

OMISSION:  
A LOOK INTO THE PK-12 EXPERIENCE  
THROUGH THE LENS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL,  
AND TRANSGENDER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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by  
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LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others who have felt oppressed within an environment for reasons that were out of personal control. Your life is important, it is precious, and it is equal to those who do not have to fight for their rights or equal treatment. Sometimes it is hard to see what the world has in store for you, but I can tell you that it is special, unique, and you are the only one that can complete the journey, that is your future.

Additionally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to those who do not understand or cannot empathize with those who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender. Education is the key to understanding and I encourage you to explore until you are comfortable with the unknown. LGBT people are no less human than those who are cisgender and heterosexual. Remember that we are all human and have the responsibility to encourage respect and acceptance of all people.

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## PRELUDE

A fifth grade student wakes up in the morning and goes to the closet. Within the closet this student has a variety of options for the perfect outfit. The student chose a white shirt with some glitter and some pink flair. The pants were a tight black legging type of material. The student puts on their clothes and then goes to the mirror to make sure their shoulder length hair is not tangled. Before the student grabs their bike to head off to school, they mention to their mother that they would like to go to Justice after school to get additional clothes.

When the student arrives at school, the bike was put in the bike rack and the school day began. During the day the student received odd looks from others, but did not dwell and went about the day. The school day eventually ended and the student returned to the bike rack to unlock the bike and head home. At this time a fourth grade student came over and asked, "Why do you wear girl's clothes? Are you gay?" The young boy stopped and responded with, "Just because I buy my clothes at Justice (a girls' clothing store) and wear shirts with glitter on them doesn't mean I am gay. Even if I am gay, who cares? And why are you supporting the patriarchy anyway? You're a girl!"

Situations just like this one happen to students on a daily basis. Even as a reader, it may have been assumed that this scenario was about a female child. As a person, one should be able to dress how they see fit. In this situation, the student had an educational response because of confidence about who he was, but not all students are as confident. For this reason and other reasons explained within the dissertation, are why we need to inform students within the educational setting about gender identity, sexuality, and diversity. Why is not okay for a male student to wear glitter and sparkles? Why is a boy

in pink immediately considered homosexual? This is because tolerance and understanding of those who do not conform to the majority is unknown, not discussed, and not tolerated.

This fifth grade student was able to handle himself, speak with confidence, and the antagonist was only able to reply with, "You are so gay." This shows that we as a society need to implement a system of understanding and exposure so students can realize what they are saying, implying, or misunderstanding. I respect this young boy because he understands who he is, what he wants, and does not allow others to deter him from being himself. He decides what is best for his life and it is our job as a society to allow him to do just that.

## SECTION ONE:

### INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION-IN-PRACTICE

A student spends approximately 1080 hours a year inside the school setting for academic instruction (DeSilver, 2014). During this time students interact with administrators, faculty, and staff who may have influence over insight and behavior. Due to constant interactions, school personnel can project influences that teach, inhibit, disinhibit, enhance stimulus, arouse emotion, or cause a response from others, either deliberately or inadvertently (Bandura, 1971). Students will select their preferred models and assimilate characteristics that were perceived through interaction into their own practices (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963a). So, what ideals or perceptions are school personnel imparting or not instilling in students who spend numerous amount of hours in their care?

A survey by the National Health Statistics Report found approximately 3.4% of students identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT), or as non-heterosexual (Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, & Joestl, 2014). Of those who identify as LGBT, 55.5% feel unsafe in school, where 16.5% report assault for sexual or gender expression, 36.2% account physical mistreatment, 74.1% report being verbally harassed, and when issues were reported to school personnel, 61.6% of harassment complaints had no action taken (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). When schools ignore harassment reports, they are reaffirming ideas about gender and sexuality (Ngo, 2003) and perpetuate the feeling of an active non-participatory system of inequality for LGBT students (Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh, 2000).

Educators refrain from addressing LGBT topics when they are uncomfortable about the subject (Weiler, 2003). Research suggests schools that implement an LGBT-positive school environment and portray LGBT persons in a positive light have a more positive school climate for LGBT students (Dessel, 2010b; Jeltova & Fish, 2005; Nichols, 1999). Students who attend school in the Midwest experience more verbal harassment, physical harassment, and assault based on sexual orientation than those in other regions of the United States (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). In Missouri and Kansas, there is no requirement to integrate gender identity or orientation topics within the adopted curriculums (DESE, 2007; KSDE, 2007). Although there is no formal requirement it is not clear if these topics are being addressed within the school environment.

Research has been completed on integrating LGBT topics into the school curriculum, (Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Flores, 2012; Burdge, Snapp, Laube, Russell, & Moody, 2013), the experienced school culture from LGBT students (Patterson, 2013; Russell, 2010), and on the climate of the school from the point-of-view of LGBT students (Dessel, 2010a, 2010b; MacGillivray, 2000), but no research has been completed to show PK-12 experiences through the lens of LGBT university students in respect to curriculum, climate, and culture.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research has shown that the school environment is not safe or welcoming for students (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002; Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Slavin & Cooper, 1999). Safety for all students is important and should be thoroughly examined by teachers and administrators. Although school districts implement general policies and procedures

to help remedy potential threatening situations, some subgroups of students do not feel protected. A series of surveys were given to LGBT youth on their perceptions of school climate, harassment, violence, inclusive-curriculum, and safety (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Kosciw, et al., 2012; Kosciw, et al., 2014) and found that over half respondents do not feel safe. Gathering data on LGBT youth is beneficial to the school environment, but has only been gathered from students who are currently enrolled in the PK-12 system.

Gathering these perceptions can be advantageous by acknowledging primary perspectives from youth about how personal expectations are being met, but is lacking a holistic approach. When looking at perceptions, it is not only wise to utilize current PK-12 students, but also investigate additional experiences from students post-graduation. Gathering multiple perspectives from university students about their PK-12 experiences can be beneficial. Not only will this replicate current research, but will offer an additional perspective that has yet to be examined. Currently, there is a lack of perspective on LGBT PK-12 student experiences after the advancement into the university setting. When investigating this viewpoint, we enhance research on LGBT experiences and expectations from a comprehensive standpoint. These perspectives will benefit the current student, as well as future students within the PK-12 environment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore LGBT university students' perceptions of their PK-12 school environment. The focus was on LGBT students who were in a university setting and had successfully completed state required coursework for

graduation in the states of Missouri and Kansas. The main question of interest was, “What are the LGBT university students’ perceptions of their PK-12 school experience?”

The approach to research was through a case study and utilized social learning theory to help communicate findings. Utilizing the qualitative strategy of a case study in conjunction with social learning theory produced in depth information on LGBT perceptions about their PK-12 experience. The purpose of this process was to find common themes through a coding process. After the coding was complete, perceptions toward the current practices and its effect on experience through the lens of LGBT persons were identified. Further, it provided insight into policies and procedures that may need to be implemented to benefit these students.

The case study was descriptive in nature. This process provided an awareness of LGBT topics being discussed within the PK-12 environment. Also, this study sought to examine LGBT students’ experiences to gather their perceptions of climate, culture, and curriculum.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of the study was to explore LGBT university students’ perceptions of their PK-12 school environment. The overarching research question was, “What are the LGBT university students’ perceptions of their PK-12 school experience?”

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, the theoretical framework is addressed in relation to the research purpose, analysis of the study, and composition. Although, the framework will be addressed briefly in this section, an in-depth contextual explanation can be found in subsequent sections of the study. Reasoning behind the use of a case study and

constructivism as the umbrella for the theoretical framework will be explored with a concise look at social learning theory.

A case study is a qualitative approach where a researcher investigates a bounded structure or multiple bounded systems during a planned amount of time and collects data from numerous sources to gather information (Creswell, 2007). There can be any number of constraints in the study, such as the city/state being researched; the type of person, age of participants or other factors that the interviewer specifically has chosen to bind their study. By using a case study a researcher desires to discover significant factors that are characteristic of the information being researched (Merriam, 2009). The goal of this research was to gather multiple perspectives from the participants to find commonalities between them.

Constructivism is based on individuals who seek understanding of the world based on the context in which they live and work (Creswell, 2009). People try to make sense of the world around them through their experiences and the goal of the researcher is “...to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meaning into a few categories or ideas” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Each person has their own perception of reality and it is constructed through their individual experiences. This means that no two individuals perceptions can be the same and each must be viewed as separate experiences. Using constructivism for the broad research framework will show the context or setting for understanding, while perceptions will be developed by interpretation of primary sources (Crotty 1998, as cited in Creswell, 2009).

Constructivism was the guiding theoretical framework for the case study. Exploration of LGBT university students’ perceptions on their PK-12 experience was the

focus of this research. Using the constructivist framework allows the inclusion of multiple perspectives by gathering information from participants and the researcher interpreting the results (Creswell, 2009). Even further, having social learning theory embedded in the constructivism framework helped reinforce the case study by adding deeper understanding of the observation through learning, the construct of knowledge, and the understanding of assimilation.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Albert Bandura (1971) stated, social learning theory as being environmentally influenced during the process of observing. This means that people learn through their everyday interactions. He continues by saying that humans are active processors of information that continually seek relationships between the actions that will/have taken place and the consequences associated with those actions (Bandura, 1971). People are observationally learning at all times and use these interpretations to determine understanding or solidify previous perceptions. During this research, Bandura's social learning theory was used to support the idea that students are constantly observing actions and teachings of others inside the school setting and their behaviors and understandings are a reflection of what was observed.

### **Design of the Study**

The study was qualitative in nature. The interviews and focus groups were conducted within the proximity of Missouri and Kansas. All participants were 18 years of age or older and had participated in a public PK-12 state approved curriculum from states of Missouri or Kansas.

A series of focus groups were conducted, as well as, interviews to gather the data for the study. There were four focus groups and 24 interviews conducted over the period of two months. Participants were selected through campus organization that focuses on LGBT support. Each participant identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Gender Non-Conforming to be considered for the study. A review of approved state curriculum from the states of Missouri and Kansas was conducted, then analyzed to determine the compulsory standards that should be addressed inside each state's curriculum.

At the completion of the focus groups and interviews, a written transcript of the recorded events were developed. Each transcript was analyzed using an open coding process to generate categories of information based on the answers of the respondent (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). After the completion of the open coding procedure, an axial coding process took place to find a relationship between the codes on each transcript to find common themes (Creswell, 2009; Merriam 2009). The emerged themes showed the perceptions of the LGBT university students on their PK-12 experience.

### **Limitations**

This research was qualitative in nature and therefore reliant on responses from participants. Because of this, the validity and reliability of individual responses had to be considered. Each participant was offering a unique perspective of their own experience; the information conveyed does not necessarily reflect the experiences and behaviors of others. Lastly, there were several confounding variables (i.e. race, age, location, etc.) that

contributed to the respondent's answers and had to be considered when analyzing the data.

### **Delimitations**

The research was conducted in the region of Missouri and Kansas. Only universities that had LGBT associated clubs (i.e. PFLAG, GSA, Common Ground, etc.) were considered. Each participant was 18 years old or older and enrolled in the participating institution during the 2015 – 2016 school year. Also, each participant must have graduated from a public school within Missouri or Kansas. Lastly, only students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender-nonconforming were considered for the study.

### **Assumptions**

While conducting interviews and focus groups, the responses received from participating LGBT students were an accurate reflection of their own opinions and not changed for the purpose of the study. Since this study is examining college age students about their PK-12 experiences from several months, up to several years after the occurrence, the information the participants convey during the focus groups/interviews were an accurate account of their experiences. Also, all students participating were self-identifying as LGBT and honest about identification. Lastly, all participants in the study answered the questions in the interview openly and honestly and were not deliberately answering the questions in a certain way because of the information being researched.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

**Gender.** This is operationally defined as a set of cultural identities, expressions and roles that are assigned to people based on the interpretation of their bodies and their

sexual reproductive anatomy (GLSEN). The behavior that is aligned with cultural norms is gender-normative and those behaviors that do not align with the norms are considered gender non-conforming (American Psychological Association, 2011).

**Cisgender.** In this context, cisgender is referring to a person who is non-transgender; a person who identifies with the gender assigned to them at birth (GLAAD, 2011; GLSEN). This term often fills a lexical gap due to there not being a term that means ‘not transgender’ primarily meaning that an individual identifies with the gender assigned to them (Wu, 2015).

**LGBT.** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) are broken down into four separate sections. Lesbian is specifically referring to a woman who is romantically and/or emotionally attracted to another woman, while Gay can be used in the same context, but also can refer to a man who is romantically and/or emotionally attracted to another man (Pobal, 2006). Bisexual is referred to as an individual who is romantically and/or emotionally attracted to the opposite sex and also the same sex, while Transgender refers to a person whose gender assignment at birth being different than the gender that they use to self-identify (Pobal, 2006).

**They, Ey, Ze, Zie & Hir.** These non-binary pronouns are used to identify those who do not fit the traditional pronouns of him or her and should be utilized when speaking with individuals who are considered gender non-conforming, genderqueer, transgender, or transsexual (Gender Pronouns Guide).

**Gender Non-Conforming & Genderqueer.** Gender Non-Conforming defines as an individual who does not conform to the perceived norm of masculine or feminine and may or may not also consider himself, herself, or herself a transgender person (GLAAD,

2011). Genderqueer is used when someone finds his, her, or hir gender outside that of a man or woman and is not synonymous with transsexual or transgender and self-identifies as genderqueer (GLAAD, 2011).

**Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).** Gay-Straight Alliances are extracurricular groups in high school and college that support and advocate for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) students (Fetner & Kush, 2008). The GSA plays a vital role in making schools safer for students by offering accepting spaces and proactively accomplishing broader organizing work against homophobia and transphobia in school, while offering support on sexual orientation, gender identity and various other topics for students. (GSA Network)

### **Significance of the Study**

The study will contribute to the understanding and perception of the LGBT students while investigating the need to cultivate the PK-12 learning environment to accommodate this subgroup of students. LGBT literature will be expanded through potential publication of results. Additionally, the study will provide documentation on what LGBT students need to feel they are represented within the curriculum. Finally, the results are intended to enhance experiences for LGBT youth by examining what school systems should implement in the environment to be determined safe and inviting.

### **Expansion of Literature**

Future work should highlight the functionality of the school, consider strengths and shortfalls within the education system, develop areas of improvement, and measure the perceptions on students and atmosphere when all youth are educated (Snapp, et al., 2015). Results of this study could enhance understanding of the interplay of school

systems in the overall support of the LGBT students, determine where deficits are within the education system, and gather perceptions of alumnus on PK-12 curriculum experiences.

### **Develop a Need for a LGBT Inclusive Curriculum**

LGBT issues are still under-represented in the curriculum at most schools (Patterson, 2013). Additional research needs to be completed to gain the perspective of what is needed for students who identify as LGBT to feel represented inside the curriculum. It would benefit research to hear from more youth from different backgrounds and different political climates (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014). Currently, limited research has been completed on LGBT perspectives, and this study sought to gain a broader viewpoint of what a LGBT inclusive curriculum entails from a Midwestern LGBT student mindset.

### **Legal Aspects of Equity**

Many states are lacking safe school laws that specifically include LGBT students, which incorporates nondiscrimination policies particular to sexual orientation (Patterson, 2013). Results of this study are intended to offer insight on policies and procedures that could be implemented to increase the protection of the LGBT students and lead to a more inclusive environment. LGBT-inclusive curriculum was one strategy that could improve safety, engagement, learning, academic achievement, self-esteem, and success in school and post-graduation (Burdge, et al., 2013). Such information will be valuable to determine if an inclusive environment could produce a safe and more welcoming experience for LGBT students.

## Summary

Currently there is no research on students who are LGBT in the university setting on their PK-12 experiences. Research has been completed on inclusive curriculum (Burdge, et al, 2013; Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014), the experienced school climate for students who identify as LGBT (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002; Graham & Juvonen, 2002), and how students are tolerated and accepted within the school setting (Nichols, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1994). However, research is still needed to determine the needs of students who are LGBT in regard to the curriculum (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014), the school environment (Patterson, 2013), climate (Peterson, 2011; Hoshall, 2013), and culture (Dessel, 2010a; Glisson & James, 2002).

Initially, some may determine an LGBT-inclusive environment is obtained through creating written policy or implementing a support group similar to a Gay-Straight Alliance (Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Fetner & Kush, 2008). Through the exploration of social learning theory, literature related to tolerance and acceptance, inclusive curriculum, and school climate, the study sought to gather perspectives of university students who identified as LGBT on their PK-12 experience. The goal of the study was to expand on current literature, advise a need for an inclusive curriculum, and contribute to an overall safe and inviting school environment for LGBT students.

## SECTION TWO:

### PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

The Tenth Amendment of the constitution allowed individual states jurisdiction over laws and policies not already controlled by the United States Government (U.S. Const. art. X). In 1867, the Department of Education was created to assist states in forming functioning school structures (“Federal Role in Education”). These structures included, but were not limited to educational policies, budgets, and curriculum within each state. Missouri and Kansas were included within these governing bodies and each formed a state board of education. These boards were formed to implement educational policies and procedures, along with other responsibilities in all public schools within their congressional districts (“What School Boards Do”).

