to endure their daily life and experiences with oppression, harassment, victimization, and general disenfranchisement.

As LGBTQ+ students navigate these challenges, many develop a sense of self-empowerment. Some students, due to their experiences with discrimination or

observations of other students' experiences, become advocates for themselves and others, actively resisting homophobic and transphobic oppression within their schools (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017). Some LGBTQ+ students develop a stronger sense of self and a deeper commitment to social justice because of their experiences, but Linder et al. (2019) cautions educators on expecting LGBTQ+ students to resist on their own behalf, reminding readers that "a student should have the privilege of just being a student" (p. 47).

Conclusions on Qualitative Research on LGBTQ+ Student Experiences

Overall, LGBTQ+ students' experiences in school are far from ideal and there is a demonstrated discrepancy in the experiences of queer youth when compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth. There is a substantial amount of qualitative research on the LGBTQ+ student experience, but this research fails to explore and connect those experiences to legislation. LGBTQ+ students experience higher rates of depression, suicidality, truancy, harassment, discrimination, and isolation, and it is reflected in the perspectives shared by LGBTQ+ youth in the qualitative research on their experiences. Due to the demonstrated positive impact that LGBTQ+-competent educators, inclusive curriculum, and comprehensive anti-bullying policies have on the LGBTQ+ student experience, there is a lot of room for legislation to be a helpful tool on federal, state, and local levels, and there is an opportunity for counselors to act as figures of support and as advocates for LGBTQ+ students, but without knowing how LGBTQ+ students experience affirmative legislation, it will not be as clear what to advocate for.

Role of School Counselors in Supporting LGBTQ+ Students

School counselors are uniquely positioned in schools to support the academic, social, emotional, and career development of all students. LGBTQ+ students, as detailed in the previous section of this paper, face disproportionate rates of bullying, marginalization, and mental health challenges, so the presence of an informed, affirming, and visible school counselor can make a significant impact on their school experience and overall well-being. ASCA recognizes the responsibility of counselors, asserting that competent school counselors should promote equity and access for all students, including those of all sexual orientations and gender identities (ASCA, 2025a).

This section ahead explores the multifaceted role of school counselors in supporting LGBTQ+ students and examines the ways school counselors can advocate for students by implementing inclusive strategies, engaging in professional development, employing affirming counseling practices, and helping students to navigate systemic barriers. Understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ students can equip counselors to better support their students and effectively advocate for LGBTQ+ equity in schools.

Ethical and Professional Competencies Related to Supporting LGBTQ+ Students

ASCA provides a framework for ethical and professional practice that explicitly demands multicultural competence of all school counselors. ASCA's Ethical Standards (2022) assert that school counselors have an ethical obligation to affirm students' identities, ensure confidentiality, and confront systemic barriers to equity. Counselors are also expected to recognize and address the institutional and interpersonal forms of oppression that affect students, including those based on sexual orientation, gender

identity, and gender expression. ASCA's Professional Standards and Competencies (2025a) also outline specific expectations for cultural responsiveness and equity-minded practice. For example, standard B-PA 2 states that counselors should "Identify achievement gaps and factors contributing to those gaps." As noted previously, LGBTQ+ students on average obtain lower grade-point averages and are less likely to pursue post-secondary education. An effective counselor would be aware of the existing gaps and work to implement effective interventions to address it. The outlined competencies solidify the school counselor role not just as an "on-the-ground" supporter of students but as systemic change agents expected to advocate for all students, including LGBTQ+ students.

Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

It is imperative that counselors adhere to the ASCA's standards in their practice of counseling, and for my study, it is also important to consider the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) as a lens for translating participant narratives into counselor action. The MSJCC were developed following earlier multicultural counseling models by integrating multicultural competence with social justice advocacy and were recognized and endorsed by the American Counseling Association (ACA) in 2015 (Ratts et al., 2015). The MSJCC's four developmental domains offer guidance to counselors and are particularly relevant for counselors working with marginalized populations affected by and perhaps involved in issues related to civil rights and social justice. Competency I, Counselor Self-Awareness invites reflection on positionality, assumptions, and biases (Ratts et al., 2015). Regarding

LGBTQ+ identities and related legislation, acknowledging how such factors shape my interactions with participants and insights into what they share will be important when discussing implications for counseling practice. Competency II, Client Worldview prioritizes participants' subjective experiences and acknowledges the variation within populations. It was important for me to consider participants' intersecting identities and how they may have impacted their experiences in high school and with legislation. Competency III, Counseling Relationship highlights the co-construction of meaning through researcher-participant engagements, requiring attention to power dynamics and identity-related influences in interpreting data. Finally, Competency IV, Counseling and Advocacy Interventions provides a structure to translate narrative findings into actionable guidance (Ratts et al., 2015). School counselors are positioned to promote resilience, confront systemic injustice, and advocate for policy and legislative equity, and the MSJCC can help counselors respond effectively to the adverse experiences faced by their students belonging to marginalized groups.

Strategies to Support LGBTQ+ Students

School counselors may demonstrate the competencies outlined in the ASCA standards and the MSJCC through inclusive programming, data-informed advocacy, and intentional outreach to marginalized student groups. For LGBTQ+ students, this can include developing a gender-inclusive restroom policy, facilitating professional development for staff on pronoun usage, or using a school-wide needs assessment to obtain data which can inform advocacy efforts for LGBTQ+ affirming mental health supports. Gonzalez (2018) posited that advocacy broadly falls into four over-arching

categories that include direct student advocacy, education as advocacy, systems advocacy, and social/political advocacy. Direct student advocacy involves individual student support through counseling, connecting students to resources, encouraging student self-advocacy, and advising or supporting a club such as a GSA. Education as advocacy includes educating folks at all levels from students to administrators as well as engaging in continuing one's own learning. Systems advocacy emphasizes awareness of structural and institutional barriers and using data to motivate change, and social/political advocacy refers to community organizing and legislative activism. Regarding education as advocacy and relating to this paper's earlier discussion about the importance of inclusive curriculum, one school counselor shared about their efforts in being inclusive of LGBTQ+ stories and identities when "talking about relationships, bullying, dating, all these things" (Gonzalez, 2018, p. 42).

Students often rely on counselors to be a safe and supportive person to all, regardless of one's identity (Roe, 2013). One student in Roe (2013) stated, "...in my mind, I think counselors, they have to be accepting of everything...and I felt like a counselor is a safe resource, I feel like they can't be biased" (p. 156). For students who felt they could not immediately ascertain whether a counselor would be supportive, Roe (2013) found that students looked for indications of the school counselor's political views, relied on the history of the counselor-student relationship or the recommendation of other students, and observed supportive symbols in the school counselor's office. Students are more aware than ever of social and political discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ identities, particularly, trans identities, and news media and other media outlets' coverage

of LGBTQ+-related issues is impacting students' mental health (Nath et al., 2024). Subtle but visible forms of allyship such as a Pride flag or Safe Space sticker are not particularly active forms of allyship but can open the door to conversation with LGBTQ+ students who are looking for support in school.

Beyond direct support for students, counselors are positioned to support LGBTQ+ students by educating parents and families on the issues faced by LGBTQ+ students. Counselors can facilitate dialogue between LGBTQ+ students and their families. Many LGBTQ+ students are not out at home or experience negative reactions to coming out (Roe, 2016), and research suggests that counselors can help students as they navigate potentially non-affirming home environments by providing resources, information, and referrals to families to better support their queer child. Craig et al. (2015) also stated that counselors can also consider developing partnerships with local LGBTQ+ organizations, healthcare providers, and advocacy groups to create a network of support or continuum of care for students.

Training and Professional Development

The ability of school counselors to effectively support LGBTQ+ students is directly linked to the quality and depth of their training, both in counselor education programs and through ongoing professional development. Professional development and training are significant predictors of a school counselor's ability and comfort working with LGBTQ+ students; when counselors feel confident and knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ issues and how to support LGBTQ+ students, higher levels of LGBTQ-related interventions and advocacy are reported (Kull et al., 2017). Despite the increased

visibility of LGBTQ+ issues in education, research consistently shows that many school counselors enter the field underprepared to address the unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth (Simons & Beck, 2020). To meet ethical and professional standards and fulfill their roles as advocates, school counselors must engage in continued learning that deepens their understanding of LGBTQ+ identities, fosters cultural responsiveness, and equips them to adhere to best practices for supporting LGBTQ+ youth in schools.

The core values and ethical standards of the school counseling profession require counselors to support all students and provide culturally responsive counseling, which involves being aware of one's own biases and engaging in continued learning (ASCA, 2022; Rose et al., 2019). In some counselor preparation programs, LGBTQ+ related topics may be housed in broader multi-cultural courses but Moe et al. (2021) asserted that clearly defined standards for addressing LGBTQ+ competence during counselor training is needed. Moe et al. (2021) also found that counselors who identify within the LGBTQ+ community report higher levels of self-efficacy and advocacy related to supporting LGBTQ+ students. When LGBTQ+ content is included in coursework, instruction may sometimes focus only on terminology and identity development theories without preparing counselors to intervene in school systems or navigate challenges such as legal restrictions, community resistance, or ethical dilemmas involving student confidentiality (Rose et al., 2019). Furthermore, school counselors lack transgender-specific training, both during training programs and on-the-job (Abreu et al., 2019). Due to counselors' lack of preparedness or exposure to working with LGBTQ+ individuals, many school counselors report feeling ill-equipped to support LGBTQ+ students when they enter the

field, reporting confidence related to addressing bullying concerns but less confidence regarding conducting interventions and support groups specific to the LGBTQ+ experience (Abreu et al., 2022). This is especially concerning given the rising number of anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies in some states (*Student Nondiscrimination Policies*, 2024).

Challenges and Barriers Faced by School Counselors

The professional standards for school counselors make it clear that ongoing learning and professional development are requirements of a competent school counselor (ASCA, 2025a). This includes training in areas such as anti-racism, gender, trauma-informed practices, and supporting LGBTQ+ youth. ASCA also encourages school counselors to remain current on emerging research, legislation, and best practices that impact the populations they serve (ASCA, 2022). In the case of LGBTQ+ students, this may involve attending conferences, workshops, and webinars focused on queer youth well-being, participating in professional learning communities, or collaborating with local LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations to stay informed of community needs and resources (Abreu et al., 2022; Simons, 2018). However, educational opportunities may be limited to counselors, and this is just one of many barriers that impedes a counselor's ability to effectively support LGBTQ+ students.

In some regions, political opposition to LGBTQ+ inclusion may limit the availability of relevant professional development opportunities or even discourage open discussion of queer-related topics. As detailed in a prior section of this paper, there are states in which legislation has been passed to ban books that contain LGBTQ+ characters

and/or discussions of gender ideology, prohibit the inclusion of protections for LGBTQ+ students in anti-bullying and nondiscrimination policies, require counselors and other school professionals to out students to their families should they come out in school, restrict transgender students' access to facilities, and so on (Archibald, 2024; Hoshall, 2012; *Inclusive Curricular Standards Policies*, 2024; *Student Nondiscrimination Policies*, 2024). In many cases, the laws in place directly contradict counselors' ethical standards (Rose et al., 2019). Additionally, budgetary constraints, lack of administrative support, or personal discomfort with the subject matter may prevent counselors from seeking out the training they need to effectively support LGBTQ+ youth. Local and state legislation and the sociopolitical climate contribute to counselors' own biases. As a result, some LGBTQ+ folks feel their counseling experience is more harmful than helpful (Arora et al., 2022; Rose et al., 2019). These barriers illuminate the importance of having inclusive counselor education programs and professional development opportunities to ensure that all school counselors are adequately equipped to support LGBTQ+ students. Support for students should include advocacy for inclusive legislation at the local, state, and federal levels, so that all students are positioned to succeed as their authentic selves in the school setting.

New Jersey Specific Legislation

In this study, I explored how recent high school graduates that identify as LGBTQ+ have experienced legislation that is intended to ensure the safety and comfort of LGBTQ+ students in New Jersey. Along with California, Oregon, and Colorado, New Jersey is considered to have some of the most affirming and inclusive laws supporting

LGBTQ+ folks, and that extends to students' rights in schools (*Student Nondiscrimination Policies*, 2024). In Chapter 2 I discussed the national legislative landscape and the current scope of state and local laws that have been enacted. In this section, I will describe the legislative landscape in New Jersey as it relates to LGBTQ+ people, and then specifically, LGBTQ+ K-12 students. Understanding New Jersey law will aid in the construction of interview questions that will be prepared for the study and will provide context to the reader, because goals of this study include investigating students' awareness of supportive laws and understanding how students have experienced these laws play out in the school setting. By investigating students' understanding and experience as it relates to legislation, counselors can be better equipped to understand "what's working" and areas for growth and improvement in legislation and advocacy.

New Jersey Nondiscrimination Laws

New Jersey is one of the most supportive and affirming states for LGBTQ+ folks as far as the law is concerned (MAP, 2025b). Despite supportive laws that exist, LGBTQ+ folks' experiences may vary, and LGBTQ+ people may still experience higher levels of harassment, depression, and suicidality than cisgender and straight people, but legislation provides the foundation necessary to advance the collective social mindset and encourage equity and inclusivity (Eden et al., 2024). The NJLAD ensures fair and equal treatment for LGBTQ+ folks in New Jersey (NJLAD, 2021). Legally, LGBTQ+ people in New Jersey have the same access as non-LGBTQ+ people to employment, housing, public accommodations, credit and lending, education, marriage, adoption, and fostering children. Folks in New Jersey also have access to gender affirming care and fertility

treatments and associated healthcare coverage and benefits (Executive Order No. 326, 2023). Additionally, folks can change their legal name and gender markers on state-issued documents such as their birth certificate or driver's licenses without having to meet any specific medical threshold or criteria. New Jersey also bans conversion therapy, which is a set of dangerous, discredited practices rooted in false beliefs that being LGBTQ+ is pathologic and that a person can be "cured" or choose to not be LGBTQ+ (Forsythe et al., 2022).

Despite the comprehensive legislative support of LGBTQ+ people in New Jersey, there are still efforts to erase, exclude, and undermine LGBTQ+ folks at the state level. There are currently 10 anti-LGBTQ+ bills active in the New Jersey State Congress (ACLU, n.d.). The 10 anti-LGBTQ+ bills being debated at the state level relate to healthcare age restrictions, curriculum censorship, school sports bans, and other school restrictions. Most of these bills are in response to recent legislation that has been enacted to support and affirm LGBTQ+ young people in schools.

NJ School Laws Related to LGBTQ+ Students

LGBTQ+ students in New Jersey have all the same rights as their non-LGBTQ+ peers due the NJLAD (2021). This section will outline the education laws and state guidance that may most directly impact LGBTQ+ students' experiences and served as a basis for the construction of interview questions prepared for this study. In this study, I investigated students' understanding and experience related to the following laws and state guidance.

