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# LGBT Student Experiences in Boston Public Schools: A Case Study

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LGBT Student Experiences in Boston Public Schools: A Case Study

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University of Massachusetts Boston

Table of Contents

Abstract ..... 2

LGBT Student Experiences in Boston Public Schools: A Case Study ..... 3

Literature Review..... 6

Methods ..... 12

    Theoretical Perspective..... 12

    Participant..... 12

    Data Collection..... 13

    Data Analysis: The Listening Guide ..... 13

    Subjectivity..... 15

Results..... 17

    Step 1: Listening for the Plot..... 17

    Step 2: I Poems ..... 18

        “I’m happy.”..... 19

        Regret ..... 20

        Hope ..... 21

    Step 3: Listening for Contrapuntal Voice..... 22

        Voice of Consciousness/Voice of Conflict ..... 22

        Voice of Distrust/Voice of Disappointment..... 23

    Step 4: Composing an Analysis..... 24

Discussion..... 25

    Limitations..... 28

Implications ..... 29

Appendix..... 32

References..... 33

### Abstract

While the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community has overcome great obstacles in its fight for equality, the newest challenge has become the poor mental health of the LGBT youth. In this study, the experiences of a recently graduated LGBT Boston Public Schools student were investigated through qualitative research methods. Interviews with the student were analyzed to determine what factors contributed to his overall positive experiences and mental health as a bisexual student attending Boston Public Schools. The showing of support from his mother and peers, along with the presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance club at his school positively affected the participant's mental health. Difficulties with coming out to his father as well as a school curriculum that did not include LGBT topics negatively affected the participant's mental health. Findings from this study suggest that school curriculum frameworks should be updated to include LGBT units to provide all students, heterosexual and otherwise, with an education that develops healthy physical, mental, and emotional habits.

*Keywords:* LGBT, Youth, Mental Health, Boston Public Schools

### LGBT Student Experiences in Boston Public Schools: A Case Study

In February of 1977, the children's animated series *Schoolhouse Rock!* released a short Saturday morning musical cartoon titled, "The Great American Melting Pot". With American singer-songwriter Lori Lieberman as the performer, the youth of 1970s America were introduced to the beauty of their country's roots. Lieberman sings, "You simply melt right in, it doesn't matter what your skin. It doesn't matter where you're from, or your religion, you jump right into the great American melting pot." ("Schoolhouse Rock! – "The Great American Melting Pot"", 1977). The song claims skin color, religion, and family descent do not matter in America because you can "simply melt right in" and be treated fairly and equally. With such an inclusive message it is no wonder that 40 years later, elementary and middle school teachers within the nation continue to share "The Great American Melting Pot" with their students.

A closer listen to the lyrics, however, reveals no mention to the "melting in" abilities of individuals belonging to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. In fact, LGBT people are not discussed or displayed in the song's cartoon at all. Unfortunately, their absence was not due to the rarity of LGBT individuals in the country. In fact, by the late 70s, extremely notable events such as the Stonewall Riots and removal of homosexuality from the American Psychology Association's list of mental illnesses had already occurred (Rosario, 2012). Furthermore, high profile LGBT individuals such as Harvey Milk and Kathy Kozachenko had made their mark on American society as elected officials in California and Michigan respectively. Instead, the exclusion of the LGBT community from the Saturday morning cartoon was indicative of how the trials and tribulations of the community were received by many Americans. For every step made toward equal treatment of LGBT individuals, a new challenge arose to keep the community from further progress.

An example of this pushback occurred in Florida in March of 1977 after an anti-LGBT discrimination law was passed in Dade County, Miami. American singer and former Miss Oklahoma winner, Anita Bryant, strongly opposed this law and worked to create the “Save Our Children, Inc.” organization to repeal the law. The campaign of this group revolved around an increasingly popular fear known as homosexual recruitment. The idea of homosexual recruitment was an accusation created by homophobic members of the country to instill fear and promote a nationwide anti-LGBT atmosphere. Bryant and her group members would claim that the inability of homosexuals to have their own children would lead to their need to “recruit” or steal children from heterosexual parents (PBS, n.d.). The work of the members of “Save Our Children” was successful and within months led to the repeal of gay rights not only in Miami but in cities across the south.

Despite the hardships encountered by the LGBT community, the victories seen by this group of individuals has pushed present day America to be a much more accepting nation than it was 40 years ago. For example, in 2015 the United States Supreme Court voted to legalize gay marriage in all 50 states and U.S. territories, an exciting feat for numerous same-sex couples (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). This LGBT friendly environment has also provided a feeling of safety and comfort for long time closeted individuals to come out as members of the LGBT community. Gates (2011) attempted to quantify the number of LGBT adults living within the United States and results estimated roughly 3.5% of the population as self-identifying lesbian, gay, or bisexual and 0.3% of the population self-identifying as transgender. This totals to nearly 9 million adult LGBT Americans, many of whom having childhoods immersed in anti-LGBT movements such as Bryant’s “Save Our Children, Inc.” The physical, mental, and emotional abuse that was endured by generations of LGBT individuals has brought much reform and better

treatment. However, the fight for equality is far from over as a new generation of LGBT youth span the country and raise awareness of the discrimination that continues to exist.