Missouri and Kansas state boards of education supplement the cost of free public education from federal, state, and local tax sources (“PreK-12 Financing Overview”). Because of this, each state board of education has influence over school districts within their respective state by shaping policies, budgets, and curriculum that are implemented at the district levels. This analysis looked at both Missouri and Kansas boards of education in regard to the origination of the boards, changes throughout inception, how each organization was internally structured, the leadership hierarchy of each state board, the flow of power within the organizations, and implications on research within the practitioner setting.

#### **History of Organization**

State school boards have evolved as new educational information was discovered and the needs of the state school board, districts, schools and/or students changed. These

changes could be within the organizational structure, involving leadership modifications, and/or duties designated to those on the state board. Missouri and Kansas were no exception to this evolution; each state has gone through several modifications since the inception of their first state board. Federal and state laws had, and continue to have major influence on implemented policies and procedures (“Federal Role in Education”).

Although Missouri and Kansas have experienced the same federal pressures, state level laws and other factors have had two separate effects on evolution. This section took a historical look at Missouri and Kansas to show state board leadership changes, the transformation of board duties, and spoke to state and federal laws influencing education.

### **Federal Education Laws**

Many educational laws have been implemented at the federal level. The laws enacted are meant to provide equal access under the law. Although the federal government gave states the power over the school system, the laws implemented are tied to funding and possible legal issues and implications (“Federal Role in Education”). There are several educational laws to be examined, the major ones to effect public education will be discussed; The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Title II of the American With Disabilities Act, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

**NCLB.** The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted in 2001 for the purpose of improving the academic achievement for the disadvantaged by exposing achievement gaps of underserved students and peers (“Elementary and Secondary Education Act”). In

2012, further specifications on NCLB were introduced to minimize achievement gaps, increase equity, advance the quality of teaching, and increase results for all students (“Elementary and Secondary Education Act”). The act requires individual states to produce assessments to reflect basic skills for students and administer these assessments to receive federal school funding (Klein, 2015). NCLB requires that schools bring all students to a “proficiency level” in all subgroups (i.e. minority, special education, low-income, etc.) on state tests to receive Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and to avoid penalizations, such as school choice for students, free tutoring, or loss of Title I funding (Klein, 2015).

**Civil Rights.** The Civil Rights laws encompass Title II, VI, and IX, which provide protection for individuals with disabilities and the protection of discrimination based on sex, race, color, or national origin. Title II of the American with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination based on a disability in any program or activity receiving federal assistance, as well as protection for employment discrimination (“Laws & Guidance”). Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 protects discrimination in regard to sex, color, race, or national origin within any educational program or activity that received federal assistance, as well as employment (“Laws & Guidance”).

**IDEA.** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted in 1975 to guarantee those with disabilities equal access to free public school education (“Laws & Guidance”). As time passed two amendments were added to the original law; Part B in 2006, noting school-aged children from three to twenty-two are to receive services and Part C in 2011, to include early intervention services for students from birth

to age three (“Laws & Guidance”). These laws are in place to help provide equal opportunity through the education system and to provide the best outcome possible for these students.

### **Missouri State Board of Education**

In 1839, Missouri began the formal establishment of organized education with the enactment of The Geyer Act (Shoemaker, 1927). This undertaking removed the current Missouri townships created in 1820 and established sub-districts with three appointed trustees as governmental leaders (“History”). Missouri education laws were revised in 1874 giving almost complete control of schools to citizens located within each district and allowed the right to elect school district directors, until 1942, when several board members throughout the state were elected to a committee, which later became the Missouri State Board Association (“History”).

Responsibilities of the Missouri State Board of Education has changed over the years into what it is today, as shown in Table 1. Due to the duties assigned to the board of education, Missouri implemented a training program to become a Certified Board Member (CBM) in 1989 (“History”). They offered training to members, which did not become a requirement until the Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 (S. 380, 1993). This 16 hour required training provided support on peer teaching, legal information, putting policy into practice, the basics of being a board member, and additional follow up support (“History”). This training allowed the board members to stay up-to-date with knowledge and the changing roles of being a school board member.

Table 1

*Current Duties for Missouri State Board of Education*

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| <b><u>Duties</u></b>  |
|---|
| 1. Does not have direct authority over higher education institutions.   |
| 2. Board set standards for and approves courses and professional degree programs for teachers and school administrators in Missouri's public and private higher education institutions. |
| 3. State level governing body for career and technical education programs provided by local school districts, community colleges and four-year institutions.                            |
| 4. No authority to regulate or accredit private, parochial, or home schools in the state.   |
| 5. Appoint the Commissioner of Education and setting policies for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.   |
| 6. Define academic performance standards and assessment requirements for public schools.  |
| 7. Accrediting local school districts. The board accredits schools districts through the "Missouri School Improvement Program."   |
| 8. Establishing requirements for the education, testing, assessment, certification and recertification of all public school teachers and administrator.                                 |
| 9. Overseeing federal education programs and the distribution of federal funds to school districts.   |
| 10. Establishing regulations for school bus safety and for fiscal management in local school districts.   |
| 11. Submitting annual budget recommendation for education to the Missouri Legislature.  |

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*Note.* Adapted from *Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*, Retrieved from <https://dese.mo.gov/state-board-education/about-state-board#members>.

**Kansas State Board of Education**

Prior to having a state board of education, Kansas began with an initial board of appointed professional educators in 1873 and through time modified the quantity of committee members, as well as the title of the board, as shown in Table 2. The Kansas State Department of Education was established in 1966 evolving from a State Department of Public Instruction (Martinez & Snider, 2001). This allowed a change from a committee of seven appointed lay members to an elected board of ten individuals (Martinez & Snider, 2001). A lay member is an individual who is not a member of the educational profession ("lay person"). With newly elected members, the duties that were previously completed by appointed members were modified or removed and new responsibilities were given to the elected board.

Table 2

*Evolution of Kansas State Board of Education*

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Title of Board and Members</u>   |
|-------------|---|
| 1873        | First board (appointed professional educators)                            |
| 1893        | Three members added to first board  |
| 1915        | State Department of Education est. (appointed professional educators)     |
| 1917        | State Department of Vocational Education established                      |
| 1933        | Board reconfiguration (appointed professional educators and lay members)  |
| 1945        | State Department of Public Instruction est. (seven appointed lay members) |
| 1966        | State Department of Education est. (ten elected members)                  |

*Note.* Adapted from “History of the Kansas State Board of Education,” by S. Martinez and L. Snider, p.14, 2001.

The duties required by members of the Kansas State Board of Education evolved since inception of the first board, where examining prospective teachers and issuing teacher certificates were the only expectations, as shown in Table 3. The latest revision in 1966 gave the board the power to supervise public schools, educational institutions, and all educational interests of the state, except educational functions delegated by law to the Board of Regents (Martinez & Snider, 2001).

These new expectations progressed the board toward reaching their goals of being flexible and efficient with students and their needs, providing an effective educator in each classroom, making sure that each school in the district has effective and visionary leaders, promote best practices in early childhood programs, and develop a strong communication with families, communities, businesses, stakeholders, constituents, and policy partners (“Board Goals and Objectives”). Although these are the current objectives set by the board, the goals and objectives can be modified to accommodate for the needs of the students, schools, parents, teachers, or district.

Table 3

*Change of Duties for Board Members as Title of Board Changes*

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Duties</u>  |
|-------------|--|
| 1873        | Examine prospective teachers and issue teacher certificates  |
| 1915        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt Textbooks</li> <li>• Administer vocational programs</li> <li>• Approve/reject procedures and rules formulated by the State Superintendent in regard to certification, college accreditation, special education and curriculum.</li> <li>• Advise the State Superintendent</li> </ul>          |
| 1945        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approve/reject plans, procedures, and rules formulated by the State Superintendent in regard to certification, college accreditation, public school accreditation, special education and curriculum</li> <li>• Advise the State Superintendent</li> <li>• Administer vocational programs</li> </ul> |
| 1966        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervise public schools, educational institutions and all educational interests of the state, except educational functions delegated by law to Board of Regents</li> </ul>   |
| 1981        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Added: Overseeing the minimum competencies for the state testing program</li> </ul>   |
| 1989        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Added: Curriculum standards and state assessment development to measure accomplishments of standards</li> </ul>   |
| 1992        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Added: Performance accreditation system adoption based on measures of students' academic performance</li> </ul>   |

*Note.* Adapted from “History of the Kansas State Board of Education,” by S. Martinez and L. Snider, p.14, 2001.

### **Organizational Analysis**

The states of Missouri and Kansas have implemented their own state boards of education. Although each has a state board, both have unique characteristics that differentiate their organizational configuration. This analysis looked at each board individually and the functions within each organizational structure. The discussion addresses the flow of power, as well as the duties designated to the members of the organization, the heads of each division, and to the Commissioner of Education.

#### **Missouri Education**

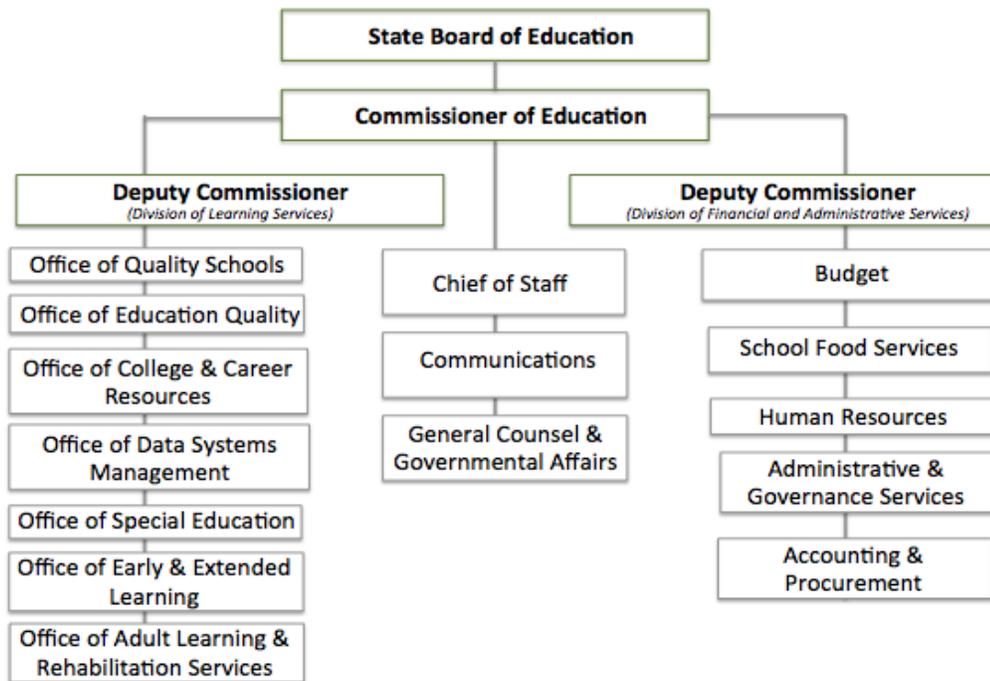
“The supervision of instruction in the public schools shall be vested in a state board of education” (Missouri Const. art. XI). The Missouri State Board of Education encompasses a multitude of duties; one being the appointment of the Commissioner of

Education for the state and second is the setting of policies for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (“About the State Board”). Currently, the board consists of eight citizens appointed by the Governor and approved by the Senate; the members serve eight-year terms, one member’s term expiring each year with no more than four members belonging to the same political party and no more than one residing member within a Congressional District (“About the State Board”).

Beneath the state board lies the Commissioner of Education, which is challenged with advising county and school district personnel, teachers, and patrons with all matters of school law, as well as supervise, make suggestions for instruction, govern schools, school property, and assist in meetings with school personnel (Missouri Const. art. XI). In addition to the prescribed duties set forth in the Missouri Constitution, the Commissioner is given authority over the Deputy Commissioners, one for the Division of Learning Services and the other for the Division of Financial and Administrative Services, as see in Figure 1.

The Division of Financial and Administrative Services is responsible for state and federal funding to districts and agencies that provide education services, as well as assisting in budgets, financial statistics, and audits for school districts both state-wide and federally (“Overview”). Specialized departments within this division work with breakfast and lunch programs, as well as business, budget, accounting, and human resource areas within the internal department (“Overview”). Although there are two divisions under the Commissioner of Education, each have different specialized responsibilities and duties to fulfill.

**Figure 1.** Structure of the Missouri State Board of Education



Flow of power from the State Board of Education through DESE. Adapted from *Missouri Department of Education*, Retrieved from [https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/DESE\\_orgchart.pdf](https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/DESE_orgchart.pdf)

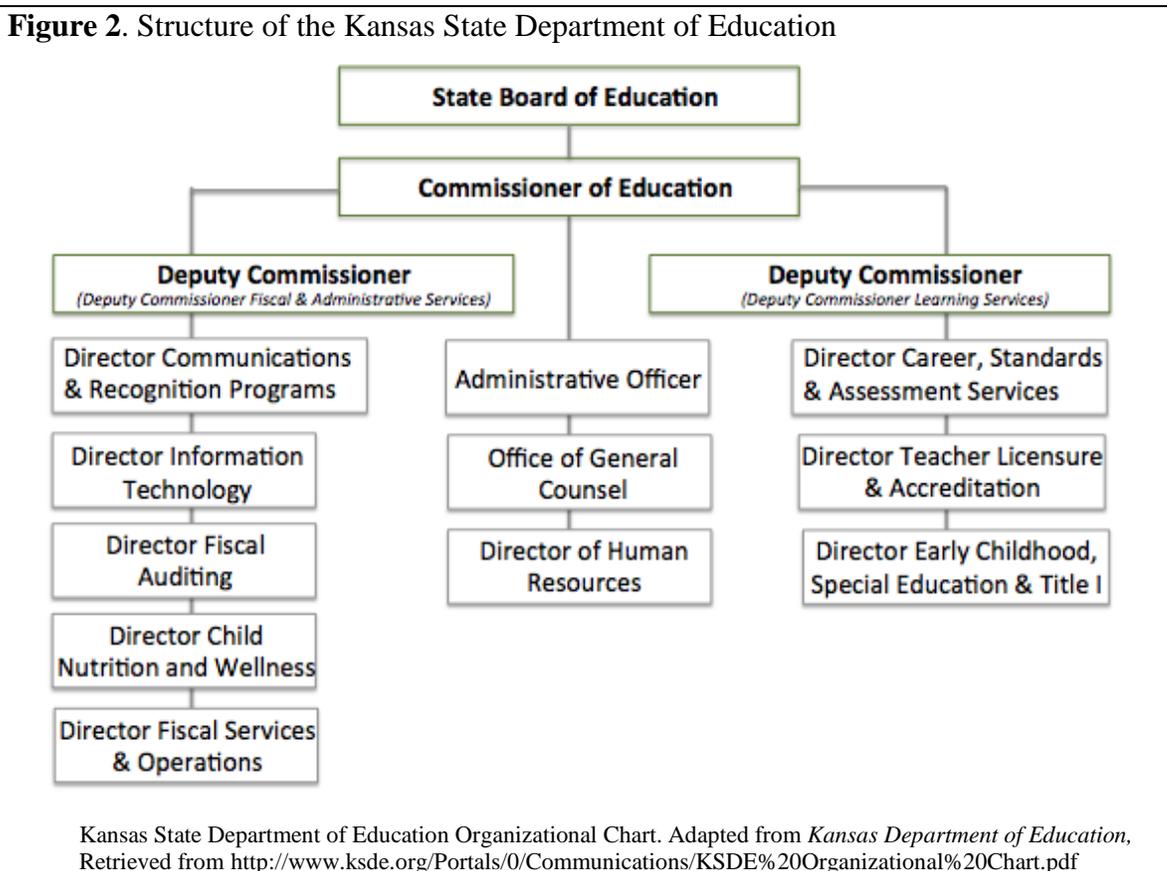
The Division of Learning Services encompasses the success of students, educators, schools, and heads specialized areas including college- and career-readiness, special education, early and extended learning, adult learning, and data systems management (“Overview”). Each area within the division reports to the Deputy Commissioner on pertinent information and statistics, while the deputy discloses the same information to the Commissioner of Education, with follow-up reporting to the Missouri State Board of Education (“Organizational Chart”). The organizations within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education are instituted to work with educators, legislators, government agencies, and community members to maintain a strong public school system.

## **Kansas Education**

It is the duty of The Kansas State Board of Education to appoint the Commissioner of Education for the state (Ks. Const. art. XI). The Kansas State Board of Education consists of ten elected member, each residing in an individual Congressional District and represents four contiguous senatorial districts during their four year term (“Board of Education”). Reporting to the board is the Commissioner of Education who ultimately is responsible for overseeing functions of the educational organization, including but not limited to legal services and human resources, as well as overseeing the communication and recognition programs while leading the state board of education on federal laws, regulations and requirements (“About Us”). The Commissioner oversees both Deputy Commissioners within the organization, one within the Fiscal and Administrative Services Division and other in the Division of Learning Services.

