

# Creating and Sustaining Safe and Inclusive Spaces for LGBTQ Youth: An Exploratory Investigation of the Role of Educational Professionals

Andrew Luceno, Jac J. W. Andrews, Tom Strong

University of Calgary

*Educators can play a critical role in buffering LGBTQ youth from potential victimization. As such, the present study explored the following questions: 1) What are the roles of educators (i.e., teachers, school administrators) with respect to promoting and creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth; 2) what unique contributions can educators make in nurturing those spaces; and, 3) what barriers do educators face in creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth? This study used a convergent parallel design mixed-methods approach. Descriptive statistics were gathered from survey results; the interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis in order to generate themes relevant to the research questions. Discussion focuses on the roles of educators and the barriers with respect to providing safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth. The paper concludes with empirical and practical implications of the study.*

*Les professionnels de l'éducation peuvent jouer un rôle essentiel en protégeant les jeunes LGBTQ d'une victimisation potentielle. Ainsi, la présente étude s'est penchée sur les questions suivantes : 1) Quels sont les rôles des professionnels de l'éducation (c'est-à-dire des enseignants et des administrateurs scolaires) en ce qui concerne la promotion et la création d'espaces sûrs et inclusifs pour les jeunes LGBTQ? 2) Quelles contributions uniques les professionnels de l'éducation peuvent-ils apporter à la création de ces espaces? 3) Quels obstacles les professionnels de l'éducation rencontrent-ils dans la création d'espaces sûrs et inclusifs pour les jeunes LGBTQ? Cette étude a utilisé une approche mixte de méthodes convergentes et parallèles. Des statistiques descriptives ont été recueillies à partir des résultats de l'enquête ; les données des entretiens ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique afin de générer des thèmes pertinents pour les questions de recherche. La discussion porte sur les rôles des professionnels de l'éducation et les obstacles à la création d'espaces sûrs et inclusifs pour les jeunes LGBTQ. L'article se termine en présentant les implications empiriques et pratiques de l'étude.*

## LGBTQ Youth in the Alberta Context

In Alberta, substantial changes to promote inclusiveness for LGBT youth have been restricted largely to Calgary and Edmonton (i.e., urban centers; Franklin, 2011) as discussions around diversity (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliances [GSAs]) have been absent in rural communities (Pike, 2018). Audette (2009) argued that Alberta was the only province to take a step backward in policy

to protect LGBT youth when it amended the province's Human Rights Statute in 2009 explicitly requiring schools to notify parents when there was going to be teaching about sexual orientation, sexuality, or religion, and allowing parents to withdraw their children from such classes. However, in 2015, the Alberta legislature amended the *School Act* by passing Bill 10 which mandated the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in any school where students wanted one. As a result, students were permitted to name the group "Gay-Straight Alliance" or "Queer-Straight Alliance (QSA)," and meet on school property. Further, the Bill also added sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, and gender expression to the Alberta Bill of Rights (Bellefontaine, 2015). Over time, extant research has included a greater number of gender and sexually-diverse identities in its focus and that is reflected in the inconsistent terminology used (e.g., LG [lesbian-gay] in some studies, LGB [lesbian, gay, bisexual] in others). The present exploratory study focuses on how educators support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, and queer/questioning (i.e., LGBTQ) youth. However, it should be noted that the acronyms used (e.g., LGBT, LGB, LGBTQ) in the present study will remain consistent with the specific identities discussed in the literature, as well as those under investigation in the present research.

In 2017, the Alberta government furthered its efforts to promote the safety of LGBTQ youth by passing Bill 24; the Bill would strengthen GSAs in schools by closing loopholes that had previously allowed school administrators to deny or delay the establishment of the peer support group (Franson, 2017). More importantly, the Bill made it clear that students could not be "outed" to their parents by school staff for participating in a GSA except under special circumstances (Franson, 2017). Proponents of GSAs say they reduce bullying and save lives; in Alberta, GSAs are more likely to be found in urban schools—few are found in the province's rural areas, and very few are found in Catholic schools as those school boards oppose them (Calabrese, 2018).