In the last decade, one of the biggest positive changes found within public schools across the United States has been the rise of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs. These clubs are student-run and allow for LGBT students and faculty to come together with their straight peers and coworkers and form a safe space. During their meetings, GSA members discuss any LGBT, gender, racial, or economic disparities that are found within the school. They work together to bring solutions to problems of inequality as well as raise awareness to non-GSA members of what issues may be present (GSA Network, 2009). In the Massachusetts Gay-Straight Alliances Youth Survey (2014), GSA chapters of the state reported in participating in events such as “Day of Silence”, running LGBT workshops, and attending the annual AIDS Walk in Boston (“MA Gay-Straight Alliance Survey”, 2014). These projects are not only wonderful experiences of community service but also assist schools to have an accepting atmosphere. Furthermore, the activism displayed by countrywide youth has led to popular television networks, journals, and social media platforms to uphold the beliefs of GSA clubs and continue to work toward equal treatment of LGBT individuals.

Reflection upon the actions and outcomes of GSA clubs displays an academic lifestyle for American youth that is very different from the youth of Anita Bryant’s time. The concept of homosexual recruitment is no longer prevalent, magazines do not contain flyers to donate to homophobic organizations, and LGBT individuals are now recognized for their journey toward equality. However, this polar opposite atmosphere for present day LGBT youth has not solved all issues of inequality and feelings of being different. YouTube videos of negative reactions by families to their children coming out are found with just a click. Social media posts of feeling

helpless and alone as an LGBT community member are shared by thousands. Reports of depression and suicide among LGBT youth continue to come to light. In the height of LGBT acceptance within the country, the well-being of LGBT youth has taken an unexpected turn for the worst. With researchers only recently attempting to assess the mental health of LGBT youth as they grow up in a country with a history of inequality, the lack of emphasis placed on LGBT youth mental health has created the newest hurdle for the LGBT community to overcome. If solutions are not found soon, the progress made to gain equality for all LGBT individuals will be overshadowed by a mental health crisis.

### **Literature Review**

Russell and Fish (2016) posed the question, “If things are so much ‘better’, why are mental health concerns urgent for LGBT youth?”. Part of this urgency arises from factors that are disconnected from the turbulent past the LGBT community has had. One example is the period of time in which many LGBT youth come out to their family and friends. Many adolescents come to terms with their sexual identity in middle school or high school, where tensions run high among fellow peers. When an individual chooses to come out, they open themselves up to the highly opinionated remarks of their friends. At times, these remarks can be supportive and nurturing but more often than not, negative comments are made as well. And whether they are of homophobic nature or a statement about a characteristic unique to the LGBT student, an instance of bullying has occurred. Moments like this arise consistently simply due to the most common coming out period intersecting with a period of development in which there is a hypersensitivity within the individual. Not only to how the individual sees themselves but how others see the individual as well (Russell & Fish, 2016).

Another factor is the level of acceptance displayed by the family as a young LGBT individual comes out to them. Research has found a significant association between rejection by family and feelings of depression as well as thoughts of suicide. Furthermore, individuals who experienced rejection by their families also displayed higher likelihood of using illegal drugs and participating in unprotected sexual intercourse (Ryan, et.al., 2009). It is clear that while peer approval and acceptance plays an important role in LGBT youth mental health, the feelings of an individual's family are equally important. LGBT adolescents that do not get proper acceptance and approval by their own family are immediately placed in a state of vulnerability for poor mental health.

The United States, however, is a country in which most children are able to obtain an education which means that friends and family are not the only people that American youth encounter. Faculty, staff, and administration working at an adolescent's school, along with students that may simply be classmates as well as guest speakers that come for school assemblies are all additional people in the lives of LGBT youth. This means that school, perhaps even more than home, can have a strong impact on the mental health of LGBT adolescents. But whether the influences of school are of positive or negative nature are of great importance.

In 1999 the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) launched the first National School Climate Survey (NSCS) to explore experiences of LGBT youth in schools all over the United States. For over a decade GLSEN collected responses and analyzed changes and trends in the survey responses from 1999 to 2011. Some of these questions focused on the survey taker's experiences with bullying, some on availability/usage of school resources for LGBT students, and some on school climate overall. Twelve years after the initial survey was released, the 2011 survey results were published (Kosciw, Palmer, Boesen, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak,

2012). Within this document, GLSEN reflected not only on the 2011 survey results but the results acquired since the NSCS was first administered in 1999. Collectively, the survey responses allowed GLSEN to identify findings for three key categories: (a) successful changes to negative LGBT youth experiences; (b) attributes of schools that have brought positive change to LGBT youth experiences; and (c) areas still in need of improvement (Kosciw, Palmer, Boesen, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012).

The areas and topics that the survey examined were each vital to the overall improvement of LGBT youth experiences while attending United States schools. However, for the purposes of this paper, the theme to be highlighted is how students in the Northeast region of the country compared to the rest of the nation as of the 2011 data. When compared regionally, LGBT youth of the Northeast and West reported less incidents of victimization and homophobic remarks as well as greater access to resources and support systems within their schools than students in the South and Midwest (Kosciw, et.al., 2012). This was a tremendous success for the Northeastern United States as students from this region represented the smallest regional pool of data with 1815 students reporting in 2011. Yet across the board, from questions about supportive administration and inclusive curriculum to prevalence of harassment based on sexual orientation, the Northeast represented the most LGBT-friendly statistics.

Massachusetts was the only state not included in Kosciw et al.'s (2012) survey report. To date, only one study has examined the experiences of LGBT youth specifically in Massachusetts: a statistical analysis of results obtained from a biennial survey of 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students in selected Boston Public Schools (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azreal, 2009). The purpose of this study was to identify any association between LGBT students and feelings of emotional distress. To determine this, the responses provided by self-identified LGBT students

were compared with responses given by their heterosexual, non-transgender classmates. The results obtained from LGBT and non-LGBT students were measured using the Modified Depression Scale (MDS) to assess depressive symptomology such as sadness, irritability, hopelessness, sleep disturbance, difficulty concentrating, and eating problems. Unfortunately, survey results indicated that LGBT students were reporting more symptoms of depression than their non-LGBT peers. Furthermore, approximately seven percent of LGBT participants indicated experiencing discrimination due to their sexual orientation.