NJDOE Guidance

To help schools adhere to the NJLAD, the NJDOE published guidance for school districts on how to best support LGBTQ+ youth, and more specifically, transgender youth. In the state's guidance for schools and school administrators, it is made clear that a school district shall accept a student's asserted gender identity and that parental consent is not required to do so (NJDOE, 2018). Additionally, there is no affirmative duty for any school district personnel to notify a student's parent or guardian of a student's gender identity or expression. School personnel should use a student's chosen name and pronouns regardless of whether a student has had a legal name change. School personnel should have an open but confidential discussion with a student about their preferences for name and pronoun use and set parameters for parental, colleague, and peer communication. Schools should offer student identification and other documentation in a student's chosen name, and school personnel should discuss with a student the risk of their trans identity being inadvertently disclosed to others (NJDOE, 2018). The guidance ensures that LGBTQ+ students have the right to express (dress) in adherence to their gender identity, use the restroom and facilities that match their identity, can participate on sports teams that match their identity, can start or join a school club or affinity group for LGBTQ+ students, and cannot be retaliated against should the student file a complaint regarding harassment or discrimination (NJ Office of the Attorney General, 2022).

HIB. Law

New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act, commonly known as the HIB law, is implemented in all public schools in New Jersey. HIB stands for harassment,

intimidation, and bullying, and is characterized as any gesture, written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic communication that is “reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic” (Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, 2011). In the law, protected distinguishing characteristics include one’s “gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.”

History and Contributions of Individuals with Disabilities and LGBT Statute

Beginning in the 2020-2021 school year, school boards were expected to mandate the inclusion of instruction on the political, economic, and social contributions of persons with disabilities and of LGBT people in an appropriate place in middle school and high school curriculum as part of a district’s implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (N.J. Stat. § 18A:35-4.35., 2019). The curriculum is expected to be integrated in a cross-curricular manner and there is no opting out of learning related to this statute.

Diversity and Inclusion Statute

Beginning in the 2021-2022 school year, school boards were expected to ensure that all instruction, K-12, highlights and promotes diversity, “including economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance.” Curriculum is also expected to examine the impact that unconscious bias and economic disparities have at both an individual level and on society as a whole, and all learning should encourage safe, welcoming, and inclusive environments for all students regardless of race or ethnicity, sexual and gender identities, mental and physical disabilities, and religious

beliefs. Due to the cross-curricular nature of this statute, there is no way to opt out of instruction (N.J. Stat. § 18A:35-4.36a., 2021).

New Jersey Health and Physical Education Student Learning Standards

Beginning in the 2022-2023 school year, school boards were expected to ensure the delivery of updated health and physical education standards to students K-12. The goal of the updated standards is to ensure that “all students will acquire the knowledge and skills of what is most essential to become individuals who possess health and physical literacy and pursue a life of wellness by developing the habits necessary to live healthy, productive lives that positively impact their families, schools and communities” (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020). The health and physical education standards in New Jersey are bracketed by grade levels as such: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12.

Edits and additions to the pre-existing standards:

K-2: Social and sexual health standards were updated to include objectives related to gender expression, gender stereotypes, and family diversity.

3-5: Students are now expected to be able to differentiate between sexual orientation and gender identity.

6-8: Gender expression was added to the list of constructs that students are expected to know about; students should also be able to define vaginal, oral, and anal sex and understand methods of protection related to each.

With the health and physical education standards, families still have the right to opt out of instruction due to moral or religious beliefs.

Freedom to Read Act

In December 2024, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed into law A3446/S2421, known as the Freedom to Read Act, which prevents arbitrary book banning and protects the rights of students, parents, and communities to have free access to age-appropriate books and learning materials at schools and public libraries (Freedom to Read Act, 2024).

Summary and Transition to Chapter 3

Based on this synthesis of existing research, it is clear that schools are often hostile environments for LGBTQ+ students, and that there is an opportunity for counselors to continue their learning and provide culturally competent support to LGBTQ+ students while also advocating on behalf of LGBTQ+ students. Chapter 2 provided information and insight on the historical context of LGBTQ+ legislation and a review of current federal, state, and local policies impacting the lives of LGBTQ+ young people. The sources reviewed offered perspective into how the legal landscape and daily lived experiences impact LGBTQ+ youth mental health. The qualitative studies reviewed gave voice to students, and the overview of standards and expectations of school counselors serve as a reminder that counselors are uniquely positioned to support LGBTQ+ students and amplify their voices by advocating for laws and policies that better ensure the safety and comfort of LGBTQ+ students. Finally, the overview of New Jersey-specific legislation that concerns LGBTQ+ people set the foundation for the study to come.

My study provides insight into how LGBTQ+ students perceived and experienced legislation and policies that are meant to be supportive and inclusive of LGBTQ+ students. States like New Jersey have clear, comprehensive, and inclusive policies in support of LGBTQ+ students, but it is essential that counselors and advocates understand how students are experiencing the legislative attempts at combating discrimination and ensuring inclusivity. This is the gap in research I explored with this study—laws have been passed based on the demonstrated needs of LGBTQ+ students, and now that they have been enacted in some places, how are students experiencing them? By understanding the student experience, counselors can continue to provide support to students, encourage enforcement of the policies in place, recommend new or revised policies, and advocate for students' needs. A counselor's role in this regard is to support their LGBTQ+ students on a daily basis and to amplify the voices of LGBTQ+ students writ large in "bigger places" that students may not have access to such as in meetings with school administrators, policymakers, and legislators. The literature review presented in this study provides a glimpse into LGBTQ+ students' experiences and the legislation that impacts them, and a goal of this study was to hear directly from the young people about what is working for them and what may not have worked for them during their time in high school to better inform school counselors' advocacy efforts.

Chapter 3: Research Method

In Chapter 3, I will detail the methodology that guided this research study, in which I used a descriptive, phenomenological qualitative research design. In this chapter, I will also explain the recruitment process, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis plan, and will address the study's trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the high school experiences of LGBTQ+-identifying young adults who attended and graduated from high school in New Jersey. Using IPA, I explored participants' understanding, perception, and high school experiences as they relate to New Jersey educational laws and curricular standards. Implications from this study may be used for improvements in policy, research, training and professional development for counselors and school staff, for LGBTQ+ student support, and to advance advocacy efforts.

IPA is often used in qualitative research to better understand and draw meaning from the lived experiences of people who have experienced a similar phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2015). In this study, I examined the unique experiences of recent high school graduates who identify as LGBTQ+ and belong to the first or an early cohort of high school students who attended high school after the passing and supposed implementation of LGBTQ+-inclusive legislation and curricular standards in New Jersey. Instead of simply surveying students regarding their awareness of the laws and their experiences in school, I used a qualitative approach to better understand how students have experienced the laws that have been put in place. The passing of inclusive education laws and curricular standards in New Jersey was inspired by research that demonstrates

the educational and socioemotional disparities faced by LGBTQ+ youth (Wood, 2023). I sought to understand to what degree students were aware of the laws, how students have experienced the laws being implemented, and generally if and how the laws impacted students' school experiences. I worked to identify how individuals understood their experiences and what those experiences meant to them. By collecting data and interpreting LGBTQ+ youths' high school experiences in a state with affirmative laws, I was able to draw implications about what is working for students and what is less effective; this information can inform counselors about where additional support for LGBTQ+ students is needed and points to where advocacy efforts can be focused as it pertains to education legislation.

In this chapter, I will explain the rationale for using a qualitative approach and describe the selected research design and methodology. This chapter will include an overview of my role as the researcher and will explain my sampling strategy and procedures for data collection. I will also address transparency and reflexivity related to my role as the researcher, and discuss considerations related to trustworthiness and ethics. I will provide contextual information related to the study, address participant selection, and explain the ethical measures taken to protect participants. Chapter 3 will detail the methodology that guided my study, in which I utilized a descriptive, phenomenological qualitative research design.

Research Design and Rationale

I used a phenomenological qualitative research approach for this study. Much quantitative research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students exists (Kosciw et al., 2022;

Nath et al., 2024), and some qualitative research exists, but no existing qualitative research links LGBTQ+ students' experiences directly to LGBTQ+-affirmative legislation. With this study, I explored the experiences of recent high school graduates who identify as LGBTQ+ and how LGBTQ+-affirmative education legislation impacted their school experiences. The guiding research question for this study was: How do LGBTQ+-identifying recent high school graduates make meaning of their experiences in school as they relate to LGBTQ+-affirmative education legislation?

My rationale for using a qualitative research design was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences that LGBTQ+ students had in high school and how those experiences had been shaped by legislation that was put in place with the intention of affirming and uplifting them. Instead of relying on a quantitative approach that would focus on the numerical measurement of a phenomenon, I believed it essential to explore and interpret the students' experiences in greater depth. The qualitative research process, which allows for open-ended questioning (Smith et al., 2008), enabled me to gain deeper insight into students' awareness surrounding LGBTQ+-affirmative education laws and how their school experience may have been impacted by these laws. With the lack of research tying LGBTQ+ student experiences to legislation, a qualitative research design provided greater insight to counselors and advocates and helped to shape more meaningful implications and recommendations than a quantitative design would have allowed for.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA was first introduced by Jonathan Smith in 1996 and is grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Miller & Barrio, 2016). Smith asserted that a key characteristic of IPA is that it can be considered applied psychology, or “psychology in the real world” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 5). IPA emphasizes gaining a rich understanding of how individuals make sense of significant events in their lives, so a central aspect of IPA is allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own words (Alase, 2017). IPA also recognizes the active role of the researcher who serves as the instrument of analysis and allows the researcher to form a relationship with the research subjects. As participants work to interpret their own experiences guided by conversation with the researcher, the researcher engages in a parallel process of interpreting those experiences through the participant’s perspective and is not limited to defining participants’ experiences through the lens of preexisting themes or categories (Smith et al., 2021).

In this study, I analyzed how participants make meaning of their experiences throughout high school as those experiences related to legislation. Although IPA is a relatively new methodological approach, it has been applied in research involving LGBTQ+ communities (Chan & Farmer, 2017). IPA’s philosophical roots and open-ended methodological strategies provided me with a framework for exploring complex and nuanced experiences within members of the LGBTQ+ community. By focusing on “how” questions rather than simply “what,” IPA is well-suited to capture the diversity of identities and lived experiences within LGBTQ+ communities. IPA’s flexibility allows

for adaptable methods in data collection and analysis while also allowing space for individualized interpretations of a given phenomenon (Allan & Eatough, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative studies is more involved than in quantitative studies primarily because the researcher operates as the instrument for data collection and analysis (Patton, 2015). Positionality refers to the researcher's role in relation to social identities and contextual factors, and how these intersect with the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In qualitative research, the researcher is a key component of the study's design and execution, so it is essential for researchers to reflect on their relationship to the topic being explored. Within the IPA framework, the researcher assumes a dual role, both observing and interpreting, bringing their own lived experiences and perspective into the analysis process (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Researcher Positionality

I began my career as a school counselor in a New Jersey public school district that could be considered high-achieving and socially progressive. As an out and proud gay man and someone who holds an advanced certificate in LGBT Social Services, it was important for me to work in a school where I did not have to hide my identity and where I could use the skills that I had built to support LGBTQ+ folks. Prior to many of the LGBTQ+-affirming education laws being implemented in New Jersey, the district I worked at wholly embraced my efforts. Within two years, I founded a Gender & Sexuality Alliance at the district's middle school, I got approval to convert the single stall restrooms into gender inclusive restrooms, I was awarded a grant to establish an

LGBTQ+ library within the school, and I was invited to be part of the district's equity team in which I was able to teach colleagues the importance of being affirming to LGBTQ+ students and give them tangible strategies to do so. After those first two years, new state mandates came into play, which required an inclusive curriculum and further ensured the fair and equal treatment of LGBTQ+ students. Despite all of this, LGBTQ+ students on my caseload continued to report instances of harassment and bullying, sadness at the fact that they did not see themselves reflected in their curriculum, and anecdotally, it was clear to me that my LGBTQ+ students generally enjoyed school less than my non-LGBTQ+ students.

I have since left that job to join a non-profit organization dedicated to informing youth-serving professionals on how to best support LGBTQ+ youth, and because of my work with the non-profit organization, I have visited dozens of schools in New Jersey. Having had the experience with my LGBTQ+ students at my previous job, I wondered if students in other schools felt the same way. Through the administration of surveys and through conversation with students and staff in dozens of New Jersey schools, it has become even clearer to me that some students do not even know about the very laws meant to affirm them, and even when students have the awareness about the laws, their school experiences do not often reflect the ideal that the laws seemed to hope to achieve. This exploration led me to ask, "How have these new, affirmative laws changed the landscape for LGBTQ+ students, if at all, and how have their school experiences been impacted?"

As a counselor, I am interested in knowing how to best support all of my students, including my LGBTQ+ students. As a counselor educator and supervisor, I hope to prepare my supervisees with the skills and knowledge necessary to support their students and to advocate on their behalf. My personal goal for this research was to better understand how students have experienced the implementation of LGBTQ+-affirmative laws if at all, and to draw implications that could inform the field of counseling and inform advocates how to best support LGBTQ+ young people in our country.

Managing Researcher Bias

As the primary researcher in this study, my identity as a gay man and my background working in LGBTQ+ advocacy spaces could influence my positionality around the phenomenon I am researching. My awareness regarding this required me to reflect on my inquiry methods, the structure of my questions, and my personal biases and beliefs when analyzing the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Patton (2015) stated that a researcher's lived experiences and constructs can be useful in qualitative data collection and analysis if a researcher is aware of their positionality and is transparent in addressing so, and in presenting data. Beyond acknowledging one's bias, it is important that researchers work to minimize their biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Because of my experiences as a gay man, a school staff member, and someone who works in advocacy spaces relating to advancing the rights and equal treatment of LGBTQ+ folks, it was necessary that I worked to self-reflect and minimize researcher bias. Strategies I used to ensure transparency and reduce my bias in this study included member checking, bracketing, and maintaining an audit trail.

Methodology

As our country's sociopolitical climate and legal landscape continue to become more volatile for LGBTQ+ people, it is imperative for school counselors to understand how to best support their LGBTQ+ students and to be informed regarding legislation and advocacy efforts. While existing literature demonstrates the effectiveness of affirmative legislation and curriculum (Kosciw et al., 2022; Snapp et al., 2015), the student voice about their specific experiences related to law is absent. Using IPA for the present study allowed me to explore, in-depth, the meaning of participants' experiences beyond just illustrating their lived experiences (Chan & Farmer, 2017). IPA creates space to explore how participants make sense of their experiences and actions within broader social contexts, and therefore can draw implications regarding social justice efforts, which counselors have a duty to promote (ACA, 2014).

Setting

Given the nature of this study and the varied locations of the researcher and the participants, no single physical location was designated for data collection. Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom using the video feature. To protect confidentiality and ensure quality interviews, participants were asked to join from a quiet, private location where interruptions would be minimized. When using video conferencing, additional steps can be taken to ensure privacy, including the use of secure, password-protected meeting links and the option for participants to disable video if they felt more comfortable (Gray et al., 2020). These considerations helped me to create a safe and

respectful environment that allowed for participants to share openly while maintaining ethical research standards.