The Deputy Commissioner of Fiscal and Administrative Services oversees approximately 40 Kansas programs and is responsible for the distribution and auditing of state and federal aid, managing scholarship and recognition programs given by the Kansas State Board of Education, and most importantly is the supervision of all projects related to education legislation (“Fiscal & Administrative Services”). The Deputy Commissioner of Learning Services primary focus is to ensure and enhance the learning for all Kansas students by engaging in federal and state programs, assisting with district consultation services for special education and migrant and/or English proficient students, providing education programs for early childhood and technical education, and assisting with local school improvement implementation through the Quality Performance Accreditation system, and several federal initiatives (“About Us”).

Within the working organization, as seen in Figure 2, the board sets to accomplish their mission of providing leadership and support for lifelong learning (“About Us”). The Kansas State Department of Education hopes to accomplish this mission by providing leadership, resources, support, and accountability for the state’s PK-12 education system and providing assistance with educational standards, assessments, special education services, nutrition and wellness, career and technical education and financial assistance “(About Us)”. The organizations within the state board are instituted to work with educators, legislators, government agencies, and community members to maintain a strong public school system.



## **Leadership Analysis**

From the state boards of education down to the individual teachers, the flow of power was different for each state, district, and school. Missouri and Kansas have two unique leadership structures, while the goals for each district are similar. This analysis looked at each state leadership starting with the Superintendent of a district, down to individual building settings with discussions on the duties, responsibilities, and practices each position is charged with at each level.

### **Public Schools in Missouri**

Every city within the state, unless otherwise specified, has the supervision and government of public schools and public school property vested in the city's board of education and can sue, be sued, purchase, receive, hold, sell, or do all necessary actions to accomplish the purposes in which the board was organized (Missouri Const. art. XI). The members of the board, also known as "Seven-Directors" are elected during municipal election days by citizens who are registered to vote and if elected are responsible for upholding the district's purpose, engaging in connections with the community, employing the Superintendent, delegating authority of policies and goals, and monitoring performance of the district and itself ("School Board Candidate Information").

The Superintendent serves as the instructional leader of the district, facilitates curriculum design and implementation mirroring best practices, applied theory, and research, monitors the accreditation of the district, and influences district staff to focus on student achievement ("Supt Job Description"). Within the district the Superintendent has supervisory responsibility over all district staff and immediate supervisory responsibility

for the following, if applicable: Assistant Superintendents, Director of Human Resources, Director of Elementary Education, Director of Secondary Education, Director of Special Education, Director of Transportation, Facilities Director, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Communications Officer, Principals, and Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent (“Supt Job Description”).

The Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education in conjunction with the building principals directly and indirectly influence the accomplishment of educational goals by developing, planning, and implementing curriculum, professional development, and school improvement initiatives within the PK-12 setting (“Public Education”). The administration and teachers at each building are responsible for implementing policies, procedures, and curriculum for their students, while creating a climate and culture that is safe and supportive for everyone (“Safe Schools Act”).

### **Public Schools in Kansas**

Each Unified School District within the state is the governing body of the schools within their jurisdiction; with such power they have the availability to sue, be sued, execute contracts, and hold real and personal property as the duty requires (Ks. Const. art. LXXXII). There are seven members on the school board, unless otherwise specified. Each member obtains a membership through the election process and will serve a term of four years (Ks. Const. art. LXXIX). The duties of board member include, but are not limited to adopting all rules and regulations for the government and conduct of schools with the law of the state, assuming title and care of all school buildings belonging to the district, approving and adopting suitable textbooks and material based on rules and

regulations from the Kansas State Board of Education, and employing the Superintendent of Schools for the district (Ks. Const. art. LXXXII).

The Superintendent oversees and manages all district operational policies and objectives, attains short- and long-term financial goals, displays competencies with practices and procedures when addressing schools, employees, and community, and assists with best practices, educational theory, and research in regard to curriculum (“Kansas Superintendent”). Within each district the Superintendent has immediate administrative power over the following, if applicable: Assistant Superintendent Elementary, Assistant Superintendent Secondary, Chief Financial Officer, Chief of Police, Chief of Communication and Government Affairs and Lead Director of Human Resources, as well as Executive Directors, Directors of Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Student Services, and Director of Early Childhood Education in the smaller districts (“Kansas Superintendent”).

The Assistant Superintendents of Elementary and Secondary along with the Director of Curriculum and building administration influence educational goals through curriculum, professional development, and educational initiatives (“Human Resources”). Teachers along with the administration implement policies and procedures to keep the school safe, create apposite learning conditions for all students, implement programming interventions, and use data to improve climate, culture, and curriculum for all students (“Kansas Safe Schools”).

### **Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting**

Findings from analysis will respond to the study’s research questions and help to achieve its objectives. The objectives of the study were to gather experiences of Lesbian,

Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students on curriculum, understand the perceived climate and culture within the educational setting from the LGBT student's perspective. These findings have several significant implications for assessing and evolving current policies, procedures, and practices and modifying curriculum structure and implementation.

Through the expansion of LGBT literature the study hopes to modify the policies, procedures, and practices of teachers, administrators, and directors toward a more inclusive environment for this subpopulation. This study will enhance understanding of the interplay of school systems in the overall support of LGBT students and determine where the deficits are within the education system. To do this, perceptions will need to be gathered and conveyed to the school board, Superintendent, and others who are involved with curriculum to modify standards, policies, or procedures that are inhibiting success for LGBT students.

Lastly, this research seeks to find the need to develop or implement an LGBT inclusive curriculum while also contributing evidence to find if schools are producing a safe and inviting school environment for LGBT students. Currently, limited research has been completed on the needs of an inclusive curriculum and this study seeks to give evidence to those who are in charge of or influence curriculum decisions by producing data in hope of modifying current practices into ones that are more inclusive of LGBT students. Through interviews and focus groups of former PK-12 students who are LGBT, the study seeks to find situations and policies that are not protective of this subgroup of individuals and charge school districts to modify and implement policies to increase the protection of these students.

## Summary

Decisions in regard to curriculum, climate, and culture for a district are influenced by a multitude of factors. Rules, regulations, policies, and procedures are first decided through the state board of education and are passed down to the local boards of education if deemed so by the state's constitution or flow-of-power, then are implemented at the district/building levels. When power of decision-making is contained at a district's local board of education, either the flow-of-power stays with the board or is designated to the Superintendent or another division that influence part, or all decisions within that division. Outside of this process was the local school flow-of-power, starting with the administration down to instructors who implement various policies, procedure, and curriculum.

By completing interviews and focus groups of LGBT students who have completed the PK-12 requirements and gathering their experiences of culture, climate, and curriculum, it is hoped that this population of people articulates perceived experiences within schools. Once this information has been gathered, it can be presented to state or local officials as documentation for assistance in ratifying current legislation with the intent of implementing new practices, policies, and procedures that are inclusive for LGBT students. To obtain this goal, research has been compiled from scholarly sources and integrated within the findings of this current study.

## SECTION THREE:

### SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY

This study examined the perceptions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) university students of their PK-12 experiences in Missouri and Kansas. An increasing amount of research has been completed on integrating LGBT topics into the school curriculum (Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Flores, 2012; McGarry, 2013; Reiss, 1999; Burdge, Snapp, Laube, Russell, & Moody, 2013), the experienced school culture from LGBT students and families (Stein, Tolman, Porche, & Spencer, 2002; Patterson, 2013; Henquinet, Phibbs, & Skoglund, 2000; Russell, 2010), and on the perceived climate of the school setting from the point-of-view of LGBT students (Dessel, 2010a, 2010b; Nichols, 1999; MacGillivray, 2000; Ngo, 2003; Miller 1999; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007).

Although research has been completed on climate, culture, and curriculum, there is a lack of research on PK-12 experiences of LGBT students after advancement to the university setting. This research sought to explore LGBT university students' perceptions of their PK-12 school environment. Throughout this study climate, culture, and curriculum were explored through the lens of social learning theory.

#### **Social Learning Theory**

Patterns of behavior are developed through experiences, directly or indirectly, with others (Bandura, 1971). Students come in contact with a variety of people in the day (i.e. parents, students, siblings, teachers, etc.) and interact or observe the behaviors of those they encounter. A student will not mimic or display all behaviors of those they come in contact with; rather they will assimilate behaviors of each and display

characteristics while searching for a model as the principal source of learned behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963b). The person chosen as the dominant contributor to a student's primary behavior is not necessarily a parent or relation, but could be someone from the educational setting that is regarded as a role model.

The idea behind social learning is that it is a forever continuous and evolving process, in which learned behaviors are not stagnant and can be modified if one deems necessary (Bandura, 1969). This could mean the social heritage learned from nurturing processes can be extinguished if a student learned a more attractive behavior from another role model (i.e. teacher, coach, administrator, etc.). The education setting needs to be examined by gathering observed messages from students and comparing them to the intentions of the school. A majority of students learned behaviors are associated with the organizational affiliations in which they belong (Bandura, 1968; Reiss, 1965). With students spending approximately 14,000 hours inside the school setting (DeSilver, 2014), they could potentially absorb positive and/or negative attitudes, behaviors, and opinions from faculty, administrators, or staff during their PK-12 tenure.

Studies have shown that students are more influenced by adult behaviors than those of peers (Hicks, 1965; Jakubczak & Walters, 1959), which means the behaviors adults display inside the school setting should be examined. More specifically, students are apt to model behaviors of those who have the social power (Mischel & Grusec, 1966), ethnic status (Epstein, 1966) and/or sex (Rosenblith, 1959, 1961) they desire. Behaviors are learned through reinforcement of actions and the outcome desired (Bandura, 1971), meaning if the desired outcome is not linked to the reprimand or support of the particular behavior properly, then the message being observed can be miscommunicated. This

research sought to gather messages sent within the school setting to students through actions or omission of LGBT associated topics.

### **Curriculum Integration**

Integrating LGBT topics into the curriculum is not a new concept in education; many authors have completed research within this area (Burdge, et al., 2013; Vecellio, 2012; Flores, 2012). Research determined that a balance between heterosexual and homosexual topics in the classroom are necessary (Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Reiss, 1999), and that some school subjects lend themselves better at addressing LGBT themes (Lipkin, 1993). When LGBT topics are integrated they are introduced within the social sciences, humanities, and sex education (Lipkin, 1993; Snapp, Burdge, Licon, Moody, & Russell, 2015).

Inclusive sexuality education curriculum has been investigated to find which topics are being discussed, the benefits and drawbacks of these topics, and which perspective the information is being presented (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014; Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Elia & Eliason, 2010). Additionally, information has been gathered to find if any diversity topics are included within the classroom (Brown, 2007; Slavin & Cooper, 1999; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003; Graham & Juvonen, 2002). Research indicated that most schools lack an LGBT-inclusive curriculum (McGarry, 2013) and if included are often tied to a negative stigma (Graydon, 2011). Missouri and Kansas are yet to implement an inclusive curriculum for their students (DESE, 2007; KSDE, 2007).

## **Issues with Integration**

A curriculum that represents students who are LGBT has a positive impact on all learners (Burdge, et al., 2013; Lipkin, 1993; Renn, 2000). An inclusive curriculum provides a mirror for LGBT students to self-reflect and a window for others to gain perspective and experiences of LGBT people (McGarry, 2013). LGBT students experienced a safer, more affirmative school environment when they are taught positive representations of LGBT people, events, and history inside the curriculum (Kosciw, et al., 2010, 2012, 2014; Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014). While this is ideal for students, most school environments are unresponsive, if not hostile toward LGBT or questioning learners (Meyer & Bayer, 2013).

The social sciences, humanities, and health education lend themselves well to the integration of LGBT topics (Lipkin, 1993; Snapp, Burdge, Licon, Moody, & Russell, 2015). A concern with integration are the biases conveyed and translated from the teacher to the students and the exclusion it can cause for the LGBT minority (McGarry, 2013; Case, Stewart, & Tittsworth, 2009; Snapp, et al., 2015). These issues arise when teachers feel under-skilled or untrained on LGBT topics (Formby, 2011; Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Professional development can be used as an immediate intervention to rectify the lack of knowledge or uncomfortable feelings that teachers could experience when discussing LGBT topics (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010).

## **Health Education**

Health education is about human sexuality, as well as relationships (Tunncliffe, 2010). Currently, a majority of health education courses default to a heterocentric point-of-view leaving out LGBT related information (McGarry, 2013; Formby, 2011; Elia &

Eliason, 2010; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014). When LGBT topics are excluded from health education curriculum it becomes problematic for LGBT students and could lead to health issues, lack of knowledge, and unhealthy sexual relationships (McGarry, 2013; Formby, 2011; Fetner & Kush, 2008). If homosexuality is discussed it is often from the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) standpoint (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014) and fails to validate the existence of homosexual feelings or identities (Nichols, 1999). Further, many health education programs only offer the abstinence only perspective (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Fine & McClelland, 2006), when comprehensive standards and curriculum exist (Future of Sex Education Initiatives, 2012).

### **Diversity Education**

A culturally responsive classroom is when a student experiences the connections among themselves and the topic being explained (Brown, 2007). When teachers implement methods and strategies to be culturally responsive, by connecting a students' home culture to the culture of the school (Erickson, 1987), the result is a higher interest from students. The curriculum becomes personally meaningful and is more easily understood by students (Brown, 2007; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). The challenge with diversity education is to create conditions where students experience a transformational learning situation by letting go of their current ideas and assumptions to allow opportunities, experiences, and situations that are different than their norm (Slavin & Cooper, 1999; Taylor, 2009). To do this, ongoing professional development is needed to address curriculum needs and fears of teaching diversity topics (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003).

## **School Culture**

A school's culture is subjective due the integration of individual's race, ability, sexual orientation, and religion (Dessel, 2010a). Culture is norms and expectations that exist within an organization with the amalgamation of an individual's values and beliefs (Glisson & James, 2002; Glisson & Green, 2006). External influences such as family, friends, church, or organizational affiliation could affect the perceived culture within the school setting (Bandura, 1968; Reiss, 1965).

Often school culture is a mirror of the societal message that is represented through the media (Nichols, 1999; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963b). When teachers or students represent discriminatory behaviors against LGBT students, it sends a message of hatred and perpetuates a negative self-image for these students (Renn, 2000; Savin-Williams, 1994; Miller, 1999; Clift, 1988). With the increased likelihood of student not having a support system in place at home (Macgillivray, 2000; Russell, 2010), it is important that the school maintains a positive culture for LGBT students (Dupper & Meyer; 2002; Longerbeam, et al., 2007). Implementing an effective professional development for teachers and administrators on how to make the culture of a building welcoming for this minority is beneficial (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010).

Studies have been completed to determine the support systems in place for LGBT students (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Gilliam, 2002; Zubernis & Snyder, 2007), as well as support for students of same-sex families (Ryan & Martin, 2000; Lamme & Lamme, 2002; James, 2002). Many states offer support through a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) to provide LGBT students with a support structure within the school system (Kosciw, et al., 2010, 2012, 2014; Patterson, 2013). Through an analysis of literature, insight into the

support of LGBT students, same-sex families, and school culture with and without implementation of a GSA organization will be given.

### **Support**

Although the exact number of LGBT students is not certain, it is estimated that one million out of the fifteen million adolescents identify as homosexual, bisexual, or gay (Reis & Saewyc, 1999). When LGBT students start to form identities, they alter their character, practices, and ethical outcomes in comparison to those around them and experience the exertion of institutional influence on their identities (Linville & Carlson, 2010).

Teens often find their identity during their school age and many educational settings cannot guarantee safety against verbal and physical harassment, even with the implementation of Title IX, which was enacted to protect students who do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes (Holmes & Cahill, 2004). Because of this, many LGBT students utilize one another as role models and as a support system (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Gilliam, 2002). Having the ability to cope with challenges of being LGBT can be hard for adolescents and having supportive adults and peers can be helpful during the identity formation process (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007).

### **Same-sex Families**

There are between five and fourteen million students with LGBT parents (Ryan and Martin, 2000). More specifically, there could be as many as five million lesbian mothers and three million gay fathers in the United States (Patterson, 1992). Although there are students who have a parent or multiple parents who are LGBT, there are few school systems that have the information or experience to address the needs of LGBT

families (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Students with LGBT parent(s) fear that they could be harassed or lose friends if their peers found out about their parents' private lives (Lamme & Lamme, 2002). These students might fear forming relationships or refrain from inviting peers over to their house because of possible judgment (Lamme & Lamme, 2002). Not only are students of LGBT families fearing ostracism or rejection, but also the parents themselves fear the same.

While there are few published articles that focus on the experiences and needs of LGBT parents in the school system (Ryan & Martin, 2000), LGBT parents' feel they will be discriminated against if the school discovers that their family is a LGBT family (Lamme & Lamme, 2002). Additionally, LGBT parent families remain "closeted" to avoid possible personal discrimination or discrimination with their family (Lamme & Lamme, 2002). A main reason for this experience is because school professionals lack the knowledge of LGBT issues, interventions, and dynamics, which negates being proactive (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Ryan & Martin (2000) stated, that even though school professional lack the knowledge, there are too few LGBT families with adequate resources to educate school professionals about their needs and the needs of other LGBT families. This research shows a resource barrier that is inhibiting knowledge and growth on LGBT family topics from the parental side and from the school professional side, as well.