While seven percent does not immediately appear as a high percentage, it is important to take into account the sample size from which the data were extracted. The Boston Public School (BPS) district is composed of almost 56,000 students that attend 125 schools, with 35 of the schools containing 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade studies in their curriculum (Boston Public Schools, 2016). Of these 35, only 18 schools were included in survey findings. Furthermore, Almeida and her team (2009) narrowed down the total number of responses by selecting classrooms so that each of the 18 schools were represented by only 100-125 students. Although the selection was random, any classrooms containing students with severe emotional or cognitive disabilities were not eligible for selection. After improperly handled surveys were extracted, the final sample size consisted of 1,032 student surveys. Seven percent of 1,032 equals approximately 72 students that self-reported experiencing discrimination because fellow classmates believed the bullied students were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The actual number of survey respondents sharing this experience may be higher, taking into account those students who chose not to disclose they were LGBT and/or that they were discriminated again. Furthermore, taking into consideration that the number of surveys analyzed represented only 1.7% of the entire BPS district, it is probable the number of students experiencing discrimination for their sexual orientation throughout the entire

district is much higher. The study connected these experiences of discrimination back to the correlation found between self-identifying LGBT students and high scores on the MDS stating, “It is not surprising that these discrimination experiences appear to negatively impact the mental health of LGBT youth and to explain some of their excess risk for emotional distress” (Almeida et al., 2009, p.12).

Reflection upon the Almeida et al. (2009) study shows that even in schools of the Northeast region, where LGBT youth reported the least amount of school-related hardships, the mental health of the students continues to be poor. This highlights a significant issue that arises when the majority of studies pertaining to the experiences of individuals are conducted through large-scale surveys. As researchers have conducted their studies on the mental health of LGBT youth, they have tried to group individual experiences together through the survey responses. While this provides a broad sense of what LGBT experiences could be, as seen with the NSCS results regionalizing LGBT youth responses, special case schools are overshadowed. The data that represent outliers tend to be lost in the shuffle; briefly mentioned by the researchers and then put aside for others to research further.

Many times, however, special cases are not focused on because they do not represent the experiences of the majority. An example of a special can be a school in the Southern region of the United States displaying a superb ability to make LGBT students feel accepted and the overall mental health of the students healthier than in surrounding schools. Another example could be a school in the Northern region of America, where LGBT students frequently display depressive symptoms and are experiencing difficulties with acceptance by their peers and family. Student experiences of the hypothetical Southern region school could provide researchers with a bank of knowledge not yet obtained from that area of the country. How does the school provide

strong LGBT support despite its location in a region where homophobia is more prevalent? How can these elements be introduced to neighboring schools to provide their LGBT students with similar positive experiences? Likewise, researchers could explore what aspects of the hypothetical Northern United States region school are weak and lead to its lack of support for LGBT students. What could be implemented to fix these problems as well as prevent them from occurring again?

### **Purpose**

Missed questions such as the ones above could facilitate a discussion and analysis of LGBT youth experiences and mental health in ways not seen before. School-specific solutions could be synthesized and applied to other schools with similar situations. Yet LGBT mental health studies continue to focus on large-scale data sets and general statistics. The broad solutions to create LGBT friendly schools have been created and shared with schools across the nation; now it is time to focus in on specific areas to understand better how these broad solutions succeed and fail.

The focal point of this study was the experiences of LGBT students attending the Boston Public Schools with my guiding research question being “What is it like to be an LGBT student in a Boston Public School?”. The goal of this research was to gain an understanding of what it means to be an LGBT student in BPS by straying away from the large-scale data collection methods and instead, using qualitative interview techniques. This approach would promote the collection of specific examples of LGBT student experiences as opposed to having participants generalize their time as a student through number scales and “agree/disagree” statements. The personal testimonials could then be used to gain a deeper understanding of what aspects, if any, of

the Boston Public Schools are positively impacting LGBT student mental health and what aspects, if any, are having negative effects.

## **Methods**

### **Theoretical Perspective**

For the purposes of this study, I decided to conduct my interviews and data analysis through a constructivist lens. Constructivism is based off of the idea that every individual constructs his or her own world view in response to the experiences that he or she has had in life. Because life experiences are unique for each individual, no two constructed world views are identical. Constructivists believe that these differences in perspectives prevent ideas from being absolute in their validity. If every individual processes and understand the world in a different way, how can one determine who is right and who is wrong in their understandings? Because of this, constructivists embrace the variance in people's ideas and focus on what themes are more commonly presented (Colburn, 2000). When applying constructivism to qualitative research, Koro-Ljungberg (2009) states the purpose is to, "describe individuals' perspectives, experiences, and meaning-making processes, to describe individuals' values and beliefs" (p. 689). This means that constructivist researchers tend to begin a study without a hypothesis and instead, allow the participant's stories to determine what conclusions are to be extrapolated.