Participant Selection

The following sections address considerations made when selecting the sample for this study.

Sample

The research sample used for this study included LGBTQ+ young adults that attended high school in New Jersey sometime in the last five years. Sampling was purposive, as participants were required to (a) identify as LGBTQ+, (b) have attended a New Jersey public high school sometime between the years 2020 and 2025, and (c) be at least 18 years old. I used a purposeful sampling strategy because allowed me to choose participants based on the listed criteria which was important for the research question being examined. It was particularly important for the participants to have attended high school recently, as some of the LGBTQ+-affirmative education laws in New Jersey have only begun to be implemented in the 2020s. It was not necessarily important for participants to have graduated from high school, as the focus was on their experiences while in school, and research shows that the hostile environments schools sometimes are to LGBTQ+ youth drive them to drop out (Kosciw et al., 2022); this would be valuable information to reflect had it been the case for any participants, but all participants in the study reported graduating from high school. Regarding diversity and intersectionality, it was my intention to recruit participants of diverse gender identities, sexualities, and ethnic/cultural backgrounds, which I succeeded in doing.

Sampling Procedure

Bernard et al. (2017) explained that network sampling methods can be productive for qualitative research in which the participants may be emotionally invested and care about the social impact outcomes of the research. For this reason and due to ease of access, I used convenience sampling. Recruitment efforts included accessing my professional network and asking school counselors that I know to promote this study to their recently graduated students. Additionally, I used the pool of students who engage in programming at the non-profit organization I work for. I am part of the education team, and we go into schools across the state, but we do not run the programming for youth and young adults at the center, so I did not feel it would be a conflict of interest to promote the project to the young people at the center. Following approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I promoted the study to the center's members which is where most participants were recruited from. In reaching out to all the parties described above, I used a recruitment email approved by Walden's IRB.

Dual Relationships

Dual relationships between the researcher and participants are a common factor to consider when conducting qualitative research, particularly when there is prior familiarity between the two (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To uphold ethical standards and maintain integrity, it is important for the researcher to establish clear boundaries with any participants they know personally. Due to my intended use of convenience sampling, it is possible that some participants might know of me from my work at the non-profit organization or if they attended a school I visited or where I have guest lectured.

Relationships of that nature were not in-depth by any means, and it had been years since any participant attended a lecture of mine, so while this was not a significant factor in conducting the research, it was important for me to set clear boundaries and expectations and to obtain informed consent from all involved.

Sample Size

Recommendations related to sample size in IPA studies vary, but it is generally acknowledged that IPA does not require a large sample size to achieve trustworthiness due to the depth of the process (Smith et al., 2012). Alase (2017) and Creswell (2012) asserted that there may be as few as two to three or up to 25 participants. I hoped to recruit between five and 10 participants initially and then make the determination surrounding the need for additional perspectives. In total, I interviewed eight participants. Saturation is often something researchers seek to achieve when conducting qualitative research, but Saunders et al. (2018) discussed that the focus of IPA is to portray full and rich narratives rather than to necessarily ascertain complete saturation related to relevant themes. Smith et al. (2012) stated that researchers using IPA methodology may conduct follow-up interviews with their participants if gaps are identified or if information needs to be clarified. Because of this, participants were informed of the possibility of follow-ups during the initial informed consent process. Once the first round of data collection was complete, I implemented member checking by supplying participants with a written summary of my understanding of their perspectives, at which time participants were invited to provide written feedback and additional information.

Instrumentation

For my study, I used a semistructured interview format with questions focusing on LGBTQ+ young adults' high school experiences, knowledge of the law and curricular standards, and how they felt their experiences may have been impacted by the law if at all. Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted that semistructured interviews offer a structured framework for the interview process while still allowing space for deeper qualitative exploration through follow-up questions. Semistructured interviews are appropriate for use in studies employing an IPA methodology, as they provide direction while allowing for the flexibility needed for the natural unfolding of participants' experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA often reveals insights the researcher may not have anticipated, so it is important to allow room for spontaneous but relevant follow-up questions rather than adhering strictly to an interview script. Smith et al. (2012) recommended preparing six to 10 questions and prompts for adult interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. My interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Smith et al. (2012) described the seven types of open-ended questions frequently used in IPA research: descriptive, narrative, structural, contrasting, evaluative, and circular questions. The authors advised developing prompts that clarify the intent of a question without influencing the participant's response, and the authors also encouraged using probes to elicit richer and more detailed accounts. Due to the exploratory nature of IPA research, it should also be expected that the interview may stray from the prepared prompts and that the order of questions can be reconsidered in real-time.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis for this study followed the guidelines of IPA which is designed to explore how individuals make sense of their personal lived experiences (Alase, 2017). The analysis process included multiple line-by-line examinations of the interview transcripts to identify patterns and themes. Smith and Nizza (2022) and Alase (2017) both described a similar process for utilizing IPA. It is recommended that researchers conduct multiple readings of the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with each participant's account. Themes can be identified related to descriptive content and conceptual insights by examining the interview transcripts for connections among them and can be supported by the inclusion of direct quotes from the participants. It is important to analyze each case independently before exploring patterns and identifying shared themes.

Throughout the process, it was important to maintain reflexivity to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the participants' accounts rather than shaped by researcher preconceptions (Smith et al., 2021). Memo writing and audit trails were used to document analytic decisions and support the study's credibility and transparency (Carcary, 2020). Rodham et al. (2015) recommended that each researcher involved in data analysis should listen to original audio recordings rather than rely on transcripts alone to avoid potentially distorting the participants' experiences. This was not an issue for me, as I personally conducted the interviews and recorded them, then retained the recordings and listened to them multiple times; retention of audio recordings through the completion of the process was another practice recommended by Rodham et al. (2020).

This rigorous and reflective approach to data analysis allows for researchers to develop rich, nuanced interpretations that align with the goals of IPA.

A clear process for the use of IPA is outlined by Smith et al. (2021), which is what I used to guide my analysis. I began by collecting data through semistructured interviews. I then transcribed the data and read and re-read what I collected, taking notes on patterns and themes, paying specific attention to repeated elements throughout the interviews. By citing and quoting participants, I employed literature and my own interpretive role to develop a structured thematic narrative that addressed commonalities, contrasts, and my own biases in discussing the findings.

Trustworthiness

Researchers must be aware of their own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions and how these might influence their interpretations when conducting IPA research and analyzing data (Watson & Jackson, 2025). This section outlines the strategies that were employed in this study to support its trustworthiness, including techniques to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth and authenticity of a study's findings (Vella, 2024). In IPA research, credibility can be established through a rigorous, reflective, and transparent research process that ensures the interpretations remain closely tied to the participant's lived experiences. One key strategy that can be used to enhance credibility is member checking, wherein participants are given the opportunity to review and clarify summaries of their interview transcripts and emerging themes identified by

the researcher (Vella, 2024). When appropriate, this process can help to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflect a participant's intended meaning, while also allowing space for correction or elaboration where necessary. This level of participant engagement supports the co-construction of meaning central to IPA (Smith et al., 2021).

Prolonged engagement with data can also contribute to credibility (Alase, 2017). I read and re-read each transcript a minimum of three times to ensure a deep familiarity with each participant's account before constructing themes. Reflexivity can further ensure credibility. As the researcher, I continuously reflected on my own positionality, assumptions, and biases throughout the research process. One consideration was to utilize a reflexive journal to document personal reflections and interpretative decisions and insights (Vicary et al., 2017).

Transferability

Transferability refers to a study's ability to be applied to broader contexts and has implications for additional research and for practice in the real world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To demonstrate transferability in IPA, Smith and Nizza (2022) recommended providing the reader with rich, detailed accounts of the data collected and the analysis process employed by the researcher, so it is clear how themes are developed. By providing as much detail as possible, the research can also be replicated and potentially supported by similar findings. Also, using direct quotations from participants provides clarity and context (Eldh et al., 2020).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability refers to the stability of a study's findings over time like reliability in quantitative studies (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure dependability in the present study, I used an audit trail to document the research process and how themes were identified and evolved (Carcary, 2020). Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study are shaped by the participants' experiences and perspectives rather than by researcher bias (Adeniran & Tayo-Ladega, 2024). The use of an audit trail, a reflexive journal, and the inclusion of direct quotes from participants all helped to ensure confirmability. Smith and Nizza (2022) noted the unique nature of IPA research in that the researcher's perspective is considered and is valuable, so it will be important to be transparent throughout the data analysis process.

Ethical Procedures

Prior to recruiting participants and collecting data, I submitted my research proposal to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). On October 29, 2025, Walden's IRB granted approval for my study, approval #10-29-25-1063425 with an expiration date of October 28, 2026. Upon obtaining approval from the Walden IRB, I began to recruit and gain informed consent from participants (Alase, 2017). During the informed consent process, it was critical to inform participants in writing that they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Participants were made aware of the nature and intention of the research and informed that the data collected would be shared as part of the doctoral dissertation process but were assured that their personal information would be kept confidential and that they would remain unidentifiable. I

ensured this by using pseudonyms to mask participants' identities and withholding identifiable information in my presentation of the data.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, and participants were asked to confirm they were in a safe and private space prior to beginning each interview. Interviews were recorded, which participants were made aware of ahead of time, and the data was stored and labeled with the date and time of the interview rather than with participants' names to further ensure confidentiality. Data remains stored in an encrypted and password protected hard-drive, and the only person who has access to that hard-drive is me. Data will be kept for the duration of the study and for up to five years after, per Walden University guidelines.

A final ethical concern I considered upon approaching the interviews is that I was to be interviewing young LGBTQ+ adults; it was critical for me to use inclusive and affirming language to the best of my ability to ensure the comfort of participants (Chan & Farmer, 2017). One way I was sure to affirm participants is by asking for their pronouns at the start of each interview. That way, I was able to appropriately engage in respectful conversation with each participant. I also reminded folks that they were allowed to withdraw at any time or skip any questions they may not have felt comfortable answering. Finally, during the debriefing process following the interviews, I informed participants of resources and support services available to them and offered to aid in connecting them with a local LGBTQ+-affirmative therapist.

Summary and Transition to Chapter 4

Chapter 3 detailed the methodology that was used to conduct this phenomenological research. I explained the role of the researcher, methods for participant selection, and outlined my data analysis plan. I discussed the steps I took to ensure trustworthiness in this research and explained the different ethical considerations related to this work. This study involved working with LGBTQ+ people, and LGBTQ+ communities have been historically oppressed and marginalized, so it was of utmost importance that I handled interviews and data storage with care. Participants were recruited through my existing networks of counselors and educators, and more participants were recruited through a partnership with the approved partner organization. I provided a description of my positionality and remain committed to engaging in reflexivity and transparency to enhance the trustworthiness of my research. After receiving approval from the Walden IRB, I began the participant recruitment and data collection processes. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the results.

Chapter 4: Results

My objective with this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of recent New Jersey high school graduates who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. My research question was: How do LGBTQ+-identifying recent high school graduates make meaning of their experiences in school as they relate to LGBTQ+-affirmative education legislation? In this chapter, I discuss the interview setting, participant demographics, and my approach to data collection and analysis. I also explain how trustworthiness was established and describe the themes uncovered through the IPA analytic process. This chapter concludes with a summary and transitions into Chapter 5.

Setting

Participants offered dates and times they were available to meet for an up to 90-minute interview via the conference platform, Zoom. I was in a private home office for each of the interviews. Similarly, the participants all joined the calls from private spaces in their homes. During the interviews, participants were given the option to be on camera or off camera, and the interviews were recorded. All participants agreed to remain on camera and only the audio recording was saved from each interview. There were no interruptions during the interviews. The in-depth individual interviews lasted between 46–73 minutes. The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted research approval on October 29, 2025. The approval number for this study is 10-29-25-1063425. Once permission was granted, I began recruiting participants. The approved partner organization shared the study recruitment email with their members and interested parties emailed me. The first participant interview was completed on

November 2, 2025. Subsequently, I was able to complete seven additional interviews, bringing the total to eight, by November 11, 2025.

Demographics

A total number of eight young adults participated in this study. Inclusion criteria included the following: (a) 18 years of age or older, (b) LGBTQ+-identifying, and (c) graduated from a New Jersey public high school within the last 5 years. Limited demographic information was collected to ensure the anonymity of participants, but each participant was asked what year they graduated, what terms that best described their sexual orientation and gender identity, and what terms best described their cultural or ethnic background. The participants included three cisgender lesbian individuals, two cisgender bisexual male individuals, one transgender female individual, and two transgender male individuals. All participants had graduated high school in either 2023 or 2025. Six of the eight participants were Caucasian and two were mixed-race. The ages of the participants in this study ranged from 18 to 20 years old. I did not use participants' names in notes or transcriptions and labeled each participant with an alias to ensure confidentiality. I asked participants to share about their high school experiences as LGBTQ+-identifying individuals and their thoughts and perceptions regarding LGBTQ+ legislation. I used Zoom's recording feature to capture the audio data, which was then transcribed.

Data Collection

Data were collected from eight participants who volunteered for the study. To recruit participants, I developed a recruitment email which was shared through the

partner organization approved by the Walden IRB. Since sampling was purposive, the participants were required to (a) be 18 years of age or older, (b) identify as LGBTQ+, and (c) have graduated from a New Jersey public high school within the last five years. I was contacted by 10 individuals who were interested in participating and received consent from and scheduled interviews with eight of those individuals. Stated in the data analysis plan described in Chapter 3, it was my goal to interview between five and 10 individuals, so my proposed number of participants was achieved. Upon receipt of interest emails, I sent each individual an informed consent document approved by Walden's IRB which participants acknowledged with responses containing the words "I consent." All eight participants agreed to speak via the videoconferencing application Zoom and agreed to be recorded.

Before beginning each interview, I explained the purpose of the study as described in the informed consent document and reiterated that they had the right to skip any questions they did not wish to answer and could revoke their consent and withdraw from the study at any time. I explained that the interview may last up to 90-minutes and encouraged participants to take their time and speak freely, emphasizing that I was interested in their individual thoughts, experiences, opinions, and perspectives. I recorded each interview to ensure accuracy and to maintain the ability to review and re-review each audio recording. Each audio recording was also transcribed into text, allowing me to conduct a line-by-line analysis of the shared content. The interview questions I presented to the participants allowed them to reflect and recall their experiences as LGBTQ+-identifying high schoolers. Information that the participants were willing to share

included experiences related to peer conflict, coming out, transitioning, communicating with school staff, affirming and non-affirming policies at their schools, and their perceptions on laws and policies as they relate to LGBTQ+ students and LGBTQ+ education. Each recording and transcription were saved on a password-protected drive. I performed member checking by providing participants with a copy of their transcribed interview and a summary of the results. I also encouraged participants to contact me if they had any questions, concerns, or wanted to provide any clarification.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study followed the guidelines of IPA, which is designed to allow for thorough examination of participants' lived experiences (Alase, 2017). For this study, eight participants consented to share information about their experiences in high school. Once the interviews were completed, I used an online transcription service to convert the audio recordings to text, which allowed me to do an in-depth review and line-by-line analysis of all the data. Smith et al. (2021), Smith and Nizza (2022) and Alase (2017) all outlined a similar process for the utilization of IPA, which includes making initial notes and comments upon review of each transcript, creating experiential statements, developing personal experiential themes (PETs), reviewing themes to refine them, and repeating the process for each participant to create group experiential themes (GETs).