### **Gay-Straight Alliances**

Some schools have implemented Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) as modes of support by allowing students to make positive connections with other students and staff (Fetner & Kush, 2008; Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Patterson, 2013) Currently, Missouri and

Kansas have statewide organizations that can assist with a positive school culture for LGBT students. Missouri formed a statewide GSA program after the “Don’t Say Gay in School Bill” enacted in 2012 (“Missouri GSA Network”). The city of Lawrence, Kansas implemented a statewide initiative called the Kansas Queer Youth Network (KQYN) to provide support and technical assistance to GSAs across the state in order to build a transgender and queer youth movement within the state (“Kansas Queer Youth Network”). Although each state has a statewide organization, no school is required to join either offered network and can have a program in place without any association.

The purpose of GSA is to create an environment that is supportive of others by creating a culture of learning about homophobia, transphobia, oppression, gender identity, and sexual orientation in order to fight practices of discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools (Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Fetner & Kush, 2008; Biegel, 2010). The implementation of a GSA has a positive effect on school climate, where LGBT remarks are heard less frequently and students feel a greater sense of safety due to decreased victimization in regard to identity, orientation, or gender expression (Kosciw, et al., 2010, 2012, 2014; Patterson, 2013). Although not all schools have a GSA, schools primarily located in larger cities, rather than small towns, in urban or suburban areas or in areas of liberal or progressive political leanings are more likely to have an active GSA (Fetner & Kush, 2008).

### **School Climate**

Climate is the sense of perceived safety and how the surroundings foster a sense of achievement and aptitude (Glisson & James, 2002). An organization’s response to students’ unique characteristics may influence the climate in a positive or negative way.

Climate for LGBT students has been thoroughly researched (Dessel, 2010a, 2010b; Nichols, 1999; Macgillivray, 2000, 2004; Ngo, 2003; Miller, 1999) and found negative attitudes toward LGBT students is prevalent (Dessel, 2010a, 2010b; Nichols, 1999).

Communication and behaviors of students, staff, and faculty play a critical role in making students who are LGBT feel welcome inside the school setting (Dessel, 2010a; Ngo, 2010; Macgillivray, 2000). It is up to the school to create a climate that is receptive to LGBT students' lifestyles, due to potentially not getting this support at home (Macgillivray, 2000; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). Some schools have enacted policies and procedures for the protection of LGBT students (Peterson, 2011; Hoshall, 2013; Underwood, 2004; Cumper, 2004).

The analysis will first examine the political influences schools are bounded by to avoid bias or discrimination within the school system. School safety from LGBT student perspective will be examined, with additional focus on transgender students (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Case, Stewart, & Tittsworth, 2009).

### **Political Influences**

There are several laws in place that offer protection for students who are LGBT and others. Currently, Title IX, the First Amendment, and the Fourteenth Amendment are in place for the protection of all students (Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Biegel, 2010; Underwood 2004). More specifically, the Equal Access Act, the Equal Protection Clause and the FAIR Education Act have been enacted to further protect those who are LGBT (Biegel, 2010; Vecellio, 2012).

**Title IX.** Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972 prohibits severe and pervasive sexual harassment and gender based harassment due to failure in conforming to

gender stereotypical norms (Holmes & Cahill, 2004) and protects discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Underwood, 2004). Also, it creates equal access for all students in athletics, math, and science to eliminate gender differences in academic achievement (Stein, et al., 2002).

**First Amendment.** The First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion, expression, and petition and allows the right of assembly, free speech, and press. In 1984, the Equal Access Act was enacted which allowed religious interest groups to assemble on campus, and disallowed discrimination of other multiple religious or nonreligious interest groups to form (Biegel, 2010). The Equal Access Act allowed the right for GSAs to form, if one or more groups on campus were allowed to gather.

**Fourteenth Amendment.** The Fourteenth amendment guarantees equal protection under the law to all students to protect sexual orientation and gender identity (Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Underwood, 2004). The Equal Protection Clause of 1868, not only protects the students of the school, but also the staff and faculty and entitles them to equal dignity and respect under the law (Biegel, 2010). Meaning that they cannot be discriminated against or fired based on their sexual orientation.

**FAIR Education Act.** In 2011, California passed the FAIR Education Act that required a Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful (FAIR) representation of LGBT topics and those with disabilities within the social sciences (Vecellio, 2012). Also, it disallows the adoption of textbooks or other materials for instruction that discriminates against LGBT people (Kosciw, et al., 2014).

**Missouri and Kansas.** Protections within Missouri and Kansas for students who are LGBT include the students' right to attend prom with a same-sex date without

discrimination as long as it is not a disruption for students and complies with other school regulations (“ACLU LGBT Handbook”, 2013). Additionally, the Missouri state constitution and Kansas law grants all eligible students the right to attend class without refusal based on the students’ sexual orientation, or the sexual orientation of the student’s parents (“ACLU LGBT Handbook”, 2013). Lastly, there are no state laws that protect safety in schools for LGBT students specifically, but individual school may have individual rules and regulations that were enacted to protect students from discrimination or gay related harassment (“ACLU LGBT Handbook”, 2013).

### **Safety**

Schools should have safety strategies to offer students who attend their districts. Numerous studies have been conducted on safety for LGBT students (Stein, Tolman, Porche, & Spencer, 2002; Patterson, 2013; Henquinet, Phibbs, & Skoglund, 2000) and found that students are experiencing harassment (Nichols, 1999; Graham & Juvonen, 2002), victimization (Patterson, 2013; Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002), and discrimination (Renn, 2000; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011) within the school setting.

According to a Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) LGBT students report experiencing physical and verbal harassment within the school setting (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). In the latest study, 74.1% of LGBT students experienced verbal harassment, 36.2% physical harassment, 16.5% were physically assaulted, 49% acknowledged electronic harassment, and of these incidents 61.6% were reported with zero response from school personnel (Kosciw, et al., 2014).

The statistics show that approximately 74% of the students who are LGBT experienced at least one form of harassment and school personnel addressed less than half of the reports.

Students who are LGBT experiencing harassment report having lower grades (Nichols, 1999; Burdge, Snapp, Laub, Russell, & Moody, 2013), increased drug use (Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994; Russell, 2003), and are at a higher risk for dropping out (Jeltova & Fish, 2005; Nichols; 1999). These types of harassments could cause further developmental issue for students. Nichols (1999) found that many LGBT students are functioning in healthy and productive ways, while a subset of these youth have become socially, emotionally, and academically at risk. Russell (2010) stated, that mental health issues are higher in LGBT youth than their heterosexual counterpart, because of homophobic teasing. These studies support the idea that verbal, physical, and electronic forms of harassment can cause not only developmental issues for LGBT youth, but also put them at higher risk for not completing school, experiencing drug abuse, and having lower grades.

### **Transgender Students**

The University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA) completed a survey showing approximately 700,000 transgender people live in the United States (Gates, 2011). The GLSEN completed a nationwide study and found 42.2% of students who are transgender are prevented from using their preferred name in school, 59.2% are required to use the locker room of their legal sex, and 31.6% are prevented from wearing clothes that are inappropriate based on their legal sex (Kosciw, et al., 2014). In an additional study specific to transgender students, 87% of transgender students have been verbally harassed based on gender expression, 53% physically harassed, and 26% physically assaulted

(Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). Transgender students experience more harassment than those who are LGB, as well as, being the least researched subgroup (Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson & Lee, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

There are laws (Title IX, First Amendment, and Fourteenth Amendments) in place to protect and promote students who are LGBT. It is unclear if schools are maintaining a positive climate, inclusive culture, supportive structure, safety policies, or curriculum integration for these youth (Macgillivray, 2004). Teachers and administrators have multiple interactions with students during the school day and through social experiences, students learn perceptions and behaviors, either directly or through observation (Bandura, 1971). The messages that are sent through these interactions can affect the way a student perceives their environment and will direct their attitudes and involvement within the school setting (Kosciw, et al., 2010, 2012, 2014).

Previous research has shown that students are experiencing verbal, physical, and digital harassment, as well as physical assault while attending the PK-12 setting (Nichols, 1999; Patterson, 2013). Students who are transgender have a higher percentage of harassment and assault (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Holmes & Cahill, 2004). Some research has been completed on climate and culture for LGBT students, but the long-term effects of the victimization experienced has not been well researched (Russell, et al., 2011; Graham & Juvonen, 2002).

California implemented the FAIR Education Act to help with representation of the LGBT students within the curriculum (Vecellio, 2012). It has been shown that curriculum representative of all learners has a positive effect on its environment (Lipkin,

1993; Renn, 2000). During health education courses and other subjects, LGBT students do not identify themselves within the curriculum, or if they do, it is a negative perception being conveyed (McGarry, 2013; Case, Stewart, & Tittsworth, 2009). It takes professional development to train teachers appropriately on how to approach and be cognizant of students when teaching LGBT topics (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). When taught correctly, the climate and culture of the building becomes more receptive to LGBT students (Dessel, 2010a; Ngo, 2010).

The First and Fourteenth Amendment, as well as Title IX are in place to assist with possible discrimination practices within the school (Biegel, 2010; Underwood; 2004). Although LGBT students are receiving multiple messages and opinions about LGBT people in the media (Nichols, 1999), the school is a common place where students gain insight on how their culture perceives LGBT people (Dessel, 2010a, 2010b). Having interventions in place, like Gay-Straight Alliances, to support students of LGBT minority can positively influence how they perceive the school culture (Fetner & Kush, 2008), increase their sense of safety, and experience less harassment (Kosciw, et al., 2010, 2012, 2014).

Previous research has given insight into the support, safety, curriculum, climate, and culture of schools. Although the documented research is a step toward an LGBT-inclusive environment, further research is needed. Research is needed to determine strengths and deficits when addressing LGBT topics and the effects the topics have on climate (Snapp, et al., 2015; Longerbeam, et al., 2007), while seeking to find if presented information is culturally relevant to LGBT students (Snapp, et al., 2015). Also, determining if schools have implemented policies to protect LGBT students and how they

are promoted, implemented, and/or resisted (Macgillivray, 2004). Lastly, how schools are implementing an inclusive curriculum, either electively or forcefully, and the perception received by LGBT students (Burdge, et al., 2012; Kosciw, et al., 2014, Snapp, et al., 2015).

## SECTION FOUR:

### CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

#### **Plan for Dissemination of Practitioner Contribution**

Who: Superintendents, Principals, State and Local School Boards, Department of Education Curriculum Directors, and School Curriculum Directors

When: Between May and July

How: Email, Face-to-Face, or Mailed

#### **Type of Document(s)**

Document type will be a white paper report to inform readers concisely on the complex issue known as the school experience from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) perspective. Upon request the full report can be sent to them, but the white paper reporting system will keep the information concise, easy to read, and concentrate on the important aspects of the study.

#### **Rationale for this Contribution Type**

The plan of dissemination is to distribute the findings to each Superintendent and Principal in the states of Missouri in Kansas. The reasoning behind this is to start with the administration of the district with hopes of reaching to the School Board. The power of curriculum resides with the administration with approval by the board, so each stakeholder needs to be aware of the findings. The principals at each building are charged with the safety, support, climate, and culture of their individual buildings and should be aware of how students in their state are viewing the current systems, policies, and procedures.

The best time to disseminate this information would be between May and July after the end of the school session, within the limits of preparation for the next school year. During this time schools look at updating handbooks, curriculum, and other materials to make sure that it coincides with the needs of the students, parents, teachers, and community. The information will be sent electronically to the designated contacts with follow up support by phone or email. Ideally, consulting with each school on their specific needs would be the most beneficial but could be something that is utilized shortly down the road.

#### **Outline of Proposed Contents**

Introduction

Findings

Future Needs as Described by LGBT Students

Recommendations Based Upon Research Study

Conclusion

References

Recommendations for Enhancing the  
Experiences of Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual, and Transgender Students  
within the PK-12 Environment

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A White Paper

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*Author*

**Ronald W. Knight-Beck, Ed.D.**

## Introduction

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students are feeling invisible within the PK-12 environment (Durby, 1994; Herr, 1998). Participants within the study indicated that they refrained from developing their identities, struggled to feel safe within the school building, could not find representation of LGBT topics within the curriculum, did not have a school support system, and commonly had negative interactions from peers, teachers, and/or administrators. It can be easy for school personnel to overlook the needs of LGBT students, but this can further perpetuate the idea of exclusion and avoidance (Renn, 2000). To ensure that school climate, culture, and curriculum are integrating the needs of LGBT students; teachers and administrators need professional development to guarantee that interventions are effective and are aligned with current policies and procedures.

## Findings

Information within the following sections were based on a literature analysis from a series of journal articles and research studies. Integrated within the literature analysis were findings from a personal research study entitled, “Omission: A Look into the PK-12 experience through the Lens of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender University Students.” The study investigated experiences of university students within the states of Missouri and Kansas who graduated from a public school within the same state. The study focused on their PK-12 experience in regard to climate, culture, and curriculum.

## Identity Formation Experience

Identity formation is a series of changes or stages in conjunction with experiences that can be characterized by the acceptance of homosexuality within oneself, a positive

approach toward ones' own identity, the disclosing of identity to others, and increased connection to like lifestyles (Cass, 1984). According to the research study, three factors influenced a student to continue, stop, or start the identity formation process; internal influence, external influence, and lack of influence. An abundance of feelings surfaced, most reportedly being confused, nervous, and/or scared.

Within the Cass Model (1979), the first step during identity development is the process of identity confusion. During this time students question themselves and either accept, deny, or reject the feelings, thoughts, and attractions they are experiencing (Cass, 1979). Parallel to the model, a participant within the research study stated, "At first I was really confused, I guess? My feelings; I felt like I was really nervous. I was really apprehensive to speak to anyone about it." As participants expressed emotions, each story became personally unique. One participant explained, "I had a lot of anxiety coming to grips with being gay because there was such a negative stigma with it."

The thoughts and feelings students experienced may have come from an internal force or external factors. External influences can be through personal or societal interactions that an individual encountered (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). The greatest influences for study participants were parents, religion, and friends. Due to constant interactions, school personnel can also project influences that teach, inhibit, disinhibit, enhance stimulus, arouse emotion, or cause a response from others, either deliberately or inadvertently (Bandura, 1971). A study respondent spoke about an interaction, "I received help from fourth grade to middle school because the girl's coach was a lesbian. My parents didn't want me to go to her, but I [did]." One participant turned to her parents for support, "They don't agree with my sexuality and wanting to be married someday.

They still love me and accept me for the person I am because that's what they're taught in their religion.”

Participants within the study indicated that religious affiliations and sociable impact such as population/area, information sources, and social inhibitors all contributed to identity formation. Within the study it was stated by eight participants, that if the size of the school was considered small, then the likelihood of being accepted within the setting decreased. Students in rural areas feel less safe, experience increased victimization, and have less support service than LGBT students in suburban or urban areas (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). A participant shared the same perception, “It’s a small town. Small towns aren’t safe if you are different.” The size of the community along with the availability of information can influence the identity formation process.

Students were prolonging identity formation until adequate information was received, as stated by twenty-one research participants. Information can come from media, parents, friends, and/or school. The internet has a contributing role in the early years of the identity formation process where individuals seek out validation of feelings and figure out who they are (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Likewise, adolescence utilize their peers for sensitive conversations by disclosing personal information about their sexuality (DiIorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). One research participant spoke about seeking information in his personal time, “I know [literature] would have been beneficial, so I didn’t have to identify or didn’t have to talk to anyone. I could get a pamphlet and look at it on my own.”

Additionally, within the study participants mentioned the school setting was lacking LGBT role models, which is a common support system for LGBT individuals (Bochenek & Brown, 2001). One participant explained, “[Being gay] was kind of hard to process because there was no one like me in my town. It was hard to identify any type of role model or person to aspire to be like.” Twenty-eight participants indicated a lack of LGBT influence within the school setting, as well as a series of external and internal influences when going through the identity formation process.

### **Experience of Safety within the PK-12 Setting**

Research studies have shown that LGBT individuals are experiencing harassment from others within the school setting (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Students who are LGBT face bias, harassment, and violence within the school (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Contrary to the literature analysis, most participants within the research study stated they felt safe because they were not identified as a LGBT individual from their own or others perspectives. A gay participant explained, “The reasons why I did not come out in high school was because I did not feel I would be safe. I felt I would have been either physically, mentally, or verbally abused.” This is not specific to sexuality, a lesbian had a similar perspective, “I felt really safe for the most part because everybody accepted me for the person that I was at that time. If I was out, I would’ve for sure felt unsafe because I know that the bullying would’ve increased.” A student being perceived as a heterosexual provided a sense of safety, as well as the implementation of school policies and procedures as stated by 22 participants.

Schools have implemented a series of policies and procedures to protect LGBT students in at least 28 states (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013). Participants within the research

study mentioned the implementation of a “no bullying” policy or the amount of diversity within the school added to their safety. In schools where policies were implemented, LGBT students experience less victimization, with an increased report of incidents conveyed to school personnel (Kosciw, et al., 2010). Additionally, through the research study, participants mentioned their personalities gave a sense of security, as well as, felt safe when school personnel were visible during passing periods. A lesbian participant stated that she provided her own safety, “Because of the presence that I had, I had a rather intimidating presence. I knew that people weren’t going to hurt me, but I knew something could happen.” This student used her personality to protect herself from harassment, when others relied on friends for support.