### **Participant**

This case study examined the experiences of a single individual given the pseudonym Gabriel. Gabriel is a 20-year-old bisexual male and recent graduate of an exam school in the Boston Public School district. An exam school is a public school that selectively admits students into the system based on grades and test scores on the Independent Schools Entrance Exam (Exam Schools, Achievement, and ISEE Entrance Exams, 2014). He is currently attending a

four-year college in the Boston area. Gabriel realized he was bisexual in his sophomore year of high school and came out to his mother and friends before he graduated. His high school experiences were extremely positive as he encountered no physical, verbal, or emotional bullying from his peers.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted two one-hour audio recorded interview sessions with Gabriel which I then transcribed verbatim. Both interviews were conducted in an area where the participant felt comfortable sharing his personal stories. For each interview, I had a set of prewritten interview guide questions available to facilitate the conversation (see Appendix). The goal of the first interview was to get to know the basics of Gabriel's story as an LGBT student at a Boston Public School so the questions asked were general. The second interview focused on getting to know more about particular experiences and statements that were said during the first interview. This meant the guided questions were more specific to Gabriel's experiences but again, he was allowed to take the direction of the conversation where he felt right.

### **Data Analysis: The Listening Guide**

To analyze the data obtained during this project, I used Gilligan et. al.'s (2003) Listening Guide analysis. Through multiple listenings of a conducted interview, the listening guide allows for, "psychological analysis that draws on voice, resonance, and relationship as ports of entry into the human psyche" (Gilligan, et. al., 2003, p. 157). The form of coding and analysis that is used with the listening guide methodology is unique from other methodologies as it emphasizes the complexity of the human voice. The highlighting of particular phrases and/or words reveals themes in the participant's conversation that could be overlooked if the transcript were coded only for general themes. Because an individual's psyche is compared to a piece of contrapuntal

music, with multiple melodies (internal voices) co-occurring, the listening guide is organized into four steps that allow for a proper and thorough analysis of the transcript ultimately exposing the various voices that arise in a single interview. There are four steps to the Listening Guide process.

The first step, which is also the first listening of the transcript, is called “listening for the plot” and has two parts to it. The first part is to simply identify the plot of the transcript in order to orient the who, what, where, when, and why of the interview that was conducted. Any repeated references are marked on the transcript as possible analysis areas but overall, the first listening is conducted to hear the flow of the conversation. The second part of this first step is for the researcher to identify portions of the transcript in which they found themselves particularly connected, interested, taken aback, etc. by what was being said. These moments are then touched upon in a listener’s response where the researcher, as well as any other listener of the transcript, reflects on how they felt during the listening.

The second step, and therefore the second listening, is titled “I Poems” as this listening focuses in on the “I” voice of the speaker. This is a powerful listening as I Poems “press the researcher to listen to the participant’s first person voice – to pick up its distinctive cadences and rhythms – and second, to hear how this person speaks about him- or herself” (Gilligan et. al., 2013, p. 162). During the listening, every first person “I” within a selected passage along with the following verb and accompanying words are underlined. The sequence in which these “I” phrases appear in the passage is maintained chronologically but rewritten and displayed in the form of a poem. The constructed I poem highlights the speaker’s voice and can reveal underlying themes within the transcript not seen/heard in the bigger picture of the interview.

The third step, “contrapuntal voice”, is the point of analysis where the identification and extraction of particular voices of the speaker occurs. These voices are what provide the researcher with specific data in which to address their research question with. The I poems can provide the listener(s) with a certain voice that will then be explicitly listened for during the third listening. For each contrapuntal voice, a subsequent listening is conducted, with specific phrases highlighting the particular voice being underlined in a designated color. Not only does this provide evidence for the voice that the listener is searching for but it can also reveal the complexity of this methodology. The same statement in a transcript can be evidence for multiple contrapuntal voices which further exemplifies the intricacy of the human voice.

In the fourth and final step, “composing an analysis”, the markings and notes collected from steps one, two, and three are put together to reflect on what the transcript reveals. The similarities or complete differences in a speaker’s contrapuntal voices throughout an interview, along with the revealing I poems and the listener’s own feelings toward what was shared can all come together to provide a level of insight to the guiding research question unique to that of the listening guide methodology.

### **Subjectivity**

Due to the personal and intimate nature that interviewing participants may have, qualitative research papers incorporate a subjectivity statement. This statement is written by every researcher of a particular study, summarizing who he or she is in relation to the topic the study pertains to. These statements allow researchers to reflect on themselves, their personal lives, their ideas, and their beliefs to determine how any or all of these qualities could affect their research. Furthermore, subjectivity statements allow readers of a paper to determine how credible and reliable the author of a qualitative paper is by assessing what biases the publishing

researcher may have. As qualitative researchers address their personal subjectivities, they allow themselves to recognize what mindset they have when beginning a research study and assure that they do not purposefully limit the progress of the study due to bias (Priessle, 2008). Below, my subjectivity statement for this study can be found.

I spent the majority of my teenage years being asked by relatives if I had a girlfriend or interest in any girls and my response was always a simple, “no”. Dating was never a priority of mine so all the thoughts that come with romanticism and relationships never crossed my mind. Subsequently, I was not sure what attraction and romantic love felt like and therefore never questioned my sexual orientation. In fact, it was not until my senior year of high school that I came to the realization that I am gay. Interestingly, what compelled me to think about my sexual orientation was the storyline of a gay character in *Ugly Betty* named Marc. Select episodes concentrated on Marc’s relationship with his mother before, during, and after he comes out to her. I reflected a lot on his journey which led me to think about myself, who I really was, and what I would like my future to look like.