Each of the eight transcripts were independently analyzed, and after identifying themes, I sent each participant their transcript along with notes and a list of themes for member checking. Four of the eight participants sent back responses, and after reviewing

the responses I was able to complete a cross-case analysis. Commonalities that I uncovered among the different participant interviews served as the results of this study and are presented in greater detail later in this chapter. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to mask their identities. Four themes and eight subthemes were developed from the analysis process. The first theme is Variability in School Experiences. The subthemes associated with this theme included (a) Schoolwide Homophobia and Transphobia, (b) Individual Influence of Teachers, and (c) Peer Support. The second theme is Lack of Recognition of LGBTQ+ Students' Needs. The associated subthemes included (a) School Site, (b) School District, and (c) Public Policy. The third theme is School Counselors Were Not a Factor. The fourth theme is Desire for More Educational Opportunities. The associated subthemes included (a) LGBTQ+ History and (b) Inclusive Sex Education.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes by Participant

Themes	Participants							
	Alexa	Catie	Colton	Evan	Jack	Lexi	Lauren	Xander
Theme 1: Variability in School Experiences	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Subtheme 1: Schoolwide Homophobia and Transphobia</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Subtheme 2: Individual Influence of Teachers</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Subtheme 3: Peer Support</i>	x			x	x	x	x	

Themes	Participants							
Theme 2: Lack of Recognition of LGBTQ+ Students' Needs	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Subtheme 1: School Site</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Subtheme 2: School District</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Subtheme 3: Public Policy</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Theme 3: School Counselors Were Not a Factor	x		x		x	x	x	x
Theme 4: Desire for More Educational Opportunities	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Subtheme 1: LGBTQ+ History</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Subtheme 2: Inclusive Sex Education</i>	x	x		x	x		x	x

Discrepancies

The participants' lived experiences as LGBTQ+ high schoolers were consistent across most cases. Alexa and Evan did not share information related to feeling that teachers lacked comfort with LGBTQ+ topics or their LGBTQ+ identities. These discrepancies are possibly explained by their unique cases; Alexa was a child of a teacher who worked at the school they attended and reported that they suspected their teachers were on their "best behavior" around her in the interest of not offending their colleague. Evan's difference from the majority in this case and in the case of feeling like his school counselor played an important role during his tenure in high school are likely related, as

Evan shared that he worked closely with his counselor to ensure that he would only have to interact with teachers who were overtly affirming of LGBTQ+ students. Another discrepancy within the data includes Xander and Colton not reporting that they felt specifically closer to their queer peers like the other participants had; notably, Xander and Colton are the only two cisgender males who participated in the study which may be a factor in this discrepancy. Finally, not all students shared the same priorities when asked to reflect upon their vision of what a more inclusive school might look like; two participants omitted sex education-related concerns and focused on other curricular inclusion.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Methodological integrity, or trustworthiness, in qualitative research can be considered complex (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Smith and Nizza (2022) contended that the IPA process meets the American Psychological Association's (APA) standards for rigor and trustworthiness in two ways. First, they highlighted the importance of purposeful design, particularly the use of a homogenous sample. Second, they recommended that dissertation researchers provide a clear and systematic account of the analytic steps taken, supported by tables that display the results. These visual and descriptive elements can help readers more easily assess a study's trustworthiness.

Credibility

The IPA research design does not include member checking (Smith et al., 2021), but this strategy can increase a study's trustworthiness, which is why I chose to employ it for my study. Birt et al. (2016) developed a method of member checking called

synthesized member checking (SMC) which outlines specific considerations to take such as the use of non-scientific wording, clear space for feedback, and cross-referencing added data with existing codes, among other things. Participants were provided with their direct transcripts but were also provided with a document outlining identified themes and were prompted to address whether the themes and notes matched their experiences and invited to elaborate or change any of what was documented. This strategy ensures that the participants' voices are accurately reflected in my findings.

Dependability

Dependability relates to the stability and consistency of data over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Delivering clear and detailed descriptions about the process of this study by maintaining an audit trail will allow for future researchers to repeat the work. Another method I used to ensure dependability included the code-recode strategy to make sure findings are consistent. After going through the data multiple times in multiple ways (listening to audio, reading and re-reading transcripts, collecting member checking data), the same themes kept occurring which confirms a level of dependability in my findings.

Confirmability

While objectivity is not a core tenet of qualitative studies (Patton, 2015), it is important for a researcher to consider their own biases during the data analysis process. Smith et al. (2021) described the process of bracketing as an integral part of the interpretative process in IPA. Bracketing—setting aside one's personal views and biases—can be ensured through reflexive journaling. Throughout the process, I was able

to identify and reflect on where my biases could have interfered with the data analysis process, but by constantly reviewing my exploratory notes and comparing them to my reflective journal, I was able to remain objective during the development of themes.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the contextual understanding of a study's findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The purpose of qualitative research is not necessarily to achieve or imply generalizability, but rather to allow the reader to determine the relevance of the results in a broader context. To establish transferability, researchers can provide rich descriptions regarding the participants, setting, and context of a study. Additionally, it is important to provide a clear explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures, and to include direct quotes from participants.

Results

With the research question, my goal was to explore how LGBTQ+-identifying recent high school graduates make meaning of their experiences in school as they relate to LGBTQ+-affirmative education legislation. I answered this question using the IPA process outlined by Alase (2017) and Smith and Nizza (2022). The process required me to listen to the recordings of the semistructured interviews conducted, read and re-read the transcripts multiple times, and then develop exploratory and experiential notes for each individual interview. Following that, and before conducting a cross-case analysis, I sent the transcript, notes, and themes to participants for their review and feedback. After receiving feedback from four of the eight participants, I began the final step of developing themes based on the cross-case analysis of the eight semistructured

interviews. This resulted in the development of four themes and eight subthemes. I labeled all names with a pseudonym to ensure participant anonymity and included both summaries and direct quotes of what was shared with me.

Theme 1: Variability in School Experiences

The participants of this study were all LGBTQ+-identifying young adults who had recently completed high school. When asked to reflect upon their high school experience overall, most participants reported that school for them was stressful or negative in some way but had positive aspects. Five respondents presented and framed their experiences in a more negative way, while three respondents seemed to have a more positive recollection while still being able to recall stressful moments and negative aspects. Of the five who presented their response with negative undertones, one respondent, Catie who graduated in 2025 shared:

My high school experience wasn't the greatest. I did go to a high school in a very conservative town, which was difficult as a lesbian... I struggled a bit when it came to making friends and just overall like feeling involved.

Another participant, Jack, a transgender male who graduated in 2023 shared, "I would say my high school experience was really stressful." Similarly, Lauren shared:

I think that people say a lot, if you had a bad experience in high school, then you'll have a good experience in college, and I think that definitely rings true for me. I really didn't like high school a lot.

Most respondents had a mix of positive and negative recollections about their time in high school. Lexi shared, "I did love the academic aspect of high school, but not

necessarily the social aspect.” Similarly, Evan shared, “I don’t think there’s any concrete way to describe it because there’s so many ups and downs.”

Three respondents framed their reflections upon their time in high school in a more positive manner while still recognizing the range of their emotions at the time. Xander stated, “I had some fabulous moments...” but followed up saying there were “some ups and downs.” One respondent, Colton, shared that school was, “...overall positive for sure... I think obviously there’s struggles, you know, there’s always troubles in high school, you always go through stuff, but I think overall my experience was filled with a lot of growth and like realization.” Alexa shared:

I think I enjoyed it just fine. I think that I was very fortunate to go to a very privileged school with a good education, especially one where I can kind of not really worry about, you know, any discrimination towards myself for queer-related reasons, for the most part.

Schoolwide Homophobia and Transphobia

Every respondent was able to recall instances of homophobia and transphobia occurring at their schools, but not all respondents experienced these things firsthand. Alexa recalled a time during their freshman year when they heard of a specific student having said something transphobic to another transgender student and refusing to call that student by their preferred name and pronouns and shared “that stuck with me.” Lexi shared that she firsthand heard the use of homophobic slurs in the hallway from other students and observed what she called “homophobic graffiti.” Catie disclosed, “In my freshman year, there were two separate incidents in which threats were made against

LGBTQ individuals, one of which I witnessed and had to report.” Jack, a transgender male shared, that cisgender female students specifically “felt like I was like gross... they acted like that.” Jack also shared that cisgender people tended to lump all the queer people together which made him uncomfortable, because he recognized that some of his queer peers were not students he wanted to be associated with.

Lauren, a bisexual female, recalled being worried that her female friends would incorrectly assume she had a crush on them or planned to make advances toward them, which she knew wouldn't have been the case if she had remained in the closet and presented as straight. Evan, a transgender male student remembered, “In freshman year, this guy posted a video of me in class and misgendered me in the caption,” and recalled having to take action to get the video taken down. Xander shared that there were students who were openly religious and that some of those students would be openly discriminatory and inform people that they were not accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. Colton, having been both an athlete and in the musical theater activities recalled that his musical theater friends were more accepting by a wide margin, and that in locker rooms and in conversations with other male athletes, there would frequently be use of homophobic and transphobic language, though most students had the sense to not directly share those sentiments with the queer students.

Individual Influence of Teachers

Almost all the participants reported feeling that there was a level of discomfort from the teachers surrounding discussions involving LGBTQ+ identities or topics, and all of them either had or knew of teachers who were not supportive. Teachers may not have

been overtly unsupportive, but there was a stark contrast between trusted teachers and other teachers. Catie shared, “Without them having to say anything, it would be very clear in body language or in how they responded where they stood on LGBTQ issues.” Catie also recalled an instance in which a teacher was “asked about the rumor about how Abe Lincoln was gay” and that the teacher’s response to this inquiry was, “Well, why does it matter?” Catie felt this was a great response because it “made it clear to me how he stood” and that he was “fast with his response.” While all respondents reported having an exceptional and/or overtly supportive teacher, most also had teachers who lacked knowledge and comfort surrounding LGBTQ+ identities and issues. Lauren recalls about her transgender friend:

There were some teachers who would call her by her dead name, and she would grimace, but it would be fine, it’d be better than facing what consequence would happen if she revealed what name she actually prefers being called.

Beyond discomfort, Jack recalled feeling singled out by teachers due to their identity as a trans male. He shared:

There was a lot of essay topics and whatever that had to do with our own personal experience where I felt inclined to write about being trans, or like I was just talking about my regular life which included being trans, and it felt like I was being like scrutinized extra because I was writing about that.

Some of the participants implied that it became obvious to them which political party their teacher was associated with, and that this made them uncomfortable. Colton

shared that his history teacher made it known that he leaned conservative, and Colton felt that he was unsure that his history teacher would be supportive of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Evan and Xander both similarly discussed how teachers might talk about history, current events, and encourage other discussions in class, but topics related to LGBTQ+ people or events sparsely came up, which sent the message to them that while there may not be overt discrimination occurring from the teachers, there also was not overt support. Lexi had a unique perspective and offered that even for teachers who may have been internally supportive of LGBTQ+ students and bringing up LGBTQ+ topics in class, there was external pressure that caused them to avoid these discussions. She shared:

Teachers shouldn't have to be afraid to teach about these topics without backlash from parents. I don't think, I really don't think backlash would be coming from students, even those who share, you know, diverse views, simply because we are in such a more progressive community. I really think the problem comes from parents who think that they are able to determine what their child learns about by, you know, by basically harassing teachers about it.

Similarly, Jack shared that he felt some teachers, particularly non-tenured teachers, were afraid to stray from curriculum which would discourage them from adding or including queer representation in the learning even if they would have wanted to do so.

Despite participants' negative experiences with some teachers, the most positive experience each participant recalled when reflecting upon their high school experience was related to their one or several inclusive teachers—teachers who overtly and explicitly went the extra mile to show students that they were supported. Alexa name-dropped her

favorite teacher several times throughout our conversation. Upon the supportive teacher's first mention, Alexa explained:

Even though it wasn't part of the curriculum, [my teacher would] try to bring up like a, 'hey if you wanted to study like a certain aspect of the 1940s, one of the options is to study like you know lesbian bars the 1940s,' you know what I mean? So that was something.

Alexa explained that this teacher would allow and encourage students to self-select topics that were of interest to them, and the fact that queer options were being explicitly mentioned made Alexa feel affirmed. Alexa later shared:

Beyond the queer thing, I think Ms. X cared more than most of my teachers in high school... about like both my education but also like social justice, which, like if all my teachers were like Ms. X I would have zero complaints about anything... except my workload because she's a harsh grader um but um I think absolutely she was someone who did definitely like go out of her way to make an effort.

Catie recalled she had two specific teachers she felt safe and comfortable with during high school. After discussing LGBTQ+ related "hot topics" such as transgender inclusion in sports, same-sex marriage, and Pride Month, Catie shared:

My music director would talk about these kinds of topics a lot. He was very open about how he felt regarding those topics. We would have conversations about it all the time, but really it just depended on what teacher you had. Yeah, it really just depended. For me, I got to talk about these things a lot because I had one of

the classes with my music teacher at least once a day, if not twice. So, I was having these conversations every day.

Catie went on to explain that the music classroom was the one in which she felt the safest, and she often spent lunches and after school there simply because it was a safe space. Catie also recalled when she came out as a lesbian to her media broadcast teacher:

I was part of a broadcast program throughout my four years, and I was very close with the teacher that ran it, and I had come out to him about halfway through my freshman year. He was the teacher I felt most comfortable around and when I had come out to him, he gave me a hug and said thank you for trusting me, and that was one of the first couple of times I actually felt like included and welcomed in my school community.

For Evan, his special staff member was his school counselor. He shared:

I was very lucky with teachers. I always felt very accepted and safe. And I feel like that definitely was by design. My guidance counselor was absolutely the best human and was always on my side. Um, and, you know, she made sure that I, I got into the like good classes with good teachers and that I felt supported.

Lexi recalled that what made her feel supported and affirmed in school was when teachers took initiative, asking how they can be supportive or get involved with LGBTQ+ student initiatives. As the president of her school's GSA, Lexi worked closely with certain staff members on ensuring a positive climate and culture for queer kids at her school. She shared that little things could go a long way regarding making students feel safe, such as safe space stickers and pride flags. These simple and subtle signs would

signal to students that the classroom environment allowed for open communication without fear of judgment. Lexi also noted that she always felt safe with out LGBTQ+ staff members. Without name-dropping a specific teacher, Lauren also shared that there were indicators that helped to identify safe staff members and teachers who were willing to go the extra mile for LGBTQ+ students. She shared that if a teacher was known to supervise a social justice club, a GSA, or an affinity group, that would signal that the teacher cared about identity on a deeper level. Lauren stated, “I think that what the teachers do within the school besides what they teach was a big indicator.”