In response to legislative changes, the Calgary and Edmonton Catholic school boards confirmed that teachers needed to sign agreements promising to live by Catholic values (sometimes referred to as *Catholicity clauses*); those values included not being in common-law or same-sex relationships (Bennett, 2018). Recent changes to The Alberta School Act, however, affirm teachers' freedom from discrimination; nevertheless, that incongruence places Alberta's Catholic school teachers in a difficult position if they are part of the LGBTQ community and/or if they want to show their support as allies openly (Bennett, 2018). Although many Canadians may believe that LGBTQ individuals are protected from discrimination, research into religiously-inspired homophobia suggests that LGBTQ-identified teachers working in Catholic schools are still vulnerable to persecution and losing their jobs (Callaghan, 2019). Callaghan stated that using Catholic doctrine to fire LGBTQ teachers and to discriminate against queer students violates Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and yet, this practice continues (2019). Further, many Alberta schools (particularly faith-based) openly refuse to comply with the new legislation (i.e., refuse to provide GSAs; Ramsay, 2018), some of which risk losing their funding from the provincial government as a result (Bennett, 2018), and their responses to non-heterosexual and non-binary gender students and teachers is contradictory and inconsistent (Callaghan, 2019).

Further, the 2019 change in provincial governments and legislative priorities (i.e., from New Democratic Party [NDP] to United Conservative Party [UCP]) has posed threats to the safety and inclusivity of LGBTQ youth in schools. In June 2019, the UCP introduced Bill 8 which rolled back Bill 24, created safety concerns for LGBTQ youth in schools and their allies, and prompted protests and heated political debates (Sharpe, 2020). Bill 8 amended Alberta's Education Act in the following ways: 1) school administrators no longer need to act "immediately" when a student

requests a GSA; 2) schools can “out” children who participate in a GSA [to their parents]; and 3) anti-bullying policies and protections from homophobia and transphobia need not be explicitly publicized (Leavitt, 2019). Indeed, the change in political climate and subsequent “steps backward in policy to protect LGBT youth” have renewed the need for investigation into how educators can protect LGBTQ youth.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Overall, the primary objective of this study was to address the following questions: *1) What are educators’ roles and responsibilities with respect to promoting and creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth; 2) what unique contributions can educators make in nurturing those spaces; and 3) what barriers do educators face in creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth?* In exploring these questions, the aim was to identify helpful strategies that educators are using to support LGBTQ youth, the barriers they face in doing so, and how they might surmount those barriers. The hope is that educators in the future may refer to the results of this study to aid them in providing more effective support for LGBTQ youth.

### **Research Design**

For the proposed study, a convergent parallel design mixed-methods approach was used (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, both the quantitative data and qualitative data are collected concurrently, with the results of each dataset analyzed separately from the other (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Once the data has been analyzed, the researcher merges the results of the quantitative and qualitative datasets to allow for an overall interpretation (this is known as the point of interface; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

### **Mixed-Methods Research Approach**

The use of a mixed-methods design in this study combined elements of quantitative (i.e., online surveys) and qualitative (i.e., open-ended survey questions, semi-structured follow-up interviews) research approaches to obtain a breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This research method involved analyzing data, integrating findings, and drawing inferences from both quantitative and qualitative approaches used (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). The quantitative data (i.e., surveys) in this study set the context of the participants involved and allowed for the reporting of statistical trends; the qualitative data (i.e., open-ended survey responses, interviews) in this study allowed the participants’ voices to be heard.

### **Quantitative Component**

The survey questions were formulated by the research team and general demographic information and descriptive statistics about the participants were gathered through surveys. Prior to commencing the study and data collection, ethics approval was obtained from the University of Calgary, Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their participation in the survey, and then again prior to any interviewing.