LGBT students most notably went to their friends circle for support, although some support limitations might be foreseen (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). This argument is validated within the research study; participants stuck to groups of people that were accepting, as one participant stated, “Most of the students were pretty cool, and I, of course, had my own group of friends.” Additionally, participants often turned to blending-in to feel safe. A lesbian explained her vision on fitting the mold, “Bullying was rampant, and racism was rampant. It’s just, you had to fit the mold or you didn’t.”

The biggest form of harassment was verbal harassment. According to a survey given to LGBT students, 74.1% of students experienced at least some verbal harassment (Kosciw, et al., 2014). Participants within the research study stated that most often students would say things about them, to them, or about others, but many situations did not become physical. One participant reported his experience, “I wasn’t physically tormented. It was all verbal and mental, but otherwise I felt pretty safe.” The verbal

harassment did not make students feel unsafe, as long as it did not turn physical, as stated by twelve participants.

Twelve participants acknowledged that harassment came from certain places within the school system. According to Bochenek and Brown (2001), harassment often came from unmonitored areas of the school building; hallways, locker rooms, and the parking lot. The most notable places stated by research participants were the parking lot, cafeteria, gym, bathroom, sports events, and locker room. A participant who was bullied most of her school years explained her avoidance of large crowds of students, “I remember in high school I would skip lunch because I didn’t want to be in the cafeteria. I would hide in the bathroom or classroom. I saw many of my friends being booed, it was just bad.” Being harassed was reality for some students, as well as increased harassment within certain confines of the building, but participants mentioned other issues with feeling safe.

A survey given to LGBT students found that 61.6% of harassment complaints had no action taken by school personnel (Kosciw, et al., 2014). This study coincides with the personal research study where participants mentioned that faculty and administrators would ignore or undervalue situations. One participant spoke about his administration after being physically harassed, “I would go to the principal. He would say, ‘That’s just you kids. You guys need to get along, blah, blah, blah.’” Safety for participants was variable, depending on the type of harassment, the degree of safety, and how issues were handled by school personnel.

## Experience of Inclusion within Curriculum, Classroom, and/or Building

Including LGBT content/studies within the school setting can be completed in a multitude of ways. Currently, LGBT issues are still under-represented in the curriculum within most schools (Patterson, 2013). The social sciences, humanities, and health education lend themselves well to the integration of LGBT topics (Lipkin, 1993; Snapp, Burdge, Licona, Moody, & Russell, 2015). The personal research study agrees with previous research where participants mentioned psychology, history, and English as prominent subjects with LGBT issues integrated. One participant spoke about his experience, “There was at least a little bit about LGBT history and psychology that I remember. I remember being able to write multiple essays about gender and sexuality and it was totally fine.” Additional representation was mentioned in the area of English, “Any of the history books in the English courses. There was a few characters if we were reading certain plays or books. But it was never elaborated on.” Even if the opportunity to discuss LGBT topics was not presented through curriculum, participants would integrate the topics into their assignments, or would seek resources from the library.

Many classroom materials omit sections on LGBT topics due to controversial issues and if included the information would be negative, stereotypical, or inaccurate (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). This statement is represented within the research study where thirty-two respondents stated that there was no exploration, no representation, and no type of LGBT discussion within the confines of the building. One participant summed up his experience, “There was never exploration of gay culture or anything like that in any of my classes, especially health classes. I had to do research on my own.” Participants mentioned teachers conveying incomplete information when discussing

LGBT related topics. A participant explained how information shared in his psychology class was inaccurate,

We were talking about intersex and the teacher was using the slur, ‘hermaphrodite’. She was teaching by using the slur, and justifying it by saying that it’s in the name of psychology. I understood it, but the people in my class, it just went over their heads.

Four participants indicated that even when mentioning LGBT topics within the classroom, sometimes it did more hurt than help, due to the inaccuracy of information conveyed. Additionally, participants mentioned a lack of LGBT models and information in all subjects and courses, including health education.

If homosexuality is discussed in health education it is often from the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) standpoint (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014) and fails to validate the existence of homosexual feelings or identities (Nichols, 1999). Further, many health education programs only offer the abstinence only perspective (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Fine & McClelland, 2006). According to the research study, the omission of anything related to LGBT was the greatest response from participants. A participant explained, “At my high school, we really didn’t have anything in the curriculum about LGBT or sex education. They basically skipped that whole section of the book and basically didn’t talk about HIV or AIDS.” Another participant spoke to a similar experience, “We were just getting to that section the teacher said, ‘I don’t think we are going to talk about this certain topic because it’s an uncomfortable topic to talk about. We are just going to skip it.”

Furthermore, if LGBT topics are within health education, it is commonly represented in the sections of depression, suicide, and HIV/AIDS (Rasmussen, 2005a, 2005b; Talburt, 2005). Within the research study, participants stated that when LGBT topics were discussed, it was based on two perspectives; HIV/AIDS or the heterocentric viewpoint. A participant discussed his experience, “The only time [LGBT topics] were ever brought up was when literature assumes gay males have the higher risk of getting AIDS.” A similar experience was mentioned by another participant, “I think the only mention of being non-straight in general I can remember is during the HIV and AIDS section. If you were sexuality active and non-straight.” Ten participants stated that if sex education was mentioned at all within health education then it was from the viewpoint of heterosexuality.

Since Missouri and Kansas have no requirement to integrate gender identity or orientation topics within the adopted curriculums (DESE, 2007; KSDE, 2007), students have to find ways of retrieving the information. One participant explained the lengths he went to find information, “We’d go to Barnes and Noble when I could drive. We’d go down to the Plaza because that was the only gay and lesbian book section that we knew about.” When students did not receive adequate information from the school system in regard to LGBT topics, according to research participants, they found ways to gather the information through personal means.

### Support Experiences

With the increased likelihood of students not having a support system in place at home (Macgillivray, 2000; Russell, 2010), it is important that the school maintains a positive culture for LGBT students (Dupper & Meyer; 2002; Longerbeam, Inkelas,

Johnson, & Lee, 2007). Participants within the research study commented that the most abundant support was the general support from those around them. This would be as simple as someone saying, “I am here if you need anything”, or knowing a teacher or administrator who was LGBT, a participant explained, “We had a lot of support with teachers because we have a few LGBT teachers within the school.”

General support was not the only method LGBT students were looking for in regard to backing. More often than not, LGBT students felt invalidated when teachers and administrators explicitly failed to enact protection or discriminated based on a student's sexual orientation (Bochenek & Brown, 2001). According to the research study, when teachers/administrators provided visible examples of support and equal treatment, it provided a positive experience, one student commented, “A teacher removed three people off the football team because of them harassing me and a couple other gay students.” Some examples were a little more subtle, one participant told his experience, “In high school, I had a teacher, I believe a history teacher, and I remember anytime someone would call something ‘gay’ or ‘retarded’ he would immediately correct them.” Participants mentioned that not only was individual support positively affecting the PK-12 experience, but also having a group of homogenous peers to receive additional assistance would have been beneficial.

The implementation of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) has a positive effect on school climate, where LGBT-remarks are heard less frequently and students feel a greater sense of safety (Patterson, 2013). Although not all schools have a GSA, schools primarily located in larger cities, in urban or in areas of progressive political leanings are more likely to have an active GSA (Fetner & Kush, 2008). Within the research study, less than

a quarter of participants stated that their schools offered some sort of GSA. One participant commented on the GSA formed his sophomore year, “The language arts teacher started a GSA. She was our sponsor. There were probably 20 - 25 people in it, but it only lasted a year.” Another participant formed a GSA their senior year and spoke to how easy the process was, “There wasn’t one until I started one. I got a whole bunch of kids together and we formed one with one of the teachers.” Although it may have been easy for some students to form GSAs within the school setting, the availability of LGBT educated personnel was a little harder to seek out.

Some school professionals lack the knowledge on LGBT issues, interventions, and dynamics, which negates being proactive with support (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Professional development can be used as an immediate intervention to rectify the lack of knowledge or uncomfortable feelings that teachers could experience when discussing LGBT topics (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010). Participants within the research study mentioned having issues going to the guidance office because the lack of LGBT specialization. One participant spoke of his experience, “Supposedly, our counselors were equipped and able to understand LGBT problems, but it was until the year after I left high school that we got a counselor that was within the [LGBT] community.” Additionally, participants mentioned that schools did not have an organization or support system that LGBT students could utilize, faculty and administrators never discussed LGBT people or issues within the school building, and/or could not find literature to assist with possible issues they may face.

## School Experiences with Peers

Having the ability to cope with challenges of being LGBT can be hard for adolescents and having supportive peers can be helpful in the identity formation process (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). LGBT students sometimes rely on their peers to speak out about bias and the effects of homophobia (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). According to the research study, participants who stated they had a positive PK-12 experience, based it on the amount of accepting people around them about their lifestyle. One participant commented on experiencing opposing reactions, “[Coming out] was about two weeks into my freshman year. It was about half and half. It felt like some people didn’t like it, they didn’t accept it and others were completely fine with it.” Another participant commented on how he was able to talk about himself to others so it became more accepting, “No one really knew what to say or what to think. It wasn’t until I was really comfortable and was able to talk about it. They grew to understand and kind of accept me because I accepted myself first.”

Approximately 55.5% of LGBT students reported not feeling welcome at school due to their sexual orientation (Kosciw, et al., 2014). This parallels findings from the research study where participants feared rejection because of the negative connotation associated with being a LGBT student. Participants reported they were not accepted by most peers and did not feel they had a sense of support. Common non-aggressive experiences were the hearing of comments, rumors, or jokes about them or their sexuality. One lesbian commented about an out student at her school, “He was very well thought of in his peer group, but I got the sense that it was a joke among the majority

crowd.” Not all negative interactions were made in the form of commentary, some encounters involved different forms of harassment.

The most popular forms of harassment were homophobic slurs/remarks, which 64.5% of LGBT students had experienced, such as ‘dyke’, faggot’ or other derogatory remarks (Kosciw, et al., 2014). According to participants within the research study, verbal harassment consisted of snarky comments, threats, and being ridiculed. One participant commented on his experience, “Everyone saw this kid as, ‘the faggot’, and I would never join in, but would follow. I was afraid that, if I would express myself, they would perceive me as the same kind of person.” Harassment was not always verbal, sometimes students experienced physical harassment, or feared it, “Once I got to high school and came out, there were a lot of people that didn’t like it so I laid low as possible and didn’t attract any attention to myself for the fear of confrontation.”

One in five students reported experiencing a physical altercation between them and another student due to their sexual orientation or gender expression (Kosciw, et al., 2014). Within the research study, the findings were consistent, one participant commented on verbal harassment turning physical, “When I was in seventh grade, I ‘dated’ a girl. A lot of people didn’t accept it. They started bullying me harder than before. I got shoved in the trash cans and lockers. I got chased home once.” Participants got picked on, experienced small conflicts, or even got beat up. Some forms of harassment only happened in specific situations where students avoided to protect themselves. The most reported places were the locker room, gym, bathroom, or places with less supervision from faculty/administrators. Within a school setting not only were peers a variable, but so were teachers and administrators.

## School Experiences with Teachers and Administrators

Studies have shown that students are more influenced by adult behaviors than those of peers (Hicks, 1965; Jakubczak & Walters, 1959). The findings from the research study found that some LGBT participants did not feel any sense of discrimination or bias when dealing with administrators or staff. This included participants who identified as LGBT before and after exiting the school setting. One participant mentioned his experience with teachers, “I noticed that some were extra considerate to students who were LGBT. They would make sure that they were doing okay. If they saw any sort of suspicion of harassment or bullying, they would go the extra mile.”

Contradictory to previous research and participant findings, negative attitudes from teacher and administrators toward LGBT people are predominant, which makes them unprepared to support and speak to the needs of LGBT students (Macgillivray, 2004; Sears, 2005). Additionally, efforts to positively influence support and diversity training are missing from many teacher preparation programs (Jennings & Sherwin, 2007; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). Participants mentioned within the research study that they believe newer teachers had diversity training to help with LGBT issues. One participant spoke about teacher preparation programs, “Teacher education has changed so much that there’s a lot more focus on inclusion and diversity.” According to participants, when faculty and administration were not accepting of LGBT individuals, it came across in their teachings and students became reserved instead of proactive when experiencing conflict.

Approximately, 56.7% of LGBT students never report harassment or assault to school personnel because of knowing that interventions would not take place (Kosciw, et

al., 2014). Responses within the research study mirrored the literature analysis stating that they felt excluded by teachers and administrators due to them making excuses for situations. One participant spoke about her administration after being physically harassed, “I recall having one incident, somebody said something to me and I went to the teacher about it. They basically said, ‘You’re just bringing it upon yourself.’ Like it was my fault that they were treating me like that.” Even though some interactions were negative, not all experiences had negative outcomes.

The sentiment of having someone on your side is empowering, especially having a faculty ally within the school system (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). This message was reflected within the research study where participants felt safe because there were LGBT teachers and/or administrators within the building. One participant stated, “This sounds silly to say but my principal was a lesbian. I really feel like there was definitely a sense of protection.” Others knew they would have support if they sought it out when they needed it. Participants were able to identify teachers/administrators within their respective buildings that they could confide in, but not all participants were as willing.

Engaging in relationships that have trust built into the foundation is vital in addressing discrimination and other LGBT related issues (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). This notion agrees with findings from the research study where participants avoided seeking support from faculty knowing that they would not understand. One participant explained, “The teachers I did tell were very supportive. All my other teachers rotated except for them, I didn't feel the need to tell someone who wasn't going to be an influence in my life for very long.” Some teachers were not shy about their attitude toward LGBT students/lifestyles. A participant shared her experience, “The majority of

teachers were old and religious, so you know not to go to them because they were against it and they would tell you that.” Participants felt supported by those they confided in, and stayed away from potential teachers and administrators they felt would not accept them or did not have diversity related training/support.

### Future Needs as Described by LGBT Students

No two LGBT students had the same experience within the PK-12 setting. Each had different friends, teacher/administrators, families, school environment, and surroundings. Conclusively, participants stated their main concerns were the lack of interventions, outlets for students, and barriers. One suggested intervention was to develop a positive LGBT influence earlier in the PK-12 setting. A participant commented, “Had [students] been educated at a younger age, then I don’t think it would’ve been a, ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ situation. It would’ve been more understanding and easier for me and other people to be themselves sooner in life.” Five participants stated that the younger information can be exposed to students, the more comfortable it would be for others.

One way to do this is to introduce LGBT topics into the curriculum. Twelve participants suggested that there needs to be some representation within the curriculum. Most specifically, in the realm of health education there needs to be additional information applicable to LGBT students. A participant stated that health education should include homosexual topics, “It’s definitely important to at least briefly talk about sex education when it comes to homosexual relationships because it is different than heterosexual. There’s a lot more risk factors and it would be good for people to know that.” Additionally, eight participants mentioned that conflict resolution should be implemented to assist with harassment issues, one participant commented, “When a

student goes to a counselor, administrator, or a teacher about a situation, they need to sit down with the gay student and the bully so they both have an understanding of each other's perspective." Furthermore, six participants stated that LGBT students' need outlets or a resource to go to within the school setting.

Outlets have been categorized by participants in two forms, organizations and resources. Organizational resources were LGBT associated groups such as GSA and Parents, Family, and Friends for Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) that assist with LGBT related issues. These resources, as well as personnel resources are needed within the building, with specialization of LGBT related issues. One participant explained having resources for support, "Schools need to have a presence of a LGBT organization even if there are not students who are open or identified in that way. So I and others have a place to go to feel safe and gather information." Twenty-five participants stated that LGBT topics were never talked about and there was not a place to get information when they needed it.

Some additional barriers that were mentioned by LGBT participants were the surrounding population, received messages, and common misconceptions. Five participants mentioned that the size of the community and the influence it had was a factor on what information was implemented within the school. One participant commented, "It's a huge country community. It's very rural, so if I had come out to my teachers, or if I come out to the school in general, then I would've been victimized. I don't regret the decision not to." Small schools in the eyes of the participants have had a negative effect due to everyone knowing each other, which has added pressure to the coming out process. A participant explained his situation, "Being in a smaller town, we

know everyone. The guidance counselor in my middle school was my mom's cousin, so it was a family member. That wouldn't have been the best place for me to go." Coming from a small area was a concern for LGBT persons, as stated by eight participants.

Participants mentioned that misconceptions were rampant and could be fixed fairly easily. One participant mentioned, "[Being gay] is not a choice by any means. Why would I choose to be a second class citizen? Why would I choose to be ridiculed day to day for my sexuality? Why would I choose to be an outcast?" This was a common message from the LGBT community. Another participant commented, "The lifestyle that we have is not necessarily a choice and [others] should really focus on individuals as opposed to a population as a whole. Everyone's different and everyone handles things differently." Additionally, it was stated that just because you are gay, does not mean that your life is predestined, "It's a normal feeling to feel gay thoughts and you're not going to go to Hell. You're going to face adversity and that's one thing I wanted to change."