Peer Support

Almost all participants, upon reflecting on their high school friendships, reported feeling a closer kinship to other students who also identified within the LGBTQ+ community. Participants also felt as though their identity as a queer person shaped the friendships they made. Lexi shared, “I very much surrounded myself with other queer individuals and other you know liberal individuals if we’re talking politically.” Lauren stated, “I think that my friends who were part of the community, they understood a lot of what I was going through.” Alexa shared:

I think [my transness] did kind of shape a lot of, like, on a social level how I interacted with friends, which friends I made... a lot of the time which people I avoided or... just didn’t even bother trying to make friends with um or chose to no longer be friends with.

Evan and Colton expressed similar sentiments as people who were involved in the arts programs in their schools. Evan shared, “I feel like if you're at all involved in the

arts, you're very accepting” and recalled having other queer friends and being able to comfortably change in the boys’ dressing room as a transgender male student. Colton shared that he felt comfortable disclosing his identity as bisexual to his theater friends but not to his soccer friends. Jack, who believed himself to be the only transgender student in his grade shared that most of his friends were straight and cisgender, but that “those people who were my friends or like adjacent to my friends, although they, they didn’t really engage with queer culture, like they, they were understanding about my experiences for the most part.”

Theme 2: Lack of Recognition of LGBTQ+ Students’ Needs

The participants of this study all reflected upon a similar sentiment which was that they felt that it was not the priority of their teachers nor building leadership to ensure that LGBTQ+ students felt safe and supported. Lexi, who was the president of her school’s GSA, had a lot to share regarding where she felt school leadership’s priorities fell:

It was... a frustrating experience because basically what I did was I conducted a climate survey for members of GSA and then brought the results of that survey to the superintendent, to the director of curriculum, to members of the board of education, and we had these sit-down meetings with them. I had two in total. Oh, and head of guidance, that was another thing... So we would meet and they would seem very intent to... they seemed very interested in the feedback that we gave, very upset when we displayed the information and statistics that students didn’t feel comfortable at school, that they didn’t have a safe person to go to, and they

seemed, in the moment, very, very upset. The problem is, no change came from those meetings. So we had these meetings, they seemed intent and dedicated to supporting LGBTQ students when we met down and sat with them, and then nothing happened. So, I called for a follow-up meeting and say, let's talk about what has changed here. And the answer is nothing. We kind of had the same statistics, the same conversation, you know, the members, the leader people in leadership positions would say like 'we're here to support you, we're gonna, you know, dedicate ourselves to supporting queer students' but yet action was not taken at least in a way that was noticeable.

Xander had a profound reflection related to his experience at school and the school's inconsistency regarding their messaging surrounding supporting people of all identities. He shared, "If the high school isn't consistently reinforcing or exposing you to other people, minority groups, other educational opportunities, then I think that it fosters maybe a harmful climate." Regarding the treatment of transgender and nonbinary students, Catie recalled her gym teachers flippantly telling her nonbinary friend to use whatever locker room they wanted. Catie shared, "That's probably what they were told by their supervisor that they had to do in order to not get in trouble for not being inclusive. That's definitely how it came across."

Alexa and Evan seemed to be aware of their special circumstances in which they had inclusive and supportive teachers by design but recognized that they were lucky for having. Alexa's mother was a teacher at Alexa's same school, and Evan's schedule was

carefully curated by his particularly supportive school counselor. Both expressed an awareness that there were teachers they would not have been so lucky with.

School Site

All respondents, even the cisgender respondents, commented on the lack of availability of restrooms for transgender and nonbinary students at their school sites. Xander shared about gender inclusive restrooms in his school, “They are existent in some capacity but definitely the minimum capacity that they can have acceptably.” He recounted an ongoing saga within his school related to gender inclusive restrooms and about how students, non-LGBTQ+ students, would abuse their restroom privileges and do things such as loiter and vape in the restrooms, and in response to the restroom misuse, school leadership closed and locked the bathrooms, leaving nowhere to use the bathroom for students who were not comfortable using the boys’ and girls’ bathrooms. He went on to say, “Just because [the gender-neutral restrooms] are the center of the problem... doesn’t mean that you can’t fix that this happens without taking [them] away.” Alexa, a transgender student who reported closures to the gender-neutral restrooms in her school stated, “The school was at fault for not responding to concerns in a hurried fashion.”

Lexi, the president of her school’s GSA shared that her school implemented gender neutral restrooms but that the restrooms remained locked and therefore inaccessible or inconvenient for students to use; students had to find a teacher with a key or ask a security guard to open the restroom for them, resulting in uncomfortable conversations and the potential for students to be outed. During her tenure as GSA

president, she advocated to get the door handles changed so that keys were not required to open them, which became what she described as a “multi-year battle” with school administration, as school leaders claimed it was a safety issue for students to have access to single stall restrooms that could be locked from inside.

Similarly to Xander and Lexi’s anecdotes, Lauren shared that her school did not have gender neutral restrooms except for in the theater wing’s dressing rooms, but that those spaces were abused by students and locked by school administrations. She shared:

One thing that was really hard for some of my friends was that there weren’t really any gender-neutral bathrooms besides the [theater] dressing rooms. They were very safe, but when people would abuse the privileges, go in there during um I guess not [theater] periods or just go in there just to hang out, you know, or skip class in there. They threatened so many times to shut them down... And that was such a huge loss [when they did]. And I don’t think the principal realized how useful those bathrooms were because that was really a place where my friends who were transgender or at least questioning things like that felt comfortable going.

Jack, a transgender male student, shared that his school had gender-neutral restrooms, but that there were access issues with the ones in his school as well. “You would have to personally find the security guy to unlock the bathroom for you, but then sometimes he wouldn’t do it because that’s not their top priority.” Each participant in this study recognized that students in their schools did indeed have the right to use the

restroom that aligned with their gender identity, but for social reasons and for fear of being outed or harassed, transgender students much preferred a gender-neutral offering.

School District

A significant similarity that the participants shared was the lack of curricular inclusion related to LGBTQ+ history or identities during their time in high school, despite New Jersey curricular mandates for public school districts. This subtheme is closely tied to the Theme 1 subtheme of “Individual Influence of Teachers,” as most participants noted that the only curricular inclusion of LGBTQ+ folks came from the very teachers they highlighted as being safe people for them in school. Alexa recalled that when students were expected to do project or a self-guided learning unit, her favorite teacher would always make it known to the class that their options included LGBTQ+ history and current events. Elaborating on the inclusion of discussions related to current events, Alexa offered that LGBTQ+ related current events were “not something that was really discussed in class at all.” She went on:

I personally believe that no matter how you know rough it would have been on me [as an LGBTQ+ student], that’s absolutely a conversation we should have been having. I think, like, sure, it would have been tough during that class period, but I think it’s absolutely worth having a discussion because this is like an ongoing issue that specifically relates to the world that our generation is inheriting... I think we absolutely should have been talking about [LGBTQ+ current events] instead of just being an afterthought in the back of our heads, and I understand that in high school there’s only so much room to talk about current

events but I also feel like that's just as important as like any history that we're learning, so I wish [LGBTQ issues] were discussed more in general.

Jack also alluded that it took teachers have a specific interest for there to be inclusion in their courses, but that nothing seemed to be required or mandated by the district throughout the school's curriculum. He shared:

There wasn't any sort of LGBTQ specific curriculum, but if there was a teacher that was particularly interested in those conversations, they would be happening. There were some teachers that were pretty focused on it. I think the teacher I had for World History—no, US History... she was really focused on it, but I could tell that that was because she wanted to, because other people who had other teachers didn't do it as much or like brushed over it. And also, anytime that queer culture or history was taught... I mean obviously in the grand scheme of things, like queer people in America is generally recent considering the fact that society goes back ages, but it was taught as super recent, like only from the AIDS crisis onward. So, some [US] history teachers I feel probably wanted to teach it, but then ran out of time because it was so recent that it was at the end of the year.

Regarding inclusive curriculum, Catie shared that there were no instances of inclusion in her school, except for a time when her band teacher showed the class the movie *RENT*, which featured LGBTQ+ characters. She also said there was a brief mention of AIDS during her health class, but that she felt the health curriculum was inadequate. Lauren, when asked whether she recalled being taught any LGBTQ+ history or about LGBTQ+ people shared, "I honestly can't remember any time where we learned

about it. Definitely not in required reading or texts. I don't think we ever learned about it." Similarly, Colton shared, "There isn't any real talk of LGBTQ figures. That might have been a certain class you could have taken, but I didn't know about it." Regarding curriculum, Evan shared:

In AP Lit, we read *The Kite Runner*, which, you know, a huge main part of that story is the sexual assault of a male which people don't really ever talk about, so... it's nice to see some forward movement and stuff like that, but we never really dived into any LGBTQ topics in any class.

Lexi stated, "We never really talked about queer history in my history classes. We kind of just grazed over the Stonewall movement and the gay rights movement." When prompted to talk about what inclusion looked like, Lexi continued:

It varied teacher to teacher, I will say that. The teachers who were passionate about the subject, and I think the teachers who may have been observed more often—so those who weren't necessarily tenured yet—really made an effort to make sure this is part of the curriculum, versus, I feel like maybe the more seasoned teachers who had been there forever taught teaching the same curriculum since they started, it wasn't necessarily part of the class.

Xander had a nuanced take on curricular inclusion within his school district and statewide and questioned the enforceability of the state's curriculum mandate. He also shared similar sentiments to the other participants, stating:

I think that they should incorporate more LGBTQ+ stuff in curriculum. I think I had one teacher in high school who struck me as making an effort to include more

content of minority groups, and LGBTQ people, artists, groups, historians... it was a history class so that was great.

Public Policy

Participants had little to no knowledge of specific LGBTQ+ related education legislation. When asked the question, “Were you aware of any laws or policies related to LGBTQ+ students or LGBTQ+ education while you were in high school?” one participant responded with “Not off the top of my head” (Catie). Other participants had a vague awareness of laws existing that they could not quite recall or articulate accurately. Evan shared:

I mean, we have, I don’t know if all New Jersey schools had this, but my school, we had the Transgender Student Plan, which was really, really awesome. Yeah, I don’t know if that was like state, if that’s like a state thing. But I know that it’s really amazing. I know that there’s like a ‘you can’t be discriminatory’ obviously which is something that, you know, you would think would be nationwide but it’s not, and that you can’t outwardly like preach against [LGBTQ] stuff like you can in like Florida schools.

Colton shared, “I think I’ve heard of a few. I think, if I can remember, they can’t discriminate against someone for their sexual orientation. I don’t think they can ask either too in situations.” Xander stated, “I think I was aware of the of efforts or things that could be done or would be happening that maybe are laws that I don’t actually know specifically that are laws.” Alexa said,

I think, especially during when I was in high school, it was all, it felt like it was so in flux. Like, it felt like you would hear one day about like, ‘oh, we just got like a protection law in New Jersey,’ and then you’d hear like, ‘oh, trans people are not allowed to be brought up in schools in Alabama’ so it became a little bit difficult to keep track of where we were on the progress line, and where specifically New Jersey was along in the progress line.

Some participants attributed their lack of knowledge regarding laws to teachers being unaware of public policy, which may have been due to their schools’ failure to recognize the needs of LGBTQ+ students and prioritize the implementation of LGBTQ+-related policies. Xander and Lauren both reported that their school leadership tended to prioritize students belonging to athletics programs and that it felt publicly known that certain students were favored. School announcements were often made regarding athletics which Lauren felt must have made those students feel good, but school leadership did not go out of their way to make known anything related to LGBTQ+ students, curriculum, or policies. Lexi felt that her teachers must not have known about the laws because if they did, students would have also known, and the information would be public knowledge. She stated, “Teachers aren’t encouraged to share their personal views, and... I feel like LGBTQ rights are seen as a political issue even though they’re not.”

Discussing how it felt like her responsibility to seek out information, Lauren shared:

I think the only time I'm ever made aware of [laws] is if I see something on TikTok about, 'oh they're trying to teach this in schools' you know, so I'm never made aware of it in a positive light. It's usually just people talking negatively about it, which I know I can't trust because that's not reliable information.

Lexi seemed to have the most specific knowledge regarding specific laws, and stated:

I was aware that, you know, there is mandated curriculum for the queer community, at least in New Jersey. I was also aware that at the time, Governor Phil Murphy was not going to impose any statewide book bans. Other than that, I wasn't, and I'm not familiar with, like, the actual logistics of what is required to teach and what is not. I'm not really sure even in terms of, like, history. We never really talked about queer history in my history classes.

Theme 3: School Counselors Were Not a Factor

For all but one participant, school counselors were not a factor in their high school experience. Seven of the eight participants made comments alluding to the fact that their school counselor seemed to only serve the purpose of scheduling classes and/or helping through the college search and application process but did not offer any mental health support to students. All the respondents noted that they believed their counselors to be LGBTQ+-affirming, but that it was not necessarily evident, it was just expected due to their role as counselors. Speaking about his high school's counseling program, Jack shared:

They assign you a counselor based on your last name, and no matter what grade you're in, if you have a last name that falls in their range, you have that counselor and you don't get really a choice, and you also don't really get to have a relationship with them.

Jack continued:

I met my counselor once in 8th grade, and then sometimes if you wanted to enroll in an extra class or wanted to skip a class or something you'd have to meet with them, but other than that, there's like no requirement to meet your counselor ever.

Of her high school counseling program, Lexi shared, "I really did not feel... it's not that I didn't feel unsupported, but I don't think there was a large effort coming from counseling to reach out to students.

Alexa shared a rich and detailed account of her perception of the counselors at her school:

My guidance counselor, she seems like decently supportive. Like, she didn't seem... homo or transphobic necessarily, but she also didn't really strike me as somebody who I could talk to about those issues. Like, if... I was having serious queer related bullying, I don't think I'd feel like I'd go to her about it because I just didn't feel like she would a like get it, because, you know, there are these people who get it, like, you know what I mean? There are people you feel more comfortable bringing that up to and I didn't feel like she would necessarily treat it with the respect that maybe it deserves... and maybe I'm judging character, but who knows? I think... just trying to have a more personal connection with my

guidance counselors in high school, it just didn't feel like something that was really in the cards. I never felt like my guidance counselor was someone who I could really talk to outside of just like, 'Hey, what am I doing for college?' Like, 'What do I apply to?' And I think that seemed to be the common case for everyone else, too. I know a lot of people had, like, kind of issues, like if they were having mental health struggles, guidance wouldn't really be the most helpful... I think that guidance wasn't necessarily an overtly negative influence, but it certainly was not super like making a big positive difference.