I am very lucky that my parents, my siblings, and my friends treated my coming out warmly. It was actually treated in a very nonchalant manner that I appreciated because it made me feel like being gay did not change how my loved ones viewed me. I was not seen as either more special or less important due to my sexual orientation because I was still the same son, brother, and friend I had always been. In terms of my peers at school, I was once again very lucky to have a positive experience. I never encountered homophobic remarks, anti-LGBT bullying, or discrimination due to my sexual orientation. Part of this was due to the fact that my coming out was not public knowledge. I was not ashamed of who I was but I did not want anybody in my school to think that being gay was my defining characteristic. Another reason for

my excellent high school experience post coming out was due to the zero tolerance for bullying my school had. People of all races, religions, and sexual identities were to be treated equally and with respect.

However, my experiences in a suburban high school do not represent what being an LGBT high school student is like for everyone. It is my hope that through this study I can gain a perspective of what it is like for an LGBT student within an inner city public school. Again, while a single story cannot fairly represent what all LGBT students from the BPS district experience, I believe it is a good starting point. I am excited to hear what stories the participant can share about his time in BPS. His telling of his experience will provide insight on what strengths and weaknesses BPS may have in providing a safe space for LGBT students.

## **Results**

### **Step 1: Listening for the Plot**

Gabriel was born in Boston to a family of immigrants from Southeast Asia. For the majority of his elementary and middle school years he attended a private Catholic school. He then transitioned to an exam school for high school and stated, “the biggest difference between the two schools, I think, were just resources, otherwise I had a pretty good experience at both”. Gabriel found that his Catholic school allowed him better access to the newest technology, better school lunches, and schedules that accommodated the hectic student lifestyle. Meanwhile, when discussing his resources at BPS Gabriel stated, “Just to get what we needed we had to pay for our books. Our parents had to pay out of pocket to get some of these books. This is supposed to be free education?”.

Fortunately, the lackluster resources did not reflect the experiences Gabriel had as he came out to his friends as bisexual. He received complete acceptance by his closest friends and

experienced no bullying of any kind. Gabriel even stated that his best friend in high school was a self-identifying lesbian, providing him with the opportunity to turn to a fellow LGBT community member for advice. Similarly, Gabriel's mother and uncle were also very accepting when he came out to them. They both told him Gabriel they accepted him for his sexual identity and simply wanted him to be happy. Gabriel did not come out to his father with concerns of the backlash that would be received. Overall, Gabriel's experiences as a BPS student after coming out as bisexual were filled with acceptance and positivity.

As I listened for the plot, I quickly noticed the ease in which Gabriel and I conversed. Sitting in the corner of a Boston café chosen by Gabriel, the flow of our conversation was similar to that of two friendly individuals catching up after time apart. This was a wonderful overall tone for the conversation as it allowed Gabriel to feel comfortable enough to open up about his thoughts and experiences. As the interview progressed, more and more details of Gabriel's high school experiences were shared with me and attached to them were an atmosphere of positivity. The overall tone of the conversation was of a positive nature as Gabriel recollected happy memories and no instances of bullying or harassment for his bisexual identity. Consistently, Gabriel would state that he could not relate nor recollect any periods of time where he was victimized for his sexuality. I was particularly drawn to his ideas of improvement for his school. Despite the positive experiences that Gabriel shared, he was very adamant and passionate about various elements of his school that he believed need to experience change. Overall, listening for the plot revealed the power that conversation can have.

### **Step 2: I Poems**

The first I poem describes Gabriel's experiences as he came to terms with his identity and how he felt as he started to come out to his peers at school and members of his Catholic family.

**“I’m happy.”**

I identify as bisexual.  
 I think  
 I came to the full realization  
 I was...a sophomore in high school  
 I knew  
 I always  
 I tried to make my parents happy.  
 I like girls  
 I always knew  
 I had some attraction to both  
 I came to the full realization  
 I like both  
 I always knew  
 I had feelings for both  
 I had to do some soul searching  
 I first came out  
 I told her  
 I was comfortable  
 I started telling my friends  
 I think  
 I feel like the diversity prepared me  
 I would be exposed to  
 I’m very grateful  
 I recently just came out to my mom.  
 I like girls  
 I’m growing up  
 I am  
 I told her  
 “I kind of had a feeling”  
 “I’m happy.”

In this I poem, Gabriel describes how many different thoughts and feelings ran through his mind as he prepared to come out. He struggled between always knowing his true sexual identity, seen with his repetition of the statement “I always knew”, and trying to make his Catholic happy by telling them “I like girls”. Upon deep reflection and “soul searching”, the tone of the I poem transitions as Gabriel became more comfortable with who he was and started to come out to his friends. The battle with his internal monologue, represented by his “I always knew” statement, disappears from the poem completely and is instead replaced with “I’m

growing up”. Gabriel was able to gain enough confidence in himself to come out to his mother and in the end states “I’m happy”. The I poem’s positive ending represents the acceptance and love that Gabriel received from peers and family alike.

In this next I poem, Gabriel’s feelings toward his high school’s GSA club and his inability to attend meetings are displayed.

### **Regret**

I did not.  
I wanted to  
I was not able to.  
I had to do homework  
I wanted to  
I would  
I knew some of the faculty.  
I think  
I felt it would be good  
I wish  
I went  
I felt bad  
I never had the chance.