The last message LGBT participants wanted to share after confirming their own identity was that they became happier because of knowing who they were. A participant was eager to share his thoughts, "I am a much happier person to be able to live my life the way I am, not because I chose that way, but that's the way I am." Another participant stated that not everyone has to be accepting, "I think a lot of time acceptance gets confused with tolerance. Let that person be that person." Lastly, it was stated by a participant to encourage a person to be who they want to be,

If a couple of gay kids are wanting to go to prom together, encourage it, be okay with it. Don't try to make them feel like somebody might have to be in a dress that is a man, or somebody might have to be in a tux that is a woman. The best

thing that a school can do is either be neutral or to provide literature to let students know that this is a thing and it's okay.

### Recommendations Based Upon Research Study

- Have information available for students who are struggling with their identity.
- Integrate LGBT topics within the curriculum.
- Have LGBT related activities, awareness months, or representation within the school setting.
- Have role models (LGBT faculty members) that represent this subpopulation of students.
- Create a club/organization that supports the needs of LGBT people (i.e. Gay-Straight Alliance, Parents, Families, and Friends for Lesbians and Gays).
- Address harassment concerns from LGBT students efficiently and effectively to minimize future occurrences.
- Implement policies and procedures that specifically address issues that LGBT students are experiencing.
- Implement professional development for all teachers/administrators on LGBT related issues and sensitivity topics.
- Adopt a sexuality education inclusive curriculum that addresses identity formation, same-sex families, and gender expression.
- Create an LGBT or special interest section within the library that include books that represent LGBT characters in a positive light.
- Have peer-to-peer conferences when LGBT related harassment occurs to promote empathy between the harasser and victim.
- Create visuals for safe zones LGBT students can utilize if they need to go and talk with school personnel.
- Communicate with the community about LGBT related issues and policy changes in support of these students.
- Have an open forum for the community to address concerns or questions they have in regard to the LGBT population.
- Work with other schools and communities to build a network of support across the city and state for utilization by LGBT students, parents, families, or friends.

### Conclusion

Although it easy to overlook a subpopulation of students within the entirety of the school system, by taking time to focus on them we not only help LGBT students, but also friends, families, and peers. This study revealed several pitfalls within the school system that cause students to prolong their identity formation process. This is because they were

struggling to feel safe within the confines of the building, they did not have visual representation of LGBT administrators and/or teachers, the school failed to represent them within the curriculum, the school was not prepared for the support needs of LGBT students, and students experienced negative interactions with peers, faculty, and administrators. This combinations of factors perpetuated a system of oppression and omission and did not allow a positive school experience for this subgroup of people. These systems do not have to exist and can be remedied with several interventions and professional development. By taking the initiative the school is improving the lives of LGBT students, faculty, administrators, peers, families and the community as a whole.

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SECTION FIVE:  
CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

**Target Journal**

The target journal for publication is Equity and Excellence in Education. This journal is part of the Taylor and Francis group, which encompasses a series of other journals.

**Rationale for this Target**

This journal focuses on the equity and social justice in the K-12 or postsecondary school systems, individual schools, classrooms, and/or the social justice factors that contribute to inequality in learning for students from diverse social backgrounds. This journal provides a record of social justice efforts designated to transform educational systems as well as intergroup interaction at all levels of schooling.

**Outline of Proposed Contents**

Abstract  
Method  
    Procedure  
    Participants  
    Coding/Analysis  
Results  
Discussion  
Limitations and Future Directions  
References

**Plan for Submission**

Who: Equity & Excellence in Education Manuscript Review Board

When: Summer of 2016

How: Website <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/eee>

## **Omission: A Look into the PK-12 Experience through the Lens of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender University Students**

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## **Omission: A Look into the PK-12 Experience through the Lens of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender University Students**

Gathering perspectives from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender students (LGBT) on their PK-12 experiences has the potential to create a safe and equitable environment for students. To gather these experiences, 39 university students from the states of Missouri and Kansas were interviewed via focus group or telephone interview. They shared experiences with identity formation, peers, teachers, administrators, support, safety, and LGBT representation within the classroom, curriculum, and/or building. This research is qualitative in nature utilizing open coding and axial coding to identify themes and interpret responses. Data discovered that LGBT students' experiences were based on the student being openly LGBT or perceived as such. Students who were not out as LGBT reported less harassment and a higher degree of safety. Those who were out or perceived as LGBT spoke to different forms of harassment. In all cases participants indicated that LGBT discussion and representation were omitted from most, if not all, facets of their experience. If integrated, the information was incomplete, covered briefly, or was self-initiated.

Keywords: LGBT, curriculum, safety, culture, climate, support

This study examined the perceptions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) university students of their PK-12 experience. Research has been completed on integrating LGBT topics into the school curriculum, (Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Flores, 2012; Burdge, Snapp, Laube, Russell, & Moody, 2013), the experienced school culture from LGBT students (Patterson, 2013; Russell, 2010), and on the climate of the school from the point-of-view of LGBT students (Dessel, 2010a, 2010b; MacGillivray, 2000). Although research has been completed on climate, culture, and curriculum, there is a lack of research on PK-12 experiences after advancement to the university setting. This research sought to explore LGBT university students' experiences of their PK-12 school environment. Throughout this study climate, culture, and curriculum were explored through the lens of social learning theory.

## **Social Learning Theory**

Patterns of behavior are developed through experiences, directly or indirectly, with others (Bandura, 1971). Students interact with or observe the behaviors of those they encounter. A student will not display all behaviors of those they come in contact with; rather they will assimilate behaviors of each and display characteristics while searching for a model as the principal source of learned behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). The person chosen as the dominant contributor could be someone from the educational setting that is regarded as a role model.

## **Curriculum Integration**

Integrating LGBT topics into the curriculum is not a new concept; many authors have completed research within this area (Burdge, et al., 2013; Flores, 2012). Research determined that a balance between heterosexual and homosexual topics in the classroom are necessary (Meyer & Bayer, 2013) and that some school subjects lend themselves better at addressing LGBT themes (Lipkin, 1993). When LGBT topics are integrated they are introduced within the social sciences, humanities and health education (Lipkin, 1993; Snapp, Burdge, Licona, Moody, & Russell, 2015). Research indicates that most schools lack an LGBT-inclusive curriculum (McGarry, 2013) and if included are often tied to a negative stigma (Graydon, 2011).

### ***Issues with Integration***

A curriculum that represents students who are LGBT has a positive impact on all learners (Burdge, et al., 2013; Renn, 2000). LGBT students experienced a safer, more affirmative school environment when they are taught positive representations of LGBT people inside the curriculum (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Gowen &

Winges-Yanez, 2014). While this is ideal for these students, most school environments are unresponsive, if not hostile toward LGBT or questioning learners (Meyer & Bayer, 2013). The social sciences, humanities, and health education lend themselves well to the integration of LGBT topics (Lipkin, 1993; Snapp, et al., 2015). A concern with integration are the biases conveyed and translated from the teacher to the students and the exclusion it can cause for the LGBT minority (McGarry, 2013).

### ***Health Education***

A majority of sex education courses default to a heterocentric point-of-view leaving out LGBT related information (McGarry, 2013). When LGBT topics are excluded it becomes problematic for LGBT students and could lead to lack of knowledge and unhealthy relationships (McGarry, 2013; Formby, 2011). If homosexuality is discussed it is often from the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) standpoint (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014) and fails to validate the existence of homosexual feelings or identities (Nichols, 1999).

### **School Culture**

A school's culture is subjective due to the integration of an individual's race, ability, sexual orientation, and religion (Dessel, 2010a). Culture is norms and expectations that exist within an organization with the amalgamation of an individual's values and beliefs (Glisson & James, 2002). External influences such as family, friends, or church could affect the perceived culture within the school (Bandura, 1968). Often school culture is a mirror of the societal message that is represented through the media (Nichols, 1999). When teachers or students represent discriminatory behaviors it sends a message of hatred and perpetuates a negative self-image for these students (Renn, 2000).

It is important that the school maintains a positive culture for LGBT students (Dupper & Meyer; 2002).

### ***Support***

When LGBT students start to form identities, they alter their characters, practices, and ethical outcomes in comparison to those around them and experience the exertion of institutional influence on their identities (Linville & Carlson, 2010). Teens often find their identity during their school age and many educational settings cannot guarantee safety against verbal and physical harassment (Holmes & Cahill, 2004). Because of this, many LGBT students utilize one another as role models for support (Bochenek & Brown, 2001). Having the ability to cope with challenges of being LGBT can be hard for adolescents and having supportive adults and peers can be helpful in the identity formation process (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007).

### ***Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA)***

The purpose of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) is to create an environment that is supportive of others by creating a culture of learning about homophobia, transphobia, oppression, gender identity, and sexual orientation in order to fight practices of discrimination, harassment, and violence (Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Fetner & Kush, 2008). The implementation of a GSA has a positive effect on school climate, where LGBT-remarks are heard less frequently and students feel a greater sense of safety (Patterson, 2013). Although not all schools have a GSA, schools primarily located in larger cities, in urban or in areas of progressive political leanings are more likely to have an active GSA (Fetner & Kush, 2008).

## **School Climate**

Research on climate for LGBT students found negative attitudes toward LGBT students is prevalent (Dessel, 2010a, 2010b). Communication and behaviors of students, staff, and faculty play a critical role in making students feel welcome (Dessel, 2010a; Macgillivray, 2000). Some schools have enacted policies and procedures for the protection of LGBT students (Peterson, 2011; Hoshall, 2013). In the latest study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 74.1% of LGBT students experienced verbal harassment, 36.2% physical harassment, 16.5% were physically assaulted within the school setting (Kosciw, et al., 2014). These types of harassments could cause further developmental issue for students. Nichols (1999) found that many LGBT students are functioning in healthy and productive ways, while a subset of these youth have become socially, emotionally, and academically at risk.

## **Method**

This study was qualitative in nature. The interviews were conducted within the proximity of Missouri and Kansas. All participants were 18 years of age or older and have participated in a public PK-12 state approved curriculum. There were four focus groups and twenty-four interviews. Participants were selected through university campus organizations that focused on LGBT support. Each participant identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Gender non-conforming. Written transcripts of the recorded events were developed. Each transcript was analyzed using an open coding process to generate categories of information (Merriam, 2009), then an axial coding process to find a relationship between the codes on each transcript to find common themes (Merriam 2009).

### ***Procedure***

Universities with a LGBT organization were contacted by email gained through their university's website. The on-campus contact person set up a date and time to meet participants for a focus group or shared contact information for a telephone interview. Participants approved consent prior to the interview/focus group and were offered no incentive. The risk for participation was minimal, due to no identifying information being gathered. According to Merriam (2009), focus groups and interviews should take place to gather qualitative data from participants. Four focus groups were conducted in a designated place specified by the onsite contact with focus on anonymity. The 24 interviews were conducted via phone with verbal confirmation of consent to participate. Each of the phone interviews were conducted in a private conference room. A series of five to six questions were asked in each focus group/interview. The questions in each setting were identical for the purpose of gathering experiences on identity, interactions, support, safety, curriculum, and representation.

### ***Participants***

All participants ( $N = 39$ ) were 18 years of age or older. Participants completed a state approved curriculum from a public school within Missouri or Kansas. The participants were enrolled at a university within in the states of Missouri or Kansas. Participants did not have to be a part of the LGBT associated club on campus to participate. All participants self-identified with majority ( $n = 21$ ) identifying as gay, ( $n = 8$ ) lesbian, ( $n = 5$ ) bisexual, and ( $n = 5$ ) as other/non-disclosing. A majority ( $n = 36$ ) identified as white/Caucasian, ( $n = 1$ ) Black, ( $n = 1$ ) Hispanic, and ( $n = 1$ ) mixed. There were ( $n = 25$ ) participants from Missouri and ( $n = 14$ ) from Kansas.

### ***Coding/Analysis***

Qualitative methods for interviews and focus groups were utilized (Merriam 2009). All interview/focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The facilitator voice recorded the interview and rev.com was utilized for the transcription process. The facilitator reviewed the transcripts for the accuracy of information. One coder completed the open coding process on all transcripts as outlined by Merriam (2009). Following open coding, axial coding was performed to find common themes across all transcripts (Merriam, 2009). The presented results are a reflection of the patterns emerging from the transcripts across all interviews and focus groups.

### **Results**

It was found that the experience of LGBT students varied based upon several factors. Some factors were attributed to the circumstance of the student being out, or the perception by others of them being an LGBT student. Additional influences were family, friends, and others where personal information was communicated. Thirty-two participants stated that LGBT topics, people, or influence were omitted within the PK-12 setting in all capacities. These factors, as well as culture, religion, race, and sexuality all influenced the identity formation, safety, support, interactions, and curriculum experiences of participants.

### ***The Identity Formation Experience***

Identity formation is a series of changes or stages in conjunction with experiences that can be characterized by the acceptance of homosexuality within oneself, a positive approach toward ones' own identity, the disclosing of identity to others, and increased connection to like lifestyles (Cass, 1984). According to the research study, three factors

influenced a student to continue, stop, or start the formation process; internal influence, external influence, and lack of influence. An abundance of feelings surfaced, many reportedly being confused, nervous and/or scared. One participant stated, “I had a strong attraction toward men. It was a scary because of not being accepted. The fear that nobody would be okay with it.” As participants expressed a series of emotions, each story became personally unique. One participant explained his thoughts, “I had a lot of anxiety coming to grips with being gay because there was such a negative stigma with it.”

Some students thought the feelings they experienced were the same for all people. One participant stated, “I don’t know if it was the fact that there weren’t many people, or I wasn’t confident, or actually different in any way. Maybe I was just experiencing what everyone else was.” A similar experience was explained, “I didn’t fully understand that not everybody felt the same way that I did, so that was my perspective. I just didn’t have a clue.” Through external influences students gained that unknown information.

External influences can be through personal or societal interactions that an individual encounters (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). The greatest influences were parents, religion, and friends. One participant spoke about an interaction, “I received help from fourth grade to middle school because my coach was a lesbian. My parents didn’t want me to go to her, but I [did].” One participant turned to her parents for support, “They don’t agree with my sexuality and wanting to be married someday. They still love me and accept me for the person I am because that's what they are taught in their religion.”

Participants who had a large religious influence reported not having an easy acceptance. A concern was the likelihood of ending up in Hell. One participant

commented, “From the time I was six until I can’t even remember, I would cry myself to sleep because I knew I was going to Hell and I didn’t want to because I wanted to change.” Others had doubts that the Bible even mentioned same-sex people, “I just wanted to make sure it’s there. I kept reading it and read it to my girlfriend because she didn’t believe that it was there.”

Religious affiliations and sociable impact such as population/area, information sources, and social inhibitors all contributed to identity formation. Within the research study it was stated by eight participants, that if the size of the school was considered small, then the likelihood of being accepted within the setting decreased. A participant stated her perception, “It’s a small town. Small towns aren’t safe if you are different.” Another participants spoke to the amount of diversity within her small town, “When we were there, it was such a small town. What’d we have, like two black people in our school? Diversity was not something that was fluent.” The amount of diversity along with the availability of information can inhibit the identity formation process, according to participants.

Participants prolonged the identity formation until adequate information was received. Information can come from media, parents, friends, and/or school. One of the participants talked about seeking information in his personal time, “I know [literature] would have been beneficial, so I didn’t have to identify or didn’t have to talk to anyone. I could get a pamphlet and look at it on my own.” A participant spoke to his reasoning on waiting until after high school to fully form his identity, “For the longest time I was in the mind-set that I’m not gay. I’m not going to be gay even though I knew that I was. It was because it wasn’t perceived in the best light at the time.”

The biggest deterrent for some participants was the fear of rejection from peers, family, or others. One participant explained,

How will my family react to this, is it worth telling them, is it okay to tell people at school or should I keep this to myself and will this affect me later? Teachers possibly discriminating or having some sort of prejudice or getting bullied. So is this worthy of revealing or should this be kept aside until adulthood?

Participants who had supportive family, friends, or social circle found the identity process easier.

Additionally, participants mentioned the school setting was lacking LGBT role models, counselors that specialized in LGBT sensitivity, and exposure of LGBT topics in all capacities. One participant explained, “[Being gay] was kind of hard to process because there was no one like me in my town. It was hard to identify any type of role model or person to aspire to be like.” The lack of LGBT influence within the school, along with external influence and internal struggle contributed to the identity formation experience.

### ***School Experiences with Peers***

When looking at the involvement of peers, the study focused on students who were out or those perceived to be LGBT. Majority of participants did not come out until after graduation. Participants stated that they were either personally denying it or influenced by social factors. Some students were identified as LGBT by peers, not by coming out, but by not meeting the stereotypical gender binaries.

When a student came out or was perceived as LGBT, the perception from others depended on the situation. Participants who had a positive experience, based it on

acceptance of those around them. One participant commented on different reactions, “[Coming out] was about two weeks into my freshman year. It was about half and half. It felt like some people didn’t like it, they didn’t accept it and others were completely fine with it.” One participant commented on how he was able to talk about himself to others so it became more accepting, “No one really knew what to say or what to think. It wasn’t until I was really comfortable and was able to talk about it. They grew to understand and kind of accept me because I accepted myself first.”