Xander had particularly strong feelings about his relationship with his counselor in high school and shared a rich account. When asked about his high school counselor, Xander stated, "She's a bum. I just... I feel like she did nothing for me." He then recounted a story about an experience at the beginning of his tenure in high school. Xander had previously explained that while he is cisgender, he uses a different chosen name than he was assigned at birth.

I asked at the beginning of high school, I asked her to change my name [in the student information system] and that was a whole mess. I had to get other assistance for that and... send it up to her boss and... there's like all this miscommunication but... you should just know the rules and do what the student is asking.

He continued:

If you're not going to help students emotionally, maybe you should help them logistically because that's her other job, and she wasn't good at that either. And

that was true for a lot of the counselors, and the counselors that were good at that were not good emotionally either anyway, so like, you had to make a very big effort to... go to your counselor to like have that support, but you would have to go a lot for them to get to know you, and I don't think they were that equipped to support you anyway... definitely not that comfortable with supporting you because they don't do it that much.

When asked what he believed his counselors' dispositions were on supporting LGBTQ+ students, Xander shared:

I think that generally, I think on average, they're probably more comfortable with LGBTQ issues and just like general topics. But I don't think that... they're certainly not the comfort level they should be as counselors. And... I think if you needed a resource, you didn't go to them. I think you went to the specific teacher that you know like went the extra mile, those few ones. Like, there were definitely those that everyone knew about and like you could go, you could build that special connection, but I don't think that was with the counselors.

When asked about her high school counselor, Lauren shared:

I never talked to the guidance counselor about any issues regarding [my identity] even if they did happen, just because I would talk to [my acting teacher], you know, because I felt like she was a better person, better fit to talk about that... because she would be open about her experiences and her past, so I felt, like, safer talking to her.

Two positive accounts of experiences with their high school counselors came from Catie and Evan. While Catie maintained a positive relationship with her school counselor, she also noted that hadn't been the case for all the students at her school. She shared:

I was very lucky. My school counselor was very supportive. She was a very safe space, and I was very open with her... she advocated for LGBTQ youth, she had pride stickers in her room, she had like a little bin of stickers and there were pride stickers in there that we could take. So... it really depended. I know one of my friends had a counselor who she felt was not inclusive at all, didn't really care, was just really there to get paid and go home, so again really it was just the individual, like it depended.

Evan had a very positive experience with his high school counselor and shared information about the different ways they would connect.

My counselor mediated a conversation that I had between, who I thought was a friend, that turned out to be a Republican. Um, and we had a long conversation afterwards about it, about how I was feeling about that particular thing... I struggled a lot in freshman year, especially with mental health. And, uh, I got a 504 plan, and we would always talk about it and talk about classes and stuff like that. And, she, in her recommendation letter for colleges and stuff had told me expressly, she said, 'I will personally email every college you apply to if you need me to and tell them that your grades in freshman year do not reflect the person that you've become'... she was just a huge advocate for me and I always felt like I

could go to her, even if I was having like an emotional problem not just an educational one. Um, you know, she, she was just great.

Theme 4: Desire for More Educational Opportunities

A sentiment that rung true for each participant was the need for more exposure and education related to LGBTQ+ people and identities for themselves, their peers, and their school staff. Xander stated that people should be taught and exposed to “...more complex topics that people don’t know about or are uncomfortable talking about, and those courses should be required.” He continued:

Teachers should have more training for them obviously, and then those courses should be required for every student and have some sort of way that it can consistently be referred back to or referenced or something where like the students actually can retain this... that would that would actually change a climate of a school.

Xander continued with recommendations regarding how this learning could look and shared:

Small group trainings that are in person force you to be able to talk to people about the issues, which makes dialogue and education... that’s how you foster a good climate... in an educated, open dialogue, accepting community. And so if you have that and you teach that way... and you’re required to learn that way, then you will adapt that way and everyone can be more comfortable.

When asked what schools could be doing better to support LGBTQ+ students, Lauren pleaded:

Oh my goodness, educating, educating them on just that it exists. Me personally, I really didn't find out anything about myself, about my identity from professionals, I would say. I think I learned everything I know from peers, from media, from, you know, TV shows, things like that.

Relating to exposure to diverse identities and schools' role and responsibilities,

Lexi shared:

I wish for these high schools that people could act and display support openly without fear of being reprimanded, not necessarily by the state, because we have these laws in place, but like culturally reprimanded by either other staff members, by parents, by students. So that's my hope, it's that high schools can openly make these policies without tiptoeing around hard issues and without the fear of the backlash.

Jack strongly advocated for the need for more training for teachers so that they could develop their comfort level surrounding LGBTQ+ topics. Regarding being misgendered in school and being referred to by their deadname, Jack shared, "A lot of my teachers genuinely didn't really understand how their mistakes were affecting me, and I would like to see them understand more through training." Colton implied that specialized training or a staff member specifically trained to support LGBTQ+ students would be helpful. He shared:

Just having more resources available in the sense of maybe having a counselor that kind of like specializes in LGBTQ, like someone that is like upfront, an ally,

that if you have any questions or you need help, like they could be your immediate person.

Catie gave an impassioned plea for more inclusion in schools and more deliberate stances by school leaders. She stated:

Plain and simple, things should have been a lot more inclusive. There should have been conversations that were had about any kind of minority whatsoever and it should not have been considered, you know, a debate. It should have been... an informative conversation. We should have had lessons on stuff like the Stonewall Riots, or really anything like that... It should have been talked about. And the fact that it wasn't is a little disappointing, but I definitely think that having that conversation would have made it a more inclusive environment. I think they should have cracked down a little more on, you know, negative standpoints on it. Obviously, you can have your own opinion, but you can't take your opinion and shove it down people's throats and tell them 'you aren't valid. You should not exist because of how you identify, because of who you like.' I think that should have been cracked down on a lot more. And I think a lot of it was, you know, administration was a little scared of what parents might think and might say and might do. And I think that they definitely should cracked down on that. They shouldn't have let people get away with things that they were getting away with. And honestly, I just think there was a lot that was not talked about in classrooms that was, you know, very much brushed past, and you had to figure it out on your own.

Alexa similarly felt like students had to seek out their own information about LGBTQ+ topics and identities because not enough conversations were being had in school or included in the curriculum. She shared:

I'm not asking for them to completely uproot the entire curriculum so we can only learn about gay stuff. Just like a quick lesson to prepare people would be nice, because like I said, a lot of people are willing to learn these things, but they really have to go out of their way to find resources on their own instead of like having it be part of their real education.

Echoing the same points, Evan said:

I think that there should be a little more overt curriculum because it is written in law, so you can't get in trouble for it. So teachers should take advantage of that and educate students, and if students have a problem with it, they can take it up with the law. It's really just small things like that, because those are the first steps to a less hateful world.

LGBTQ+ History

When discussing the specific type of learning and exposure they would like to see in schools, many participants shared how important they felt it was for schools to be teaching about LGBTQ+ history and key figures. Alexa put it simply: "I would like to see more discussions on queer history integrated into larger conversations on American history as a whole." Catie had spoken about the community in which she went to school in having negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people generally, and regarding curriculum, shared that she wished conversations in school looked something like this:

‘Hey, this is what has happened for years and years to people of the LGBTQ community.’ I feel like that, to an extent, might have helped the situation and the environment that I was in. I could be wrong entirely... it could have made things worse.

Jack, who is an aspiring educator, shared similar sentiments, stating:

I think it’s great that there’s a requirement that queer history is taught, but I don’t think that it’s clear in my school that that requirement (a) exists and (b) includes any kind of [discussion about] current events. Like, I feel like... history is supposed to connect to the present, and I think that generally, like, a requirement to connect history to some kind of current event in history curriculum is a good pedagogical strategy.

Lexi had discussed the lack of curricular inclusion in her school and elaborated on her thoughts regarding the LGBT curriculum legislation in New Jersey. She was not hopeful about the implementation of the curricular mandates. She shared:

I do think, you know, just, we are in a very polarizing political climate right now... I don’t think that’s going to happen. I don’t think that all of these laws are going to be lived out to their fullest, unfortunately... but I mean, if they were, that would be freaking amazing.

Inclusive Sex Education

While not all participants discussed their experiences regarding health or sex education, those that did shared that their learning was not inclusive of LGBTQ+ topics and was generally not informative for them at all in many regards. Jack simply stated, “I

definitely did not learn about queer sex or protection at all in health.” Lauren similarly shared:

I mean, our textbooks were ancient. They didn’t even teach us about abortions. I had to learn all that stuff from other people, media, things like that, you know? I really wish that they would have taught us, especially about, like, protection and stuff.

Speaking about what she would have liked to have seen in health class, Alexa shared:

I would like to see... just a unit or two relating to queer identities... maybe, ‘how do you respond and not respond to someone who just came out to you?’ And also, ‘How can you be and properly support someone who was queer and make them feel supported?’ Because that’s something that a lot of people want to do but might not necessarily know how to do, so having that either social studies or health class would go a long way.

Recalling her experience in health class, Catie shared the following:

So, we were going through like all the different kinds of STDs. It was sex ed. So they were going through any and all kind of STD you could imagine. And AIDS was briefly brought up, mentioned very briefly, [the teacher] did not really go into detail about it. And this was my freshman year. It was very briefly mentioned just, ‘Oh, it’s stereotypically gay men, caused a whole pandemic...’ And it was just a very quick kind of like, ‘Oh yeah, this too,’ but it was not very in-depth... It was kind of like a ‘do your own research’ and I’ll just give you the terms,’ but it was

definitely kind of brushed past compared to you know something like gonorrhea where we talked about it for an hour. Like, it was very briefly mentioned and obviously, I mean about 90 percent of my school was straight, so they probably didn't care too much to learn about something that is stereotypically just for gay men, even though it's not.

Xander also took time to describe his experience with sex education in high school. He explained that his school did not seem to have a formal, teacher-led sex education program and that sex ed. was taught by older peers and very little time was spent on it. He explained, "Sex education was only in freshman year it was only six sessions maybe..." He continued, reflecting:

I think it's illegal! They canceled like almost all of our sessions, we had like three. Anyway, we had very small single digit number of workshops throughout the year. It was taught by juniors in high school so they might not even know what they're teaching, and the curriculum was terrible, so bad, so not inclusive... I think that overall, it was not inclusive and no education of any LGBTQ terms or community things or anything like that ever occurred in high school in any class.

Summary and Transition to Chapter 5

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the steps taken to examine the results of the data collected from the eight participants in my study. I explained how I utilized IPA as outlined by Alase (2017) and Smith and Nizza (2022), and presented the findings to provide specific data supporting the four themes and eight subthemes discovered through the IPA process. The data presented provided insight on the lived experiences of

LGBTQ+ high school graduates, and the themes included the participants having had both positive and negative experiences related to their identities as LGBTQ+ while in high school, feeling like LGBTQ+ students were not a priority during their time in school, school counselors not being a factor important to their high school experiences, and participants feeling like more education and exposure to LGBTQ+ topics and identities being an important next step for teachers and peers alike. In Chapter 5, I present my analysis and interpretation of the data and provide implications for counselors, advocates, and legislators in consideration of LGBTQ+ young people.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

My goal for this study was to answer the following research question: How do LGBTQ+-identifying recent high school graduates make meaning of their experiences in school as they relate to LGBTQ+-affirmative education legislation? Existing qualitative and quantitative research has focused on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and their mental health and academic outcomes; however, there was a gap in research linking youths' experiences to existing legislation. For this reason, part of my inclusion criteria required participants to have graduated from a New Jersey public high school, because New Jersey has some of the most affirming and inclusive education legislation related to LGBTQ+ students and curriculum (ACLU, n.d.; MAP, 2025b). By collecting data related to the lived experiences of NJ LGBTQ+ high school graduates from a state with affirming legislation, I was able to examine how that legislation may have impacted participants' experiences in high school and on participants' perceptions of the legislation.

Because LGBTQ+ students are a minority group often faced with experiences of harassment, discrimination, bullying, stigma, and prejudice, integrating MST provided a conceptual framework when developing my study and analyzing the results. I chose IPA as my methodology because the research question was designed to prompt conversations about the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ young adults, through the use of IPA, the researcher can work to understand subjective perspectives and the context in which those perspectives emerge (Alase, 2017). Through repeated, deep engagement with the audio recordings and transcripts, I identified four themes and eight subthemes from the

semistructured interviews I conducted with the eight participants. In this chapter, I discuss their impact on social change and offer recommendations for further studies.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this IPA study provide new insights into how LGBTQ+ young people make meaning of their high school experiences and how those experiences relate to LGBTQ+ education legislation. Previous research illuminates the experiences of LGBTQ+ high schoolers but does not take the step to connect those experiences directly to legislation. My findings suggest that inclusive legislation can have a positive impact on the experiences of LGBTQ+ high schoolers, but even existing LGBTQ+ inclusive legislation is inadequate in ensuring an equitable high school experience for LGBTQ+ youth.

Theme 1: Variability in School Experiences

Existing research demonstrates that the high school experience for young people is not one that can be solely characterized as good or bad, with negative feelings about school present among all demographic groups (Moeller et al., 2020). Students of all identities report both positive and negative experiences in high school, but students belonging to minority communities, and students specifically belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, generally have worse outcomes than non-LGBTQ+ students emotionally, socially, and academically (Aragon et al., 2014). One's LGBTQ+ identity has a significant impact on their high school experience and is a major factor in how they navigate and experience social and academic situations. This theme demonstrates the

need for school counselors and educators to consider the impact that identifying as LGBTQ+ has on students' experiences, whether that student is out or not.

Appels et al. (2023) discussed the nature of equality and equity in the American education system, exploring the relationship between the two concepts. The authors described the tenets of equality as containing four key components: “(1) equality of opportunities (i.e., rights recognized in legislation); (2) equality of access (i.e., actual access to school); (3) equality of treatment (i.e., educational models); and (4) equality of outcome (i.e., opportunities to succeed)” (p. 2). The authors went on to describe how these equalities cannot be achieved without consideration of the unequal provision of resources or treatment, which is where the concept of equity comes in; they explained that to achieve full equality, there must be equitable policies rather than “one size fits all” policies, and that it is important to consider diversity in the context of education. Seemingly in recognition of this concept, New Jersey implemented a K-12 diversity mandate in which schools are to “incorporate instruction on diversity and inclusion in an appropriate place in the curriculum of students in grades kindergarten through 12” in which the instruction shall:

“(1) highlight and promote diversity, including economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance;

(2) examine the impact that unconscious bias and economic disparities have at both an individual level and on society as a whole; and

(3) encourage safe, welcoming, and inclusive environments for all students regardless of race or ethnicity, sexual and gender identities, mental and physical disabilities, and religious beliefs” (N.J. Stat. § 18A:35-4.36a., 2021).

It is important for educators to recognize that all students have positive and negative experiences in high school, but in the interest of being equitable, it is necessary for schools to take special consideration for minority communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community, and recognize the specific positive and negative experiences commonly associated with belonging to that community. This theme highlights the need for improved implementation of existing New Jersey laws to ensure a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students.