Overall, a tone of sadness can be heard in this I poem as Gabriel regretfully discusses how he was unable to attend his school’s GSA meetings. He repeats “I wanted to”, displaying how badly he desired to be a member of the club but unfortunately, homework and other school obligations got in the way. While the poem has an overall sullen tone, some positive concepts are dispersed throughout. The line “I knew some of the faculty” highlights the fact that Gabriel was aware of faculty that either identified as LGBT or as LGBT community supporters. Knowing that trusted adults within the school were supportive of the values of the GSA club was a reason for Gabriel’s interest in joining the club. It is also probable that the presence of these adults also provided Gabriel with a feeling of safety while attending his school as they were individuals that accepted him no matter what his sexual identity. Another positive note comes from that which is

not said in this poem. Of all the statements made, none reflected Gabriel's apprehension of joining the GSA club from fear of bullying. There was no mention made of non GSA members harassing individuals part of the club. Nor were there any statements pertaining to the negative feedback that the high school's GSA received from administration. With no evidence of mistreatment of the GSA club members, it is clear that Gabriel's high school provided a welcoming and accepting atmosphere for LGBT students.

The third and final I poem was created from the response that Gabriel provided to the question, "Do you think your school should do more to promote the well-being of LGBT students?".

### **Hope**

I know  
I graduated  
I am hoping they promote a positive experience  
I am hoping they continue  
I went  
I have seen through social media  
I feel  
I feel  
I felt  
I could be wrong.  
I think just talking

In this I poem, there is an overall sense of uncertainty in Gabriel's response to the question. He stated that since his graduation, many administrative changes had been made at his school which left him in a present state of unknown. He repeats "I am hoping" which expresses that he wishes for positive experiences for LGBT students at his high school but his only informative link to the school's happenings are social media platforms. The I poem concludes with Gabriel's advice for his school as he says, "I think just talking". As the previous I poem, there is an important message in what is not said through the "I" statements. There are no

statements that represent Gabriel's hope for future LGBT students of his high school to not have the experiences he had. None of the statements signal that Gabriel experienced something traumatizing and that he hopes nobody else follows in his footsteps. On the contrary, Gabriel states his hope is the school continues to promote positive experiences and he believes that even just by educational school-wide discussion, this wish can come true. The ever present uncertainty through the poem, however, cannot be ignored. For Gabriel to be unsure of how LGBT friendly his school has become since the administrative changes leads to an uncomfortable yet important point. All it takes is the presence of one person that does not believe in equal treatment of LGBT individuals to completely change the dynamic of a school environment and its acceptance of LGBT students.

### Step 3: Listening for Contrapuntal Voice

#### Voice of Consciousness/Voice of Conflict

As I listened to Gabriel share his coming out story, I was struck by how his sexual identity has caused him to mentally and emotionally divide himself into "two Gabriels". In the following text, these two identities are represented by a Voice of Consciousness and a Voice of Conflict. The statements composing Gabriel's Voice of Consciousness have been underlined and the statements representing his Voice of Conflict written in bold font. Any statements that represent both of his Voices have been underlined and bolded.

I'm pretty sure my dad knows about what my sexual orientation is **but we never really talk much about it. We don't have the greatest relationship** I guess. And he wasn't that much involved growing up so **I don't have that close of a relationship with him** that I do with my mom. So, I mean, **when I told my mom I was pretty comfortable** but **when it comes to my dad I'm just like eh.** I don't know how he'll take it and like, he's not very much an open-minded person so when it comes to talking to him, I don't think he'll totally understand.

Gabriel's Voice of Consciousness is very strong in this passage as he displays a deep understanding of the complex relationship he has with his father as well as the personality that

his father has. He states, "...he's not very much an open-minded person...I don't think he'll totally understand". Gabriel realizes that due to his father's personal beliefs, coming out as bisexual would be a delicate conversation. And while he may want to tell his father, Gabriel recognizes that the outcome may not be positive. This thought process, one that coming out to other family members and friends did not require, has required Gabriel to become conscious of his actions and words toward his father. As seen in the above text, this awareness has consequently put Gabriel into a state of apprehension as he tries to determine if and when he will feel comfortable coming out to his father.

Despite Gabriel's comprehension of his father, a Voice of Conflict can also be heard in the above text as he compared the relationship he has with his mother with the one he has with his father. Gabriel states, "I don't have that close of a relationship with him" followed by, "...when I told my mom I was pretty comfortable, when it comes to my dad I'm just like eh". The ability for Gabriel to come out to his mother but not his father has placed him in a state of conflict. They are both his parents yet he has only felt comfortable in confiding in his mother. And no matter how understanding Gabriel has been of his father's beliefs, attempting to balance the two very different relationships he has with his parents can be an emotionally exhaustive process.

### **Voice of Distrust/Voice of Disappointment**

Listening to Gabriel's reflection on his school's curriculum, I heard two more Voices arise, a Voice of Distrust and a Voice of Disappointment. Below, the Voice of Distrust is distinguished with underlines, the Voice of Disappointment in bold, and statements representing both being underlined and bold.

So **this is what I don't like about our school system.** I feel like **we leave out certain aspects of history.** I mean they, in the school system, they teach us what they want to teach us

and what they deem to be teachable. Like they go over general topics they think people should know but **they don't go deep down into the details** and so I mean, thinking about this, **the LGBTQ history, I don't remember anything other than when I saw commercials on Harvey Milk**. That's pretty much it. I think stemming back from the idea of teaching what they want to teach, I mean **in Health Education we never talked about like same sex couples or sexual practices with same sex couples**. I mean in English class; **I recall maybe one moment in one book that we were reading** but that's like pretty much it...

Gabriel's Voice of Distrust is emphasized with the usage of the ominous word "they". He states, "...they teach us what they want...they don't go deep down into the details...teaching what they want to teach...", implying that "they" have full control over education and the material covered is on a superficial and sometimes biased level. Many times, when decision makers are separated from the individuals who are impacted by the decision making, an air of distrust and apprehension arises. In this situation, the education that Gabriel and all other students at his high school have received has been under the control of "they". Without any say in what topics were to be covered or how they were taught, the BPS students had to trust that teachers were presenting them with a well-rounded and fair education. Analysis of Gabriel's thoughts on this displayed a heavy distrust on how well-rounded his classes really were.