The first section of the survey collected background information using multiple-choice

questions about the participants' current roles and training. Participants were asked to describe their role in the school (e.g., teacher, administrator), gender, age, level of school in which they currently work, the school's geographical setting, student population, number of other staff employed in a similar role, highest level of education, specialized training obtained in their role, and years working in their role. The second section of the questionnaire focused on the participants' training specific to working with LGBTQ populations. Participants responded to Likert questions (e.g., How well do you feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in your role: Not at all; inadequately; adequately; thoroughly?) and had the option of including open text comments to give context. The third section of the survey concerned LGBTQ programming in the participant's school. Participants responded to multiple choice questions about the presence of a GSA (or related programs) in their school and their involvement with it (e.g., If you have been involved with a GSA/QSA, for how long [approximately in years]: Less than one year; One to three years; Three to six years; Six or more years?). The fourth section of the survey focused on ways in which participants contributed to the safety and inclusivity of LGBTQ students in school. In this section, participants responded mostly through open text comments (e.g., How might individuals in your role uniquely contribute to making learning and involvement in school safe and inclusive for LGBTQ students?). The fifth and final section of the survey focused on the ways in which participants developed and contributed to GSA/QSAs in their schools. In this section, participants responded through open text comments (e.g., In your opinion, what helps the development of a successful GSA/QSA within a school?). Survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

### ***Qualitative Component***

The follow-up interview questions (see Appendix B) were formulated using an enhanced critical incidents technique (Butterfield et al., 2009) in an effort to elicit descriptions and examples of specific events that illustrate the example given (e.g., specific example(s) of when safety and inclusivity was demonstrated, specific example(s) of when a teacher faced a barrier to supporting LGBTQ youth).

All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of participants, and those recordings were transferred to a password-encrypted drive. Subsequently, all interviews were transcribed for future data analysis. Interview transcripts were stored on a password-protected drive that was accessible only to the researcher, the principal investigator, and a research assistant/colleague who assisted with data analysis and peer debriefing.

The interview questions reflected the survey questions and deepened their exploration into the topics covered. The topics explored in the semi-structured interview included: (a) the participant's beliefs about what makes for a safe school environment for LGBTQ youth; (b) their role in supporting LGBTQ youth; (c) the pre-service training they had received that equipped them in supporting LGBTQ youth; (d) the professional development they have received that has equipped them in supporting LGBTQ youth; (e) areas of competency they would like to further develop with regard to supporting LGBTQ youth; (f) barriers they have faced in supporting LGBTQ youth; (g) factors that contribute to and thwart the success of a GSA; (h) other groups and programs that are available to support LGBTQ youth in their school; (i) the participant's experiences in feeling supported and unsupported by various members of the school community with regard to supporting LGBTQ youth in school; and (j) the visual aspects of schools that can contribute to safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth.

## Results

### Quantitative Results

The quantitative results comprise responses from surveys (i.e., responses to Likert questions and open-ended comments). The majority of survey respondents were teachers between the ages of 30 and 39 who worked at the senior high school level in urban centers, held bachelor's degrees, with six or more years of teaching experience, and who identified as female. Refer to Table 1 for more detailed demographic information about survey respondents.

Survey respondents were asked to report on their feelings about the training they had received with regard to supporting LGBTQ youth (see Figure 1). Regarding how prepared participants felt to support LGBTQ youth, 76.6% of respondents reported being *inadequately* trained or *not at all* trained. Refer to Figure 1 for more detailed information on participants' feelings about their training with regard to supporting LGBTQ youth.

Among survey respondents, 62.3% reported having a Gay-Straight Alliance or Queer-Straight Alliance in their school (see Figure 2); the majority of participants who had been involved in a GSA (or similar) had done so for less than three years (see Figure 3); and the majority of teachers reported being involved in the development and maintenance of the GSA (or similar) in their respective schools (see Figure 4).

When survey respondents were asked how important it was for individuals in their role to be involved in making schools safe and inclusive for LGBTQ students, 77.9% reported that it was *extremely important*, and 66.2% of respondents felt it was *extremely important* for individuals in their role to seek professional development to accomplish that end (see Figure 5).

Regarding the level of support survey respondents experienced by administration, 62.4% reported feeling either *extremely supported* or *very supported*, 53.5% of respondents reported feeling *extremely supported* or *very supported* by teachers; 31.2% reported feeling either *extremely supported* or *very supported* by parents. Refer to Figure 6 for more details on participants' feelings of support from others with regard to supporting LGBTQ youth.