The fear of rejection and negative connotation associated with being a LGBT student was reality for some. Participants reported they were not accepted by most people and did not feel they had a sense of support. Common non-aggressive experiences were the hearing of comments, rumors, or jokes about them or their sexuality. One participant commented about an out student at her school, “He was very well thought of in his peer group, but I got the sense that it was a joke among the majority crowd.” Not all negative interactions were made in the form of commentary, some encounters involved different forms of harassment.

Verbal harassment consisted of snarky comments, threats, and being ridiculed. One participant commented on his experience, “Everyone saw this kid as, ‘the faggot’, and I would never join in, but would follow. I was afraid that, if I would express myself, they would perceive me as the same kind of person.” Harassment was not always verbal, sometimes students experienced physical harassment, or feared it, “Once I got to high school and came out, there were a lot of people that didn’t like it so I laid low as possible and didn’t attract any attention to myself for the fear of confrontation.”

One participant reported the verbal harassment turning physical, “When I was in seventh grade, I ‘dated’ a girl. A lot of people didn’t accept it. They started bullying me harder than before. I got shoved in the trash cans and lockers. I got chased home once.” Participants got picked on, experienced small conflicts, or even got beat up. Some forms of harassment only happened in specific situations which students would avoid to protect themselves. The most reported places were the locker room, gym, bathroom, or places with less supervision from faculty/administrators. Harassment was not gender specific. Within a school setting not only were peers a variable, but so were teachers and administrators.

### ***School Experiences with Teachers and Administrators***

It was mentioned that some LGBT students did not feel any sense of discrimination or bias when dealing with administrators or staff. This includes students who identified as LGBT before and after exiting the school setting. One participant mentioned his experience with teachers, “I noticed that some were extra considerate to students who were LGBT. They would make sure that they were doing okay. If they saw any sort of suspicion of harassment or bullying, they would go the extra mile.”

Participants mentioned that they thought that newer teachers had diversity training to help with LGBT issues. One participant talked about the teacher preparation programs, “Teacher education has changed so much that there’s a lot more focus on inclusion and diversity.” Another participant mentioned the avoidance of administrators, “It’s like more support comes from younger people, it’s the older people, administration, are usually older, so I just kind of kept it on wraps.” When faculty and administration were not open to the concept of LGBT individuals, it came across in their teachings.

Teachers were avoiding LGBT topics and were making excuses for not enforcing rules. Five participants stressed that their school environment consisted of the, “Don’t ask don’t tell policy.” One participant explained his view, “I think most of my teachers would have pretended the conversation didn’t happen if I came out to them.” Another participant stressed the lack of discussion, “I didn’t tell and nobody asked, then there wouldn’t be a problem. So it was left unspoken, then there wasn’t an issue.” Avoidance and exclusion were the biggest concerns for participants in the study.

Exclusion was felt through intolerance by teachers and administrators when excuses were made for situations. One participant spoke about his administration after being physically harassed, “I would go to the principal. He would say, ‘That’s just you kids. You guys need to get along, blah, blah, blah.’” A similar experience was shared from a lesbian participant after being involved in an altercation, “I recall having one incident, somebody said something to me and I went to the teacher about it. They basically said, ‘You’re just bringing it upon yourself.’ Like it was my fault that they were treating me like that.” Even though some interactions were negative, not all experiences had negative outcomes.

Support from school systems can come in different facets. The biggest support came from dialogue between student(s) and a member of the administrative team. One participant explained his experience after having issues with a peer,

She had told me that one of her best friends was gay. She stated, ‘I understand what you’re going through. People can be mean sometimes. I’ll definitely take care of it. Tell me if something like that happens again. I will deal with them.’

Participants indicated LGBT students need support from administration. One participant explained how it benefited him after a physical altercation, “He called me into the principal’s office and pulled the surveillance. He told me that this is not how I shouldn’t have handled it, but the student teacher got in trouble because he refused to do anything after witnessing it.”

The sentiment of having someone on your side is empowering. Many participants mentioned that they felt safe because they knew teachers and/or administrators within the building who were LGBT. One participant stated, “This sounds silly to say but my principal was a lesbian. I really feel like there was definitely a sense of protection.” Others knew that they would have support if they sought it out when they needed it. Participants were able to identify teachers/administrators within their respective buildings that they could confide in, but not all participants were as willing.

Some participants stated that they avoided seeking support from faculty knowing that they would not understand. One participant explained, “The teachers I did tell were very supportive. All my other teacher rotated except for them, I didn’t feel the need to tell someone who wasn’t going to be an influence in my life for very long.” Some teachers were not shy about their attitude toward LGBT students/lifestyles. A participant shared her experience, “The majority of teachers were old and religious, so you know not to go to them because they were against it and they would tell you that.” Participants felt supported by administration, through those they confided in, and stayed away from potential teachers and administrators they felt would not accept them.

### *Support Experiences*

Participants commented that the most abundant type of support was the general support from those around them. This would be as simple as someone saying, “I am here if you need anything”, or knowing a teacher or administrator who identified as LGBT, one participant explained, “We had a lot of support with teachers because we had a few LGBT teachers within the school.”

General support was not the only method LGBT students were seeking. Visuals displays of support and equal treatment were needed. A participant mentioned his experience after an encounter with a football player, “A teacher removed three people off the football team because of them harassing me and a couple other gay students.” Some examples were a little more subtle, one participant told us his experience, “In high school, I had a teacher, I believe a history teacher, and I remember anytime someone would call something ‘gay’ or ‘retarded’ he would immediately correct them.”

Some students didn’t rely solely on the faculty and administrators at their school. They had a support system from their friends and family. An informal group can sometimes be common for LGBT individuals, as one participant related, “I met my boyfriend, and then I started hanging out with students from his school. I would say we formed an alliance but it wasn’t a formal group.” Not only were friends a good mode of support; an alliance within the school system was helpful for students who were LGBT, as stated by four participants.

Four participants stated that their schools offered some sort of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). One participant commented on the GSA formed his sophomore year, “The language arts teacher started a GSA. She was our sponsor. There were probably 20 -

25 people in it, but it only lasted a year.” A participant formed a GSA their senior year and spoke to how easy the process was, “There wasn’t one until I started one. I got a whole bunch of kids together and we formed one with one of the teachers.” The participant was unaware if this group is still in existence today.

A separate population of people whose schools offered GSAs were hesitant to utilize them. Each participant had their own reasoning; intimidation, protection, or even the group being mostly cisgender. One participant explained his thoughts, “I knew it was offered. I never went to it because I was too chicken to do it, but I knew it was offered.” Not only were some students too scared to attend a meeting, they had a negative outlook on the group itself and other methods of support.

Some participants had an issue going to the guidance office because they lacked LGBT specialization. One participant spoke of his experience, “Supposedly, our counselors’ were equipped and able to understand LGBT problems, but it was until the year after I left high school that we got a counselor that was within the [LGBT] community.” It was hard for students to relate to those who cannot be empathetic to their unique situations. Additionally, participants mentioned that schools did not have an organization or support system for LGBT students to utilize, faculty and administrators never discussed LGBT people or issues within the school building, and/or did not find literature to assist with possible issues they may face.

### ***Experience of Inclusion within Curriculum, Classroom, and/or Building***

Including LGBT people within the school can be completed in a multitude of ways. There was very little report of students having LGBT topics integrated within the classroom. The prominent subjects with LGBT topics integrated were psychology,

history, and English. One participant spoke about his classes, “There was at least a little bit about LGBT history and psychology that I remember. I remember being able to write multiple essays about gender and sexuality and it was totally fine.” Additional representation was mentioned in the area of English, “Any of the history books in the English courses. There was a few characters if we were reading certain plays or books. But it was never elaborated on.” Even if the opportunity to discuss LGBT topics was not presented through curriculum, participants would integrate the topics into their assignments, or would seek resources from the library.

Thirty-two respondents stated that there was no exploration, no representation, and no type of LGBT discussion within the confines of the building. One participant summed up his experience, “There was never exploration of gay culture or anything like that in any of my classes, especially health classes. I had to do research on my own.” Participants mentioned teachers conveying incomplete information or avoiding LGBT topics. A participant explained how information shared in his psychology class was inaccurate,

We were talking about intersex and the teacher was using the slur, ‘hermaphrodite’. She was teaching by using the slur, and justifying it by saying that it’s in the name of psychology. I understood it, but the people in my class, it just went over their heads.

Even when mentioning LGBT topics within the classroom, sometimes it did more hurt than help, due to inaccuracy of information. Additionally, participants mentioned a lack of LGBT models and information in all subjects and courses, including health education.

### ***Experience of Inclusion within Health Education***

Within health education participants' experienced a lack of discussion on LGBT topics, or if discussed, it was from a HIV/AIDS and/or heterocentric perspective. The omission of anything related to LGBT was the greatest response from participants. A participant explained, "At my high school, we really didn't have anything in the curriculum about LGBT or sex education. They basically skipped that whole section of the book and didn't talk about HIV or AIDS." Another participant spoke to a similar experience, "We were just getting to that section the teacher said, 'I don't think we are going to talk about this certain topic because it's an uncomfortable topic to talk about. We are just going to skip it.'"

If sex education was discussed, topics mostly centered on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), body changes, abstinence, or just health and diet. One participant explained his sex education experience, "Basically sex education was talking about your body going through the changes, basic attraction toward the opposite sex, abstinence, and that was it." This type of experience was not uncommon for students and the lack of LGBT specific knowledge contributed to the overall student experience.

Furthermore, if sex education was discussed, it was based on a HIV/AIDS or from the heterocentric viewpoint. A participant discussed his experience, "The only time [LGBT topics] were ever brought up was when they assume gay males have the higher risk of getting AIDS." A similar experience was mentioned by another participant, "I think the only mention of just being non-straight in general I can remember is on HIV and AIDS. If you were sexuality active and non-straight." Ten participants stated that if

sex education was mentioned at all within health education then it was from the viewpoint of heterosexuality.

Lastly, if students were not exposed to LGBT topics from the hetero-centric and/or HIV/AIDS perspective, they were introduced to it with non-conventional means. One participant explained her experience of LGBT topics, “The closest we ever got to talking about anything transgender was probably opposite day for homecoming. We didn’t have a lot of information about sexuality in our classes.” If LGBT topics were not introduced within the school setting, students had to find ways of retrieving the information they desired. One participant explained the lengths he went to find information, “We’d go to Barnes and Noble when I could drive. We’d go down to the Plaza because that was the only gay and lesbian book section that we knew about.” Students found ways to gather information that they need, through the education curriculum or through personal means.

### ***Experience of Safety within the PK-12 Setting***

Most participants stated they felt safe because they were not identified as an LGBT individual from their own or others perspectives. A gay participant explained, “The reasons why I did not come out in high school was because I did not feel safe. I felt I would have been either physically, mentally, or verbally abused.” This is not specific to sexuality, a lesbian had a similar story, “I felt really safe for the most part because everybody accepted me for the person that I was at that time. If I was out, I would’ve for sure felt unsafe because I know that the bullying would’ve increased.” A student being perceived as a heterosexual provided a sense of safety.

Safety was related to the observed violence within the school day. One participant shared her perspective, “I felt safe as a person in school because I never saw much violence. I made it a personal goal to avoid negativity in school, so I avoided the conflicts.” Other participants mentioned the implementation of a “no bullying” policy or the amount diversity added to their safety. Additionally, participants mentioned their personalities gave them a sense of security, as well as, felt safe when school personnel were in the hallway during passing periods. A lesbian participant stated that she provided her own safety, “Because of the presence that I had, I had a rather intimidating presence. I knew that people weren’t going to hurt me, but I knew something could happen.” This student used her personality to protect herself from harassment, when others relied on blending in.

Students often turned to fitting the mold to feel safe. A lesbian explained her vision on fitting the mold, “Bullying was rampant, and racism was rampant. It’s just, you had to fit the mold or you didn’t.” Those who didn’t feel like they fit the mold, turned to their friends for safety. Sticking to a group of people that were accepting is what one student did to feel safe, “Most of the students were pretty cool, and I, of course, had my own group of friends.” Students maintained a friend circle that made them feel safe due to harassment or possible altercations that could take place.

The biggest form of harassment was verbal harassment. Participants stated that most often students would state things about them, to them, or about others, but many situations did not become physical. One participant reported his experience, “I wasn’t physically tormented. It was all verbal and mental, but otherwise I felt pretty safe.” The verbal harassment did not make students feel unsafe, as long as it did not turn physical.

Some harassment came from certain places within the school system. The most notable places were the parking lot, cafeteria, gym, bathroom, sports events, and locker room. A participant who was bullied most of her school years explained her avoidance of large crowds of students, “I remember in high school I would skip lunch because I didn’t want to be in the cafeteria. I would hide in the bathroom or classroom. I saw many of my friends being booed, it was just bad.” Having the experience of being harassed was reality for some students, but even having the assumption that you will be harassed can also be troublesome.

Many participants refrained from coming out because of being bullied or feared being harassed. A participant stated how his safety in school would have changed if he was out, “I felt pretty safe just because I wasn’t out. If I was out, I feel like I would have been afraid to go because I know how the gay kid felt every day.” The assumption of being harassed was a deterrent for LGBT students. Since some students were already getting bullied for other reasons and did not believe they should add to their experience, “I would’ve for sure felt unsafe because I just know that all the bullying would’ve increased a lot more. I don’t know if I would’ve got beat up or anything, just knew that I would’ve not felt safe.” Some students were able to avoid bullying while others had no choice in the matter.

Some male students were harassed based on their perceived femininity by not sticking to the stereotypical gender binaries. A male participant spoke to this situation, “[Getting bullied] was not necessarily for gayness, just for being feminine. The lesbians of the school didn’t really get much. The feminine young gay men were the biggest target.” Additionally, it was stated that if harassment were to happen, teachers would not

do anything to discipline the perpetrator. Middle school was a prominent time in LGBT students' lives where issues would take place and they felt the most unsafe, as stated by five participants. Safety for a student was variable, depending on the type of harassment, the degree of safety, and how issues were handled by school personnel.

### **Discussion**

This study was designed to gather the perceptions of LGBT students' experiences within the PK-12 setting. Since social learning is not a stagnant process, where one can learn behavior from any interaction (Bandura, 1969), it is best to exam the school setting where over 14,000 hours of a student's life is spent (DeSilver, 2014). Although some students did not form their identity within the PK-12 setting it is important to look at the reasoning behind these decisions. Participants reported feeling confused, scared, and/or nervous with the integration of other emotions. They mentioned they did not have many, if any, adult role models within their PK-12 experience, which is a common support system for LGBT individuals (Bochenek & Brown, 2001). Additionally, the information that was available to assist with the identity formation process was minimal or non-existent. This was true across all experiences within the school setting, including health education (McGarry, 2013, Formby 2013), where Kansas and Missouri are not required to teach LGBT related topics (DESE, 2007; KSDE, 2007). If LGBT topics were discussed it was from the HIV/AIDS and heterocentric perspective, participants stated. When LGBT topics are not discussed it fails to validate the existence of homosexual feelings and identities (Nichols, 1999).

Participants reported a small teaching of LGBT topics within a variety of subjects; psychology, history, and English. This was aligned with LGBT topics being more easily

integrated within the social science, humanities, and sex education courses (Lipkin, 1993; Snapp, et. al, 2015). Participants reported when topics were mentioned within the classroom setting, teachers would have inaccurate information or would skip sections that are considered uncomfortable. This happens when teachers feel under-skilled or untrained (Formby, 2011; Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Likewise, when teachers do not correct behavior from students, it sends a message of hatred and perpetuates a negative self-image for LGBT students (Renn, 2000). Different forms of harassment were mentioned by participants; verbal, physical, situational, and assumed. It is not uncommon for LGBT students to report harassment from peers, since students in the Midwest experience more harassment than those in other regions of the United States (Kosciw, et. al., 2014). Support system like the GSA help those who are LGBT through support and advocacy (Fetner & Kush, 2008). A low number of participants mentioned having an active GSA within their school system and few personnel resources to assist with issues. It is up to the school system to be receptive to LGBT student's lifestyles, due to potentially not getting the support from other sources (Macgillivray, 2000). Students could potentially absorb positive and/or negative attitudes, behaviors, and opinions from faculty, administrators, or staff during their PK-12 tenure (DeSilver, 2014) and should continue to be monitored for the messages that are being received by LGBT students.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This research was qualitative in nature and therefore reliant on responses from participants. Because of this, the validity and reliability of individual responses have to be considered. Each participant was offering a unique perspective of their own experiences; the information conveyed does not necessarily reflect the experiences and

behaviors of others. Lastly, there were several confounding variables (i.e. race, age, location, etc.) that contributed to the respondent's answers and had to be considered when analyzing the data.

Future research should explore the perspectives from a diversity standpoint. They should include a larger variety of ethnicities within the states of Missouri and Kansas. Additionally, more research should be gathered within the Midwest to seek if commonalities exist with this study and others. A focus on urban versus rural areas to determine if there is a gap between these two environments and the degree of LGBT topics discussed, as well as support systems in place. Lastly, studies that show the effect of college entrance, success, and assimilation might be useful to determine if the topics being discussed have a longitudinal effect for university students.