On a more specific level, Gabriel's Voice of Disappointment highlights his frustration with the lack of LGBT-related topics incorporated into his studies. His only recollections of in-class references to the LGBT community were during the release of the Harvey Milk movie and a single moment in a book read in English class. Gabriel displays his dissatisfaction with the education system as it constantly "leaves out certain aspects of history".

#### **Step 4: Composing an Analysis**

Examining Gabriel's story through a constructivist lens, I concluded that the experiences discussed in the interviews combined with those not expressed came together to form his reality as an LGBT student attending a Boston Public School. The complexity of his family, his peers,

and his school environment all contributed to an overall experience that was both very positive and unique to Gabriel. Due to an emphasis of favorable experiences such as accepting family members and friends as well as a school with LGBT related resources, Gabriel's reality as an LGBT student at BPS was a positive one. In turn, Gabriel's perception of his life with a relatively optimistic and happy view positively affected his mental health.

### **Discussion**

The conversations with Gabriel opened up a wonderful window into what his life was like as an LGBT student attending a Boston Public School. Through this window, I saw a strong support system that provided Gabriel with an environment full of acceptance. This allowed him to maintain a positive sense of self which ultimately contributed to his overall healthy mental state. However, through this window I also found moments of internal struggle, stemming from the fear of rejection from both family and community.

As seen in the I poem titled "I'm happy." prior to his coming out, Gabriel remained in a state of unrest as he pondered upon his sexual identity. As time passed and he gained more confidence within himself, Gabriel was able to come out to his friends and his mother. The poem captures the support he received from these loved ones as it ends with the statement, "I'm happy". As proposed in the Ryan, et.al. (2009) and Russell and Fish (2016) studies, support from family and friends as an individual comes out has a positive effect on his/her mental health. These effects include a reduction in depressive symptoms and risky behaviors. Gabriel did not express any difficulties with depression, suicidal ideation, or any risky behavior, thus supporting these empirically supported studies.

Simultaneously, Gabriel's Voice of Consciousness displayed an ongoing struggle he has experienced with his father whose personal beliefs have caused Gabriel to be apprehensive of

coming out to him. While this situation is not necessarily an example of rejection by family, the emotional distress that fear of coming out can bring to an LGBT individual can have a detrimental impact on mental health. Fortunately, Gabriel has been able to acknowledge the difficulties he may have with being honest with his father and not let this impact his overall mental health. While the exact reasoning for his success was not touched upon in this study, his family situation revealed a valuable lesson; the experience of coming out to loved ones cannot always be categorized as complete acceptance or complete rejection. In many cases, LGBT youth find themselves in a gray area in terms of social acceptance as they face support and backlash for their sexual identities.

In the I poem “Regret”, Gabriel expressed his dismay over not being able to participate in his high school’s GSA club. As described, Gabriel’s inability to join GSA was simply due to a busy schedule, and not from fear of being bullied. This evidence shows the school was successful in its attempts of upholding a safe social environment for LGBT youth. As discussed in the Russell and Fish (2016) study, many issues that arise from LGBT students coming out simply stem from the social setting in which they do so. Within a school environment filled with pubescent youth, any individual who opens up about their sexual identity can be subject to judgement from peers who are more often than not, hyposensitive to the feelings of those around them. In particular, these judgements are often passed on students belonging to minority groups such as the LGBT community. The presence of the GSA club in Gabriel’s high school provided a safe space for all LGBT students if situations of bullying occurred. In Gabriel’s case, simply knowing of the club’s existence provided him with comfort and confidence to come to school every day.

Gabriel also discussed during our conversation that the classes at his school did not reflect the LGBT-accepting environment within the building. His Voice of Disappointment highlighted the lack of references to LGBT history or individuals in any of his courses. And as he stated, it appeared that administration and other unknown individuals known as “they”, were selectively choosing to ignore LGBT community contributions when planning curricula. Gabriel expressed his frustrations with this as it meant that significant events in LGBT history were not deemed teachable yet no explanations for this decision were provided. From a mental health standpoint, the absence of LGBT historic events in Gabriel’s education did not negatively impact him. However, as seen in the I poem “Hope”, he suggested that to continue to promote the well-being of LGBT students, the school should just talk. Talk more about LGBT people, history, and events so that the student body can expand its knowledge base on who LGBT individuals are and what obstacles the group has overcome for equal treatment. This would have the potential of dispelling any misconceptions that some students and faculty may have about the LGBT community which would then allow for an even more accepting school environment.

Gabriel’s experiences revealed a vital concept about school systems. Much like the process of coming out does not always result in complete acceptance or complete rejection, a school cannot perfectly promote or oppress the well-being of LGBT students. Gabriel’s school made great strides in maintaining an accepting environment for LGBT individuals by having a GSA chapter, having LGBT faculty, and promoting a bully-free school. At the same time, Gabriel’s school would purposely not focus on the trials and tribulations that the LGBT community overcame to earn equal treatment. This contradictory situation proved that while anti-bullying posters and clubs help maintain a supportive atmosphere, issues beneath the surface such as curricula focusing on exclusive topics, also exist.