### Qualitative Analysis and Results

Many of the online survey questions allowed respondents to select from a set of responses (e.g., Likert scale) and then offer further optional comments using text. Some additional questions from the online survey solicited optional responses only in the form of open text (see Appendix C).

### Qualitative Analysis of Interview Transcript Data

Interview recordings were transcribed and anonymized by a professional transcriptionist. The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for this study focused on organizing the data from transcriptions into recurrent themes/sub-themes and patterns; occurrences of data (e.g., the frequency of a particular word mentioned) were not quantified.

Table 1

*Demographic Background of Survey Participants*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	Percentage
<b>Role</b>		
Administrator	4	5.2
Other School Personnel	5	6.5
School Counsellor	12	15.6
School Psychologist	4	5.2
Teacher	50	64.9
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	67	87
Male	6	7.8
Neither of those options apply to me.	4	5.2
<b>Age</b>		
20–29;	11	14.3
30–39;	35	45.5
40–49;	23	29.9
50–59:	8	10.4
<b>Level of school in which you currently work in your role:</b>		
Elementary School	19	24.7
Junior High School	22	28.6
Senior High School	36	46.8
<b>School’s geographical setting:</b>		
Rural	24	31.2
Suburban	11	14.3
Urban	42	54.5
<b>Student population in the school where you are currently employed:</b>		
250 or less		
251–500	14	18.2
500–750	22	28.6
750–1000	22	28.6
1001–1500	8	10.4
1501–2000	8	10.4
2000 or above	2	2.6
<b>Your highest level of education:</b>		
Bachelor’s degree	44	57.1
Master’s degree	31	40.3
Doctoral degree	2	2.6
<b>Specialized training obtained in your role:</b>		
Certification	30	39
Diploma	16	20.8
Master’s Degree	29	37.7
PhD	2	2.6
<b>Years working in the current primary role selected:</b>		
Less than one year	4	5.2
One to three years	12	15.6
Three to six years	14	18.2
Six or more years	47	61

Figure 1

Survey Respondents' Feelings About Their Training With Regard to Supporting LGBTQ Youth