Given the variability in the participants’ experiences and the demonstrated need for equitable approaches to supporting LGBTQ+ students, school districts could take several steps to strengthen the implementation of New Jersey’s diversity and inclusion mandate. One recommendation is to provide educators and school counselors with targeted professional development that helps them understand how having an LGBTQ+ identity shapes academic, social, and emotional experiences, including for students who are not out. Districts could also consider creating implementation frameworks that translate the state mandates into clear, grade-level expectations. Additionally, incorporating routine assessments of school climate such as student surveys or focus groups can help schools identify disparities in treatment, access, and outcomes that may disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ students. By providing concrete tools to support the

legal mandates, schools can create learning environments that meaningfully address the unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth.

Schoolwide Homophobia and Transphobia

Participants from this study shared the various ways in which they experienced and observed instances of homophobia and transphobia within the school setting. Taylor et al. (2022) found that LGBTQ+ high school and post-secondary students were more likely to be discriminated against due to their gender and sexual identities than their heterosexual and/or cisgender counterparts and specifically explored the effects of direct and indirect homophobia and transphobia on LGBTQ+ students' self-esteem. While not all participants in my study were able to name the law, most participants were aware that in New Jersey, it is illegal to discriminate against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. The NJLAD outlines these protections (NJLAD, 1945 & rev. 2021). The NJDOE has provided specific guidance to schools on how to best support LGBTQ+ students in adherence with the law (NJDOE, 2018). This theme emphasizes the importance of intervention that extends beyond simply informing students of their rights.

To address the homophobia and transphobia highlighted by participants, schools may need to adopt a more proactive and comprehensive approach to intervention that goes beyond simply communicating students' rights. One recommendation school districts can consider is to implement structured, schoolwide anti-bias initiatives that explicitly address homophobia and transphobia through curricula, ongoing staff training, and clear behavioral expectations for students. School leaders could also establish

consistent protocols for reporting, documenting, and responding to identity-based harassment so that incidents are not minimized or handled informally. Additionally, students might benefit from a restorative approach, utilizing counselor-facilitated dialogues, peer-led workshops, or targeted social-emotional learning lessons that help to shift school climate on a systemic level rather than relying solely on punitive measures which are incident-specific.

Individual Influence of Teachers

An important aspect of school staff intervening in cases of discrimination, as mentioned in the last subtheme, is students feeling safe and comfortable enough to report instances of harassment, intimidation, bullying, and discrimination. Participants in my study could only identify one to a handful of educators they felt safe speaking with about LGBTQ+ related topics in their schools, and only two participants reported that those individuals were counselors. Participants reported that they did not feel most of their educators had the knowledge or comfort necessary to appropriately discuss, address, or respond to LGBTQ+ topics, whether personal or intellectual. Fleshman (2019) detailed what makes a safe and supportive school for LGBTQ+ students, and one of those core tenets emphasized the need for school faculty to be prepared and trained to support LGBTQ+ youth. Despite this necessity, teachers' own prejudice against LGBTQ+ people may prevent them from being positive role models for LGBTQ+ youth (Gastic & Johnson, 2009). The participants' perspectives related to this theme highlight several legislative omissions that could lead to improved outcomes for LGBTQ+ students, including the mandate of LGBTQ+-related training for New Jersey public educators.

Beyond the implications for New Jersey and its legislation, teacher preparation programs and counselor education programs must make a concerted effort to educate trainees on the disparities experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community so that professionals are equipped to effectively serve these populations.

Participants in this study all noted that for them to feel safe and comfortable enough to be their authentic selves with a school staff member or to bring up LGBTQ+ related discussion topics with a teacher, the staff member must have first gone out of their way to prove or demonstrate their support and allyship to the LGBTQ+ community. Some of the ways school staff did this included the deliberate inclusion of LGBTQ+ related content within their classes' curricula, displaying pride flags or "Safe Space" stickers visibly, and generally being willing to engage in discussions about identity and social justice. Research shows that students who feel connected to at least one school faculty member are more engaged and are more likely to demonstrate positive behavioral and academic outcomes (García-Moya et al., 2018). Despite the importance of school connectedness, Harris et al. (2021) asserted that LGBTQ+ students, particularly transgender and gender non-conforming students, receive little social support from teachers. Other factors contributing to LGBTQ+ students' lack of school connectedness included the vulnerable nature of being in gendered spaces, where teachers were not always present to observe discriminatory language or behaviors, and the fear of being outed to one's parents. LGBTQ+ students are often reluctant to report the harassment they face because they fear their LGBTQ+ identity would be communicated to their parents/guardians.

It is particularly important for teachers to “go the extra mile” for marginalized students, including LGBTQ+ students. Frankly, it should not be difficult—as it sometimes was for the participants of this study—to identify a safe and trusted adult at school. The participants’ perspectives related to this theme highlight the importance of school staff being ready and willing to explicitly voice their support for LGBTQ+ students, but there are school staff who are not supportive and/or not comfortable having conversations with LGBTQ+ students. For students to feel supported, teachers and counselors must be supported through LGBTQ+ competency trainings, a mandated inclusive curriculum, and they must be informed of tangible strategies for making it known to students that their classrooms and/or offices are safe spaces.

To address the limited number of trusted adults identified by participants and the inconsistent demonstration of allyship among school staff, schools may benefit from implementing structured approaches that help educators reliably communicate support for LGBTQ+ students. One recommendation is the use of explicit and visible nods to LGBTQ+ students such as standardized “Safe Space” indicators, inclusive syllabus statements, and classroom norms that all trained staff are encouraged or required to adopt. Districts could mandate annual LGBTQ+ competency training for all educators that focuses not only on terminology and legal obligations, but on concrete relational skills like how to initiate affirming conversations, respond to disclosures, and address biased comments in real time. Additionally, teacher preparation and counselor education programs could integrate supervised practice scenarios, reflective exercises, and partnerships with LGBTQ+ community organizations to build confidence and reduce any

discomfort. By pairing professional learning with visible, schoolwide practices, schools can better ensure LGBTQ+ students have multiple trustworthy adults rather than just one or two allies.

Peer Support

Rowe (2014) explained that most LGBTQ+ individuals do not learn about gay culture from their parents, so they tend to seek out LGBTQ+ peers and mentors from whom to learn that culture. Kuhlemeier (2022) supported this idea by describing that through supportive and personally affirming friendships, young people can comfortably explore their identities. The participants in this study believed that they formed closer personal bonds with other LGBTQ+ students due to shared experiences and similar perspectives on life and identity. The participants' perspectives related to this theme highlight the importance of cultivating safe enough spaces in which students can comfortably be their authentic selves and therefore more easily find similar others. New Jersey law requires that, should schools have extracurricular clubs, and should there be one interested student, the school must fund a club for LGBTQ+ students (NJ Office of the Attorney General, 2022), often referred to as a GSA in New Jersey high schools. The existence of GSAs and similar safe spaces specific to LGBTQ+ students are proven to reduce instances of homophobia and transphobia within schools, thereby cultivating a more positive climate for all students (Marx & Kettrey, 2016).

To strengthen peer support networks and ensure that LGBTQ+ students have safe spaces to connect, schools could take deliberate steps to expand and sustain opportunities for students to build affirming relationships. One recommendation is to actively promote

the creation and visibility of GSAs or similar clubs and ensure they have trained advisors, adequate meeting spaces, and administrative support. Schools could also integrate peer-led initiatives such as schoolwide campaigns that normalize diverse identities and encourage allyship among the broader student body.

Theme 2: Lack of Recognition of LGBTQ+ Students' Needs

LGBTQ+ students experience all the following at higher rates than do their cisgender and heterosexual peers: bullying, feelings of isolation, persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, suicide ideation, illicit drug use, and skipping school (Centers for Disease Control, 2025). The Center for Disease Control's (CDC) report reviews data taken annually over the course of ten years, and the rates for LGBTQ+ students remain consistent, demonstrating that despite the disparities faced by these students, they are still not a priority in public education. My research supports the theme that LGBTQ+ students do not feel it is a priority for their school to make them feel safe or included, highlighting that schools do not recognize the specific needs of LGBTQ+ young people. Regardless of schools' intentions, students are reporting feelings of isolation, being othered, and are generally disconnected from their schools; they only feel connected in specific settings or contexts within their schools, often due to staff members that take the extra step to be explicitly supportive and deliberately inclusive.

The data alone demonstrates how negative outcomes for LGBTQ+ students are, but another factor to consider is that many LGBTQ+ students do not belong to affirming families (Nath et al., 2024). Many students do not identify school or home as a place that prioritizes their identity or well-being, which is why there may be an overrepresentation

of LGBTQ+ youth among the unhoused youth population in our country (CDC, 2025). It is the duty of public schools, educators, and counselors to ensure that students feel seen, welcome, and valued. The participants' perspectives related to this theme highlight that even in states where affirmative legislation exists, schools are not making a big enough effort to ensure the well-being of LGBTQ+ students.

To address the persistent lack of recognition and prioritization of LGBTQ+ students' needs, schools could take steps to make student well-being an explicit priority rather than an assumed outcome of existing policies. One recommendation is for districts to implement systems for identifying and responding to students who may be experiencing isolation or mental health distress. Schools could also collaborate with community-based LGBTQ+ organizations to provide counseling resources, crisis supports, and family education programs which are particularly important for students who come from non-affirming households. Additionally, implementing regular needs assessments, such as climate surveys and focus groups specifically designed to capture the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth can help schools understand where support is lacking and inform targeted interventions. By pairing data-driven decision-making with intentional, visible efforts to center LGBTQ+ students' safety, belonging, and mental health, schools can begin to close the gap between legislative intent and students' lived experiences.

School Site

Transgender and non-binary students' lack of access to a restroom in which they feel safe is associated with harmful mental health indicators such as depressive moods

and suicidality (Price-Feeney et al., 2021). Overwhelmingly, the participants in my study emphasized that accessing restrooms was an issue for students in their school sites. New Jersey law allows for transgender students to use the bathroom that matches their gender identity (NJLAD, 2025), but despite being “allowed” to use the restroom, the law does not consider students’ comfort, anxiety, and lack of safety in these spaces. Bathroom anxiety can only be alleviated for trans students if they are confident that they will not be harassed or targeted for using the bathroom that matches their identity, and students do not feel this to be the case. Therefore, students tend to seek out inclusive or gender-neutral restrooms which are often single-stall restrooms. Schools must consider creating gender-neutral and private spaces. Participants in this study reported that if their schools had gender neutral restrooms, they were difficult to access and came with difficulties such as having to ask a teacher or security guard to unlock them (and risk being outed) or missing class time due to the inconvenient locations (and risk being questioned by their teacher). One trans student in this study shared that they simply avoided using the restroom at school, which should not have to be the case for any student.

Furthermore, the law does not provide direction for nonbinary students. Participants of this study stated that it seemed like nonbinary students could technically use whichever restroom they were more comfortable with, the boys’ or girls’ restroom, because school staff seemed to be more worried about being faced with a discrimination suit than they were about the students’ safety and comfort. The laws must be updated and take these things into consideration, and if student voice is not considered when looking into legislation, it is the duty of counselors and student advocates to amplify their voices.

One New Jersey town has taken steps to ensure that access to restrooms is more readily available for people of all identities.

Princeton, NJ passed an ordinance in 2019 that stated that all single-stall restrooms in any publicly accessible building be unisex or available to all individuals without regard to sex or gender identity (Princeton, 2019). Schools could consider repurposing any single stall restrooms, such as staff restrooms, into all-gender restrooms for the safety and comfort of students who prefer not to use gendered spaces. Granting access to comfortable restrooms will specifically ensure that transgender and nonbinary students can use restrooms without fear, stigma, or the logistical barriers which the participants' of this study were all keenly aware of.

School District

Similarly to the prior subtheme, counselors have a duty to make it known that an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum is mandated in the state of New Jersey. All the participants in this study expressed disappointment, but not surprise, that their school district had little to no inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities, figures, or history within the curriculum. When school districts implement inclusive curriculum, instances of homophobia and transphobia are reduced, and rates of student victimization are decreased (Kosciw et al., 2022). New Jersey school districts are neglectful in that they are failing to implement the curricular mandates set by the state, which require that schools “include instruction on the political, economic, and social contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, in an appropriate place in the curriculum of middle school and high school students” (N.J. Stat. § 18A:35-4.35., 2019).

To address the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in curricula, school districts should take steps to ensure that mandated instruction is implemented consistently and meaningfully across all schools. One recommendation is for districts to develop detailed curricular frameworks that specify where LGBTQ+ content can be integrated within existing courses, provide lesson plans and instructional materials, and include strategies for connecting content to broader discussions of current events, social justice, and equity. Districts could also offer professional development for teachers and counselors focused on effectively teaching LGBTQ+ topics, addressing potential student questions, and responding to resistance from families or the community. Administrator support is crucial for teachers to feel safe to teach content that can be considered “sensitive” or political,” so administrators must be trained as well. Additionally, implementing ongoing monitoring and accountability measures such as curriculum audits, classroom observations, and student feedback surveys can help ensure that inclusive instruction is effective. By providing clear guidance, training, and accountability, districts can move beyond compliance with the law and create learning environments where LGBTQ+ students see their identities reflected and valued.

Public Policy

My interpretive role as an IPA researcher allows me to draw implications through engagements from my participants’ accounts of their experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022), so while not many participants explicitly stated the importance of knowing about existing legislation, it became clear through participants’ accounts that schools do not prioritize informing students nor teachers of their rights when it comes to LGBTQ+ inclusion and

support. It is particularly important for teachers to be aware of protections regarding supporting students, because if teachers are aware that they are legally allowed to integrate inclusivity in their curriculum, they may be more likely to do so. Additionally, for students who are not comfortable sharing their chosen name and pronouns with school staff, it may help them to feel more secure knowing that staff is mandated by the law to refer to them with their chosen name and pronouns, and that there is no affirmative duty for teachers to disclose a student's LGBTQ+ status to their parents/guardians (NJDOE, 2018). Furthermore, knowing the laws may empower students to become better advocates for themselves within their schools.

The MSJCC recognized and endorsed by the ACA in 2015 act as a lens for translating participant narratives into counselor action and offer guidance to counselors that can be useful when working with marginalized populations affected by issues related to civil rights and social justice (Ratts et al., 2015). One of the competencies listed under Section IV. A. states that counselors should “assist privileged and marginalized clients with developing self-advocacy skills that promote multiculturalism and social justice.” Counselor have a duty to make students aware of their rights and to help them cultivate their self-advocacy skills.