In sum, the results displayed how Gabriel's life as an LGBT student attending a Boston Public School was composed of varying experiences. Some provided the support and acceptance that Gabriel needed after coming out to his friends and family. Others introduced emotional and mental obstacles into his life. Gabriel prevented these situations from severely impacting his time within BPS and ultimately maintained a healthy sense of self and well-being.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations I encountered in this study was the inability to meet with more than one LGBT BPS graduate. By only meeting with Gabriel, I was only able to learn about the positive and negative experiences of a single person. Being able to hear the stories of more graduates would have allowed me to gain a better understanding of what other strengths and weaknesses the Boston Public Schools have in promoting the well-being of LGBT students.

A second limitation was a byproduct of the first, which was the fact that I could only document the experiences of a bisexual graduate. The LGBT community is comprised of many different sexual identities but through the interviewing of only one participant, I could only capture the story of one sexual identity.

A third limitation of this study was that Gabriel was a recent graduate of the Boston Public School system, as opposed to a currently enrolled student. This meant that Gabriel may have been unable to recall additional experiences simply due to the time that has passed since his enrollment in a BPS school. Furthermore, experiences of students today may be different from those who graduated even just a few years ago.

A fourth and final limitation to the study is my own personal sexual identity. As a gay male, I am a part of the LGBT community and therefore am biased toward instances of unequal treatment toward LGBT individuals. I may have a heightened sensitivity to these situations

relative to researchers who are not LGBT themselves but instead, allies or simply unfamiliar with LGBT youth.

### **Implications**

While it is true that no two people are able to lead identical lives, elements of Gabriel's experiences can be used to understand what positively and negatively impacts the well-being of LGBT youth. By understanding what benefited Gabriel's experiences upon coming out, school administrators and faculty members, students, and families can all learn what to do to improve the mental health of other LGBT BPS students. Likewise, understanding what aspects of Gabriel's life were counterproductive or even detrimental could teach the LGBT community and its supporters what to fix and to avoid.

An example of this is seen with Gabriel's story complementing previously cited studies that claim the acceptance from loved ones when an LGBT individual comes out is imperative. Without the support of family and friends, LGBT youth especially are susceptible to negative experiences ranging from risky behavior to homelessness. Introducing these situations into an adolescent's life would cause him/her to construct a very cynical reality that would subsequently deteriorate his/her mental health. Therefore, a necessary element to introduce to LGBT youth is that no matter what rejection they may face, they are not alone. In Massachusetts, multiple resource groups and shelters are available for LGBT youth to reach out to when in need of help. However, how can BPS students experiencing no support at home be aware of the existence of these resources when LGBT related topics are not being taught at school? From where can LGBT youth learn about available support groups if their two major sources of knowledge, home and school, are not providing proper information?

To prevent this situation from arising, BPS must begin to incorporate LGBT instructional units within the classroom. However, to be able to do this, the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks for all subjects must incorporate LGBT topics and at the moment, none of them are required to do so. The comprehensive health frameworks, for example, states the objective for the reproductive/sexuality unit is for students to, “acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to make effective personal decisions that promote their emotional, sexual, and reproductive health” (“Massachusetts Comprehensive Health Curriculum Frameworks”, 1999, p.31). However, not a single lesson nor objective pertains to lessons on LGBT sexual health. By completely disregarding the education of the LGBT youth, only heterosexual students are being taught to framework. This places LGBT students at a severe disadvantage as they do not learn about healthy mental, emotional, and physical practices like their non LGBT peers. This disconnect in the educational system reflected itself in the Almeida et al. (2009) study as Boston Public School LGBT students reported depressive symptomology more severely and prevalently than the heterosexual students. If Boston Public Schools administrators are truly interested in combatting the poor mental health of numerous LGBT students, a more inclusive curriculum should be of utmost importance.

Studies of LGBT youth well-being over the last thirty years have allowed researchers to determine various statistics about this group population. These findings have led to the improvement of many home and school environments as well as an overall decrease in homophobia found within the nation. Even the strengths and weaknesses of the different regions within the country when dealing with LGBT students have been successfully identified. However, while contributing immensely to the progress of LGBT equality, quantitative research has oversimplified the LGBT experience. Having LGBT survey takers attempt to quantify their

experiences is a complicated task. As seen with Gabriel, the experiences of LGBT students are multifaceted and no form of numbers could fairly represent them.

Qualitative research methods, however, allow for the full explanation of any and all experiences. To promote progression of the improvement of LGBT youth experiences, it is recommended that future researchers follow a qualitative approach. By focusing on the stories of students from schools across the country, researchers would be able to learn about district-specific or school-specific successes and failures that contribute to the positive or negative impact on LGBT student well-being.

## Appendix

**Guided Interview Questions for Interview #1**

- What is your sexual orientation?
- Tell me about when you realized this was your sexual orientation?
- Have you come out to your friends?
  - If yes, tell me about when that happened and what it was like.
  - If no, tell me why you think you have not come out to them.
- Have you come out to your family?
  - If yes, tell me about when that happened and what it was like.
  - If no, tell me why you think you have not come out to them.
- Have you ever been bullied (in any form) for your sexual orientation?
  - If yes, tell me about when that happened.
- Tell me what it's like to be an LGBTQ student at your school.
- Tell me about how you feel about your school's efforts to promote the well-being of LGBTQ students.

**Guided Interview Questions for Interview #2**

- Tell me some positive things that your family/friends/school did that made you feel comfortable to be a member of the LGBT community.
- Tell me anything you wish your family/friends/school did to make you feel even more comfortable to be a member of the LGBT community.
- Are there any experiences during your time at BPS that you wish you could change?
  - If yes, tell me what experiences and why.
- What advice would you give to LGBT students currently attending your school?

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