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## SECTION SIX:

### SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

#### **Dissertation Influencing Educational Leadership**

A leader sets a direction, develops a vision for the future, and produces strategies that are needed to achieve the visions that were set (Kotter, 1990). The dissertation experience influenced my drive to cultivate an environment of servant leadership while promoting collaboration, critical thinking, and coaching within every educational capacity. Individuals have to be able to engage in constructive, reacculturative conversation, and have an interdependent relationship with those they work with (Bruffee, 1999). If I can foster this type of learning environment, I can become an agent for change for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community and hopefully promote this process in others.

#### **Servant Leadership**

Being a servant leader is what I strive for as an educational leader. I focus heavily on the needs and desires of people over tasks at hand. A servant leader is attentive to concerns of others and uses empathy and nurturance to empower them to develop their full potential (Northouse, 2012). I am the person who assists when any person is struggling or invites others to join in collaboration if I believe they could benefit from the interaction. This aligns with my desire to make LGBT students feel included within the educational system and actively involved. This is so they feel a part of a group and these students can benefit from the offered support (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006).

When I come across beneficial information for the LGBT community, I can engage key

stakeholders in the conversation in order to share ideas or experiences so everyone feels connected, positive, and essential in the decision-making process.

### **Collaboration**

It is important to have a positive experience with those I lead, as well as to give them the power to complete tasks without micromanaging. The team should become part of the decision-making process by allowing their ideas to be shared and their visions fulfilled. Having the collective knowledge and wisdom of the team will allow the diversity of opinions and viewpoints to be used in order to discuss the full spectrum of ideas from participants (Gill, 2010). In my opinion, having the environment of diversity within a staff, in conjunction with the relationship to hear opinions without criticism, is a skill of an educational leader. For these reasons, when looking for new LGBT related events and feedback I know that I have to elicit the ideas of teachers, students, and the LGBT community to develop a cohesive plan that melds their unique perspectives into a common purpose. This process takes it from a managing aspect and transforms it into a leadership experience while also utilizing it as a learning and growth opportunity.

### **Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is difficult to teach, but essential if a group is focused on implementing a transformational experience. Merriam and Bierema (2013) stated, critical thinking is when an individual takes a look at assumptions held by others, for instance through research, and then investigate his, her, or hir own assumptions based on the information he, she, or ze gathered. I do not want LGBT students to take what they are told within the classroom or outside the educational setting at face value; I want them to listen to the information, assess it, analyze it, and make a personal judgment. By doing

this I hope to engage LGBT students, teachers, administrators, and myself in the process of critical reflection, allowing them to think analytically about their own practices (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). If I can cultivate an environment to critically assess information that is presented to the student on a daily basis, as well as to stimulate metacognition within the individuals presenting the information, then a positive transformations for the educational leader and LGBT student will take place.

### **Coaching**

Coaching can be a powerful leadership attribute if one offers the right balance of challenges and support for those they lead and then supplies individual recognition, feedback, and support (Fisher-Yoshida, 2009). Engaging in open dialogue with colleagues or LGBT students while cultivating a relationship with structural guidelines can be mutually beneficial. The role of the coach is not to profess, but rather facilitate; the mentee is not there just to absorb, but rather establish questions, examine assumptions and ideas as the context of their learning (Mandell & Herman, 2009). When the coach and LGBT students or faculty member engage in this symbiotic relationship, they understand that they are learning from each other. As a leader, I want to create an environment for coaching, collaboration and critical thinking by leading change, instead of managing other's visions.

### **Change Agent**

My end goal is to move beyond being a leader and to be seen as an agent for change. I have to set up the educational foundation to promote transformational learning by inviting others to assess their value system and worldview by guiding them to change the way they previously thought and acted (Taylor, 2009; Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

This dissertation has been a change agent because of the personal perspective I have gained concerning my own abilities and passions. During the course of the dissertation, I have developed a passion for the LGBT community due to the discriminatory acts against them and want to promote equality for this group and myself.

I have experienced discrimination, as well as oppression by omission while attending the public school system and believe that a stand should be taken for other LGBT students who are or will be going through the same system. Since transformational learning is triggered through societal inequities and oppression (Merriam & Bierema, 2013), it is entirely appropriate that perceived inequities within the PK-12 setting for LGBT students was the concentration of my dissertation. Not only do I want to be a change agent, but also I want to develop this drive in others. Although I feel I am well on my way, I do recognize and acknowledge my limitations moving forward.

One limitation was my knowledge, prior to the dissertation it had been strictly personal. In order to better serve the LGBT community, I broadened my knowledge base by reading written literature, synthesized it, and integrated it into the research study. Second, is the lack of measurement to show a transformational impact on an individual's experience (Northouse, 2012). This means little evidence is available to demonstrate that transformational experiences have occurred in others. Lastly, if a transformational experience did happen, it would be unknown if the cause was from direct interaction or disjointed from the individual or organizational influence. These limitations make it harder to determine when a successful transformational experience occurred, but because of the dissertation process and my future as an educational leader, I know that I can develop policies and procedures to positively influence the environment, not just for

LGBT students, but all people within the educational system. When this happens it will hopefully promote transformational change in everyone.

### **Dissertation Influencing Scholarship**

Being a scholar means becoming a specialist within a particular branch of study and setting yourself a part from others within that academic field. The dissertation processes has influenced me as a scholar by not only absorbing an uncountable amount of literature on LGBT studies, but also employing that information in a positive way. While in return, adding additional scholarship within the LGBT framework for others to utilize during future research. I want to continue this ever evolving process by continually adding to the literature, not just within LGBT studies, but in diversity education.

Although my passions lie within the LGBT arena, I believe there are other minorities that feel oppressed with potential to be remedied through the same fashion. To do this the right questions need to be asked, time has to be utilized as a critical factor, support is needed through a variety of relationships, writing needs to be explicit and contain intellectual rigor.

### **Asking the Important Questions**

As a scholar it is wise to ask the big and important questions before starting research. Questions like, “Why is this happening?”, “Who stated this was a problem?”, “Can this issue be solved?”, and/or “Who has already completed research within this area?”, should be the initial thought process within a study. Starting the journey focused on the big picture, then funneling it down to a sizeable research area is recommended. For example, my important question was, “How can I make a difference in the educational lives of LGBT students?” Although, this question is a sizeable one, by

narrowing the focus into experiences within the educational setting in regard to curriculum, culture, and climate, I was able to start to develop the right questions to eventually solve the big idea of making a difference in the lives of LGBT students.

### **Time and Passion**

Understanding that quality scholarship will take time to complete is essential to an exceptional manuscript. Time does not necessarily deal with the time spent writing a particular article, rather it is the time in ones' life that is important, the time in the life of those who are being researched, or even down to the day the writer decides to submit the article for publication. "Why was that time chosen?" should be critical question in the process of creating new scholarship. Additionally, a scholar should not write just based on time, but based on passion. Many authors write because publishing is a part of their tenure and only do it because of requirement. I would recommend the writer to take their time and passion to find a subject that is relevant to them and/or relevant to those he, she, or ze loves. When this happens then the timing and passion will coincide with the end product.

### **Support and Relationships**

While researching and writing scholarship it is important to rely on the support and relationships of others. Support can come from intellectual supporters and partners, from the community being researched, or from a personal support system like family, friends, or colleagues. Each of these groups/people contribute to the flow, execution, and timeliness of scholarship. The intellectual supporters or partners can be utilized for collaborative thought and processing in order to help pave a vision of where the research is heading. Those within the community can potentially open up doors to people and

places that may not have been possible if the relational foundation had not been previously developed. Lastly, the personal support system is intact to help the researcher through possible struggles or adversity that may be faced that could inhibit the researcher from following through on important research.

### **Each Word Counts**

When composing a manuscript for personal purposes or publishing, it is critical to make sure each word is representative of the end message. Too often I find myself beating around the bush or not explicitly stating what I am trying to say. This can come off as confusing, misleading, or unknowledgeable within certain subject areas. With that being said, it can also be easy to talk above the readers. Understanding the use of acronyms or jargon can be confusing, which might limit the time spent with the material or the overall understanding. As a writer of scholarship, the dissertation process has taught me to be cognizant of the words that I am using. I have to be sure that I am not being too wordy, too vague, too technical, or am writing the manuscript for the intended audience.

### **Intellectually Rigorous**

Being intellectually rigorous, means the thoughts and ideas inside the research need to be thorough, true, exhaustive, and accurate. Meaning that the information presented needs to be thoroughly researched to where the saturation point is reached. This is through extensive literature analysis and wide-spread investigation to include all possible research background and information. Additionally, the information included needs to be accurate and credited to the founding authors. Each cited author deserves credit for the work they completed within their research area. This process is highly

respectful of the authors work and will become important when others start to cite personal work within future research.

### **Conclusion**

The dissertation has influenced my practice as a scholar and educational leader in many forms. First, as a scholar I understand the trials and tribulations faced when writing scholarly work and how much effort and time is not conveyed to the reader. Second, the time it took to find the perfect research topic and the drudgery of whittling down the idea into manageable segments was a time consuming process. Third, the execution of the topic has to be timely for the researcher or it may contribute to an incomplete job, or a lack of passion may ensue. Fourth, support from family, friends, colleagues, and intellectual supporters is crucial to the overall success of the scholarship and to the sanity of the researcher. Lastly, making each word count by completing a thorough literature analysis to reach a saturation point will make the scholarship more meaningful and powerful than originally expected. Becoming a scholar is not easy, but the reward cannot be fulfilled by only completing a dissertation, but the process has influenced me as an educational leader.

The biggest influence that was passed through the dissertation process was the desire to become a change agent. To complete this goal, I know I need to implement a series of cogs in the clockwork. I must first continue being a leader who works for the needs and desires of others as a servant leader. Second, developing a system of collaboration with stakeholders in an organization is crucial in making a visual impact, as well as creating the ideal system for information to be spread in a safe and structured environment. Third, implementing a coaching system within an organization that is under

my influence, not only promotes the idea of supporting those who want to lead, but also supports those who are not necessarily seeking it out. Lastly, creating an environment with those you work with to critically think, not just about themselves, but how each person and decision contributes to the success or failure of the organization.

Implementing each one of these ideals contributes to how I want to be viewed as an educational leader and will contribute to my goal of being an agent for change.

The dissertation process has not only influenced me to develop these goals, but also translate them into scholarship so other scholars can see those who inhibit the same goals and aspirations as them, so collaboration can happen to make the change they want in the world. Also, the desire to speak for the LGBT community in hopes of changing policies and practices so that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Gender Non-conforming students feel included within the educational setting. One participant summarizes the LGBT participants' feelings succinctly,

The academic community should be about creating a place where topics are discussed, not brushed under the rug. That in this setting, it's okay to feel uncomfortable, it's not okay to feel unsafe. Being uncomfortable is having dissenting opinions, but acknowledging that humanity and humanness of an individual, regardless of their identity, and finding commonalities amongst the differences in order to create that welcoming space. While also knowing that while there are differences, at the end of the day, an individual should still have their humanity.

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## APPENDIXES

### Appendix A: Informed Consent

#### OMISSION: A LOOK INTO THE PK-12 EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

You are invited to participate in a research study of twenty representatives from Missouri and Kansas to explore perceptions of the PK-12 experience through the lens of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Gender-Non Conforming university students. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, the study will add to LGBT research by giving insight into support, safety, climate, culture and curriculum as experienced by LGBT students. The results of this study will create a foundation for future research to help understand policy and procedure changes that could benefit this subset of students. Second, this study will gain knowledge and insight to help generate further discussions about LGBT issues within the PK-12 setting. Thus, this study will help board members, school personnel, and advocates reach a common ground beneficial to LGBT students and teachers.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and no compensation will be offered. However, your thoughts are valued and appreciated to provide insight into LGBT experiences within the PK-12 setting. There are no risks or discomforts associated with this research and participation in this study will require only a minimal amount of time and effort. You will be asked to share your thoughts in a thirty-minute to an hour interview/focus group. The focus group/interview will be audio recorded. If you choose not to be recorded at any time, please the researcher know. You must be at least 18 years of age to be a participant in the interview/focus group. Participation does not involve any experimental procedures. All data gathered during the study will be kept strictly confidential. It is also important to note, all audiotapes, videotapes and photographs must be kept with the research records and will be kept secured for seven years following the completion of the research and then all original records will be destroyed. The study's results will be presented in a doctoral thesis. Every effort will be made to protect your identity, including being given an alias within the data and final paper. You will be notified if any findings develop related to your willingness to continuing to participate in the study.

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time during the study without adversely affecting your relationship with the researcher and the University of Missouri-

Columbia. Your decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Focus group members will be asked to keep the information provided in the groups confidential; however, a potential risk that might exist for some would be that information about you might be discussed outside the group by other participants and be tracked back to you. If you feel that you would not like to disclose information within a group setting then we can schedule an independent interview at a later time to discuss the same questions as discussed within the focus group.

You may review the data collected from your interview and follow up questions to correct any errors and interpretation of findings. You can receive a copy of the final results if you so choose. You may ask any questions or voice concerns relative to the study by contacting Ronald Knight-Beck at [ronniewknight@yahoo.com](mailto:ronniewknight@yahoo.com) or by calling Ronald Knight-Beck at (816) 678-8647. You are also welcome to contact the University of Missouri's Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB) by visiting their website [umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu](mailto:umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu) or calling (573) 882-9585 or my dissertation advisor Dr. Carole Edmonds at 660-562-1258 or by email at [cake@nwmissouri.edu](mailto:cake@nwmissouri.edu).

Thank you for taking time to participate in this study. You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. A copy of the consent form will be provided for you.

## **Appendix B: Focus Group/Interview**

### **OMISSION: A LOOK INTO THE PK-12 EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

- A. Brief introductory statement with attention on who I am as a person/researcher while reiterating the study, why the study is conducted, explain why respondents are required for success, re-explain the confidentiality and opting out process.
- B. Express the interest I have in those who are participating and let them know that they are able to speak freely and will receive equal attention for positively or negatively responding to a topic.
- C. Brief them on the flexibility of the focus group and the environment. Letting them know that there are prescribed questions to answer, but will allow for free discussion if the environment lends itself.
- D. Let people know if they feel that they would not like to disclose information within a group setting that we can schedule an independent interview at a later time to discuss the same questions as discussed within the focus group.

#### **Questions**

- 1. Think back to when you first started to form your identity, what were your thoughts/feelings?
- 2a. How were you received by peers within the school setting?
- 2b. How were you received by teachers within the school setting?
- 2c. How were you received by administration within the school setting?
- 3. What support services were offered to you or other students who may identify as LGBT?
- 4a. How were LGBT issues/people/yourself represented within the building?
- 4b. How were LGBT issues/people/yourself represented within the classroom?
- 4c. How were LGBT issues/people/yourself represented within the curriculum?
- 5. Describe the environment you experienced when walking into your PK-12 school setting and the degree of safety that you attribute to the experience.

#### **Follow up Question**

- 1. What advice would you give to administrators, curriculum directors, and state department leaders as to changes needed in our current PK-12 curriculum, support systems, resources, safety, etc.

## VITA

The author of this study, Ronald Knight-Beck has lived in numerous residents within Missouri and Kansas. As he was going through the PK-12 school system he often found himself as a minority both racially and in regard to his sexuality. It was not until he entered high school that he started searching for answers to his unanswered questions. Information about gender, identities, and sexuality was non-existent within his PK-12 experience in both Missouri and Kansas. He graduated from high school in 2004 from Kearney High School in Kearney, Missouri. He continued his education by obtaining his Associates of Arts Degree in 2006 from Metropolitan Community Colleges in Kansas City, Missouri. His educational journey did not stop there, he moved to Saint Joseph to attend Missouri Western State University where he graduated in 2008 with his bachelor's degree in Elementary Education.

After graduation, Ronald pursued his teaching career in Saint Joseph where he had the opportunity to support students from various backgrounds and financial statuses. He worked for the school district for six years and taught sixth grade, high school mathematics, and college 101, which was a class to assist students in obtaining scholarship dollars to fund their future educational journeys. Ronald was a proud supporter of the Gay-Straight Alliance during his tenure with the district. During his time, he obtained his master's degree in teaching instructional technologies in 2011 from Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Missouri.

In July 2011, Ronald met his future husband, Chris, in Saint Joseph. During that time Chris was pivotal in helping Ronald become more confident in his sexuality. He struggled to find his comfort with expressing himself to the students and others within the

school system. Chris and Ronald got married in 2013 in the wonderful city of Des Moines, Iowa. Shortly before the wedding Ronald started the doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia. During the program Chris and Ronald moved from Missouri to Basehor, Kansas so Ronald could pursue a new career opportunity in corporate education.

He currently works for Cerner, a medical information technology company, where he utilizes his teaching skills for adult learners. He is charged with creating, implementing, and presenting educational materials to new and existing associates for his organization. In 2016, Ronald completed his doctoral degree with hopes of making a difference in the LGBT community. He hopes to become a face for the LGBT community and develop a support system for them and others in the educational setting. The first thirty years of Ronald's life was spent growing himself socially, intellectually, and professionally to become a person who inhibited qualities that were respected, appreciated, and replicated. During the next thirty years he will spend his time focusing on the lives around him by encouraging compassion, empathy, and tolerances of those who are considered different.