The participants in this study were not as aware of LGBTQ+-related legislation as I had anticipated or hoped. To address the gaps in awareness of LGBTQ+ rights among students and educators, schools and counselors could take proactive steps to ensure that legal protections are clearly communicated to students. One recommendation is for counselors to provide structured lessons or workshops on students' rights. To support

LGBTQ+ students in particular, these lessons (which should be provided to all students) can include conversations related to school staffs' responsibilities related to using students' chosen name pronouns and can involve teaching about students' protections from discrimination as well as strategies for self-advocacy within the school setting. Teacher and staff professional development should include explicit guidance on what the law says regarding inclusivity in curriculum and student support. Schools could also develop resources such as posters, handbooks, or webpages that outline students' rights and ways for reporting concerns, while also considering needs surrounding confidentiality for students who are not out to their families.

Theme 3: School Counselors Were Not a Factor

School counselors have a duty to uplift marginalized voices and consider equity in their care for students as well as uphold standards of social justice (Ratts et al., 2015). Unfortunately, many of the participants in my study did not have a relationship with their school counselors, and most detailed the counselor's role as being largely administrative, completing tasks like creating students' schedules, writing college recommendation letters, and managing testing. Blake (2020) found that counselors roles are largely ambiguous in high school settings due to a lack of a clear job description, supervision from non-counseling administrators, and other conflicts that diminish counselors' master's-level training and mental health background. Blake (2020) explained that high school counselors' overwhelming number of non-counseling duties reduces time with students and leave little room or time to help to improve mental, emotional, and academic outcomes for students.

The participants in this study reported that while they did not have relationships with their school counselors, they felt counselors were more adequately prepared to handle social and emotional issues, including issues specific to LGBTQ+ identities due to the perceived nature of their profession. There are no laws or policies safeguarding counselors' time and duties, which points to a lack of awareness of the importance surrounding mental health support in schools for all students. There is also a lack of awareness, as made evident by participants' accounts, that the title of "school counselor" is the appropriate designation for this role, rather than "guidance counselor," which further highlights the need for continued advocacy for the profession. ASCA's ethical standards (2022) and the ASCA National Model (2025b) should serve as the blueprints for schools when defining a counselor's role. The ASCA National Model (2025b) stated that no more than 20% of a school counselor's time should be spent in program planning and school support activities, and that most time should be spent providing direct and indirect services to students. If counselors were regarded as the mental health experts they are, there would be more of an opportunity for counselors to cultivate meaningful relationships with students and become a safe adult students can turn to in schools.

Ideally, schools would take concrete steps to ensure that counselors are positioned to provide meaningful social, emotional, and academic support for all students, but the reality is that resources are lacking and many schools need additional staff. If schools can reduce or reassign non-counseling administrative duties so that counselors can spend most of their time providing direct and indirect services to students, students would be better served, and counselors would be able to carry out their duties as outlined by the

ASCA National Model (2025). With additional resources and staff, schools could implement policies that clarify the professional role and responsibilities of school counselors so that students and colleagues alike can better understand the counselor's role as experts in mental health and social justice advocacy. Finally, promoting clear communication to students about counselors' roles and the types of support they are equipped to provide would reinforce that they are safe, accessible, and knowledgeable which can foster connections and encourage students to seek counselors out when needed.

Theme 4: Desire for More Educational Opportunities

The participants of this study reported feeling like it took a personal stake for a teacher to want to be involved in supporting them and their identities as LGBTQ+ people. To communicate the urgency regarding the need for support of marginalized students, and for school professionals to want to develop a personal stake in these relationships would require exposure to information and training specific to supporting marginalized populations. An inclusive school climate is critical for students' healthy development, and it is a teacher's duty to establish and maintain inclusive classroom norms. Brown (2019) explained that teachers' attitudes and beliefs about the value of diversity were reflected in their students' experiences with peer discrimination and identity. The researchers found that teachers who valued diverse classrooms and considered them an opportunity for enrichment rather than a burden had marginalized students that reported less peer discrimination and feeling more valued. Existing laws mandate an inclusive curriculum but do not mandate training specific to supporting

LGBTQ+ student populations, so the state or individual school districts could implement mandatory, ongoing professional development focused specifically on marginalized populations. Training could include strategies for creating inclusive classroom environments, responding to bias and discrimination, and integrating LGBTQ+ perspectives into lessons in meaningful ways. Additionally, schools could consider incentivizing or publicly recognizing educators who actively demonstrate allyship to encourage a culture in which advocating for marginalized students is valued and normalized.

LGBTQ+ History

As previously stated, the mandated LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum law is not being implemented consistently in New Jersey schools, and this is reflected in the experiences of the participants in this study. Students want to know their communities' histories. Schools prioritize specific units related to many important aspects of history and historical and literary figures, but excluding LGBTQ+ history from the curriculum feels to students like a deliberate omission. The message this sends to LGBTQ+ students is that their histories do not matter, and the message it sends to non-LGBTQ+ students is that it is acceptable to not know or pay attention to LGBTQ+ related issues and topics. Snapp et al. (2015) explained that an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum benefitted LGBTQ+ and straight and cisgender students alike as it normalized people of diverse identities and encouraged intervention in bullying and harassment situations; however, the researchers also asserted that standalone lessons regarding LGBTQ+ issues further alienated students, which points to the importance of a comprehensive curriculum in which learning about

diverse identities of all kinds is integrated throughout multiple grades and content areas. The NJ law, as written, allows local school boards to make the determination of how to incorporate inclusion into the curriculum, but the resources provided by the state to support the enforcement of the mandate are limited.

Inclusive Sex Education

Comprehensive sex education is associated with significant reductions in current sexual activity, frequency of sexual activity, number of sexual partners, unprotected sexual activity, STIs, and pregnancy (Hawkins, 2024). Sex education cannot be effectively comprehensive if it does not reflect the lived experiences of all students and involve discussions related to diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions (SOGIE). Furthermore, inclusive sexuality education can reduce homophobic and transphobic bullying (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). Despite the New Jersey State Learning Standards containing standards specifically related to SOGIE (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2020), participants in this study did not report learning about LGBTQ+ identities or about protection as it relates to non-heterosexual intercourse. The lack of education related to LGBTQ+ experiences and identities in health may be one factor of many related to LGBTQ+ students' higher instances of reporting being coerced into having sex (CDC, 2025).

The NJ state health learning standards, if implemented in schools, may close the gap in some of these disparities, but they still fail to address the specific and unique health needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. LGBTQ+ youth are at a higher risk for substance use, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), cancers, cardiovascular diseases, obesity,

bullying, isolation, rejection, anxiety, depression, and suicide as compared to the general population (Hafeez et al., 2017). The existence of LGBTQ+ health curricular standards is an important first step, but teachers and curriculum writers must be adequately trained and informed to effectively integrate inclusion.

Limitations of the Study

The fluctuation of laws and policies in the current political climate is a limitation of my study. During the time in which this project was proposed and written, there was a change in presidential leadership and the implementation of several executive orders specifically targeting LGBTQ+ individuals. Despite state laws and mandates, local school district responses varied; however, this project focused on the lived experiences of the participants, so regardless of a district's stance or response to new orders, the participants' perceptions and experiences were captured.

Another limitation relates to IPA's use of small and purposive samples to explore meaning. The research design is a strength for depth, but a limitation when making claims about the broader population of NJ LGBTQ+ youth, particularly as it concerns folks with multiple marginalized identities and conversations related to intersectionality.

A final limitation is that participants responded to a recruitment email, which resulted in me securing the perspectives of young LGBTQ+ people who are openly LGBTQ+; voices of people who are closeted for any given reason are omitted from the study.

Recommendations and Implications for Positive Social Change

The core goal of my study was to understand how LGBTQ+ youths perceived and made meaning of their time in high school, with the purpose of examining what is working for them and what is lacking regarding LGBTQ+ inclusive legislation. The data collected in this study demonstrated that New Jersey schools are failing to implement existing affirmative legislation, as detailed by the accounts of the participants. For that reason, I recommend that future research examine the causes for these failures. Possible reasons for schools' failure to implement legislation include a lack of resources, a lack of awareness, or a failure to prioritize the needs of LGBTQ+ students because they are not a majority group. Teachers' and counselors' lack of educational opportunities regarding LGBTQ+ youth populations is of great concern, so there must be a more concerted effort by teacher training programs, counselor education programs, and school leaders to create and offer opportunities for exposure to this kind of learning.

It is possible that counselors are indeed equipped to provide support for LGBTQ+ students, but as demonstrated by the data collected in this study, counselors' role ambiguity in schools and the duties they take on do not allow them to act as the mental health resource and student advocates they are trained to be. One consideration for future research is to investigate school counselors' self-efficacy and effectiveness related to providing social and emotional support to LGBTQ+ students by collecting perspectives from both students and counselors. Depending on the results of that research, some of which already exists (Kull et al., 2017; Roe, 2013; Simons & Cuadrado, 2019), I recommend that counselor preparation programs, counselor advocacy groups, and

counseling organizations such as the ACA and ASCA engage more deeply in legislative spaces to advocate for policies ensuring the protection of the role of a school counselor.

Due to the reported lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students and the disparities demonstrated by quantitative data, it is essential for schools to strengthen school climate beyond simple policy compliancy. The results of my study show that affirming legislation alone does not create safe spaces nor connected experiences for LGBTQ+ students. Schools must shift from a compliance-based approach to implementation of LGBTQ+-inclusive laws to proactive, relational, and culturally responsive practices. School-wide professional development focused on affirming students of all identities is essential as is the need for school staff to address both subtle and overt forms of discrimination to better foster belonging. Another way schools can foster belonging and connectedness is through implementing programs that intentionally connect LGBTQ+ youth with trained adults, such as mentorship programs, LGBTQ-affirming advisory periods, or GSA advisor training, to ensure every student has at least one meaningful adult connection in the building. Regarding addressing discrimination within schools, school leaders must consider adopting more nuanced approaches to identifying and addressing harassment, microaggressions, biases in teacher behavior, and exclusionary peer dynamics. Encouraging student voice and student feedback may help to track school climate dynamics beyond formal bullying reports.

Despite being mental health professionals responsible for student advocacy, the participants in my study did not always view school counselors as accessible or supportive. This disconnect highlights an opportunity for counselor education programs

and counseling organizations to strengthen preparation in LGBTQ+ mental health, advocacy, and systemic intervention. Programs could integrate targeted coursework or modules on LGBTQ+ developmental experiences, minority stress, and affirming counseling practices, along with applied learning experiences such as case studies that involve responding to microaggressions or addressing school-based discrimination. Additionally, training could incorporate role-plays, supervised practice, or structured reflection activities that focus on building trust with marginalized populations such as LGBTQ+ youth, where counselor candidates can practice using inclusive language and creating affirming counseling environments.

Beyond supporting the development of individual counseling skills, programs and professional organizations can also emphasize systemic advocacy as a core competency. For example, counselor trainees could be taught to conduct school climate assessments, collaborate with teachers and administrators to address bias, and design or implement inclusive school policies. Practicum and internship sites could be encouraged to provide opportunities to work directly with LGBTQ+ students or engage in equity-focused initiatives at the school or district level. Professional associations could further support this development by offering and promoting continuing education workshops, advocacy toolkits, mentorship networks, and policy guidance that model concrete strategies for fostering safer, more inclusive school environments. These efforts could ensure that future school counselors are better equipped to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students and fulfill their roles as advocates within educational systems.

Even though LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum is mandated in the state of New Jersey, my participants' experiences suggested that the curriculum is not being taught consistently, if at all. Because this is the case, districts may require stronger oversight and additional resources to support implementation. For example, either the state DOE or individual districts could create clear guidelines that outline what LGBTQ+-inclusive instruction should look like across grade levels and subject areas, along with sample lesson plans, recommended texts, and developmentally appropriate materials that teachers can readily use. Administrators such as department/content supervisors might also consider conducting periodic curriculum audits or classroom observations to ensure that inclusive content is being implemented and embedded effectively. In addition, providing teachers with ongoing professional development focused on LGBTQ+ history, inclusive pedagogical strategies, and how to address potential pushback from families or community members could build teacher confidence and consistency. By pairing accountability with meaningful support, districts may be better positioned to fulfill the intent of the state curricular mandates and create learning environments where LGBTQ+ students see their identities reflected and valued.

My study lays a foundation for dialogue between students, counselors, educators, and legislators to explore ways to ensure that social, emotional, and academic outcomes for LGBTQ+ students are on par with their cisgender and heterosexual peers by addressing the existing gaps and barriers. These conversations could serve as a catalyst for re-examining current school policies, identifying where supports break down, and determining what additional structures are needed to create safer and more affirming

school environments. For instance, stakeholders could collaborate on developing clearer accountability measures for inclusive curriculum implementation and strengthening teacher and counselor preparation standards. While students are likely to continue reporting both positive and negative school experiences, this study shed light on specific stressors for LGBTQ+ students that schools must work to address, such as the lack of safe and comfortable restrooms for transgender and nonbinary students. It is critical for decision-makers to consider and center student voices, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, in shaping educational practices and legislation. Bringing these groups together creates opportunities to co-design interventions and build consensus around strategies that promote equity. In this way, the study not only highlights the challenges LGBTQ+ students continue to face but also offers a starting point for collective action aimed at fostering affirming schools where all students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Conclusion

By examining the complexity of LGBTQ+ youths' high school experiences within the context of LGBTQ+-affirmative policies, my study demonstrated that legislation alone does not ensure student comfort, safety, nor connectedness. Essentially, there is a divergence between legislative intent and students' lived realities. This study is one of many in which the LGBTQ+ student experience is explored, but the first to frame itself within the context of LGBTQ+-affirming education legislation. The results and implications from this study emphasize the need for a broader societal awareness that structural and legislative change must be paired with relational, cultural, and

interpersonal change. It is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs, counselor preparation programs, and policymakers to move beyond the recognition of need for support of LGBTQ+ students and into action so that LGBTQ+ student perceptions, lived realities, and outcomes match those of their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What year did you graduate from high school?
2. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
3. How would you describe your gender identity?
~What are your pronouns?
4. What is your race and/or ethnicity?
5. Can you describe your overall high school experience?
~To what degree did your LGBTQ+ identity impact your high school experience?
6. What messages—explicit or implicit—did you receive in school about LGBTQ+ identities?
~From school staff?
~From peers?
~From the environment?
~Were there gender inclusive restrooms? LGBTQ+ student clubs?
7. Were you aware of any laws or policies related to LGBTQ+ students or LGBTQ+ education while you were in high school? If so, how did you first learn about them?
~Do you feel supported/unsupported by legislation?
8. How, if at all, did those laws or policies impact your school experience—either positively or negatively?
9. Can you recall a time when you felt supported or unsupported by your school because of your LGBTQ+ identity?
10. In your opinion, how do your school’s curriculum and policies reflect (or fail to reflect) LGBTQ+ identities and issues?
~Anti-bullying policy?
~Dress code?
11. How did your teachers or school staff respond to conversations or issues related to LGBTQ+ topics?
12. What role did school counselors play, if any, in supporting or advocating for you as an LGBTQ+ student?
13. Looking back, what changes would you like to see in schools or policies to better support LGBTQ+ students?

The “~” denotes specific probing questions to consider, if appropriate and/or necessary.