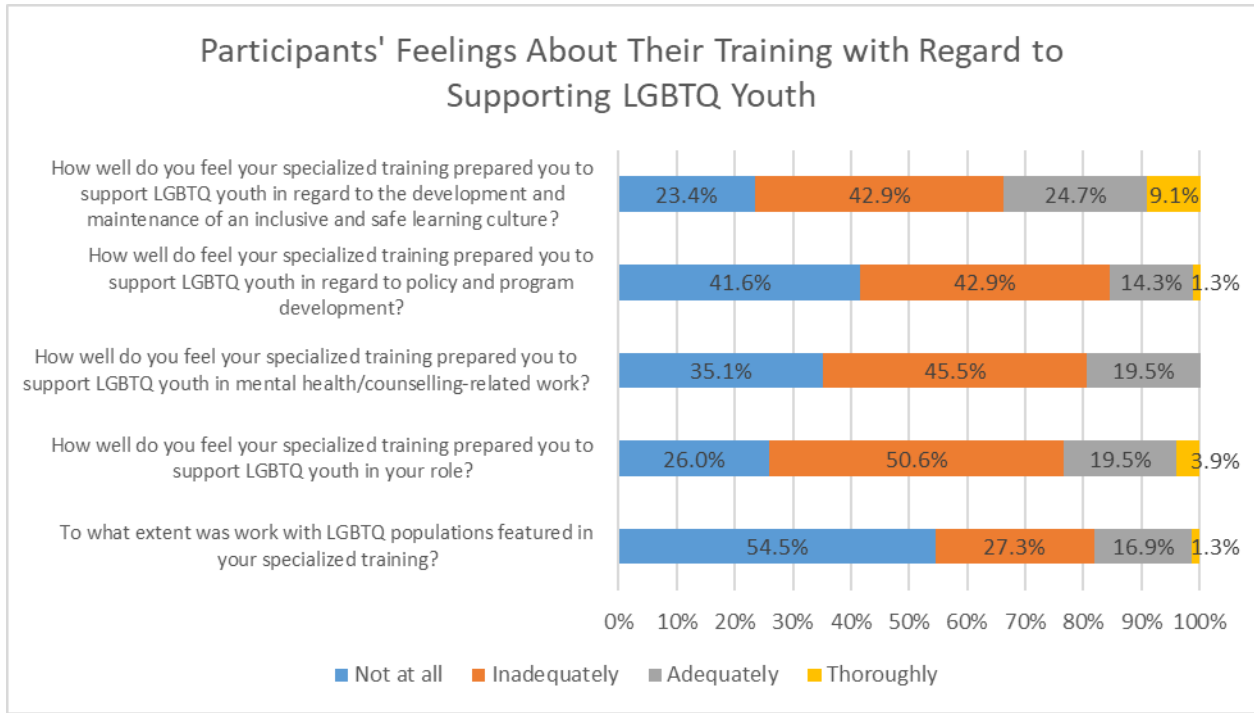


Figure 2

Respondents' Reports on the Programs Available in Their Schools to Support LGBTQ Youth

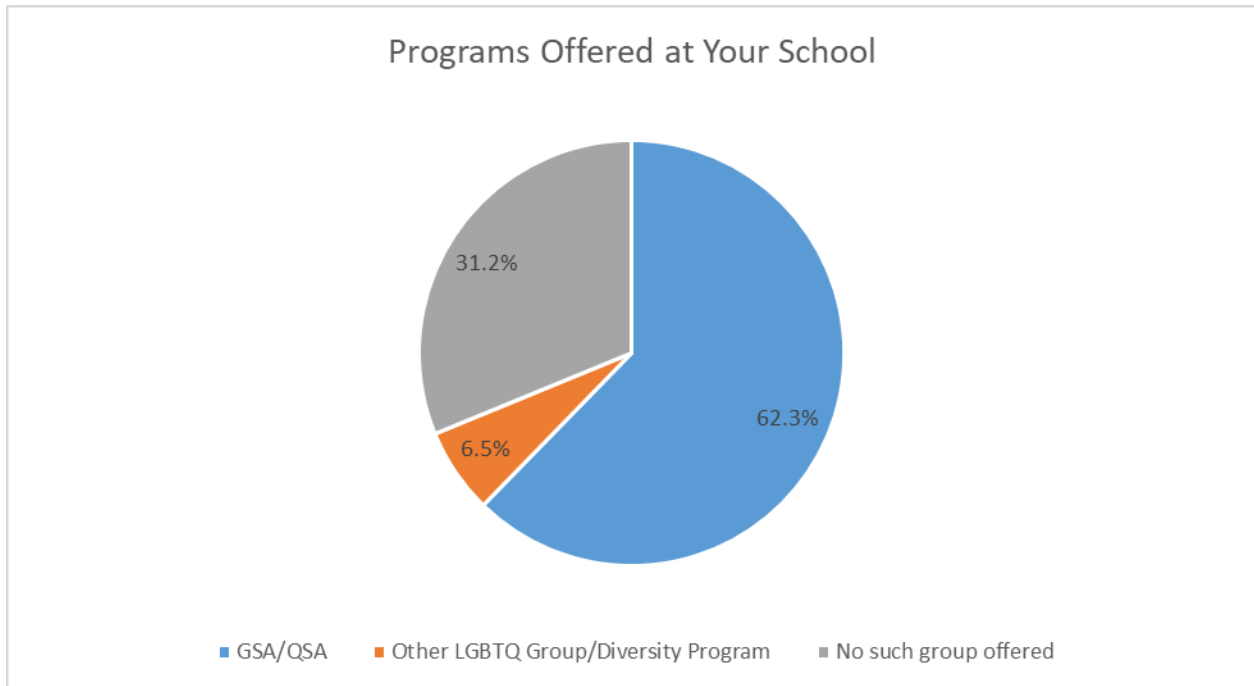


Figure 3

*Amount of Time (In Years) Survey Respondents Were Involved With the Gay-Straight Alliance/Queer-Straight Alliance in Their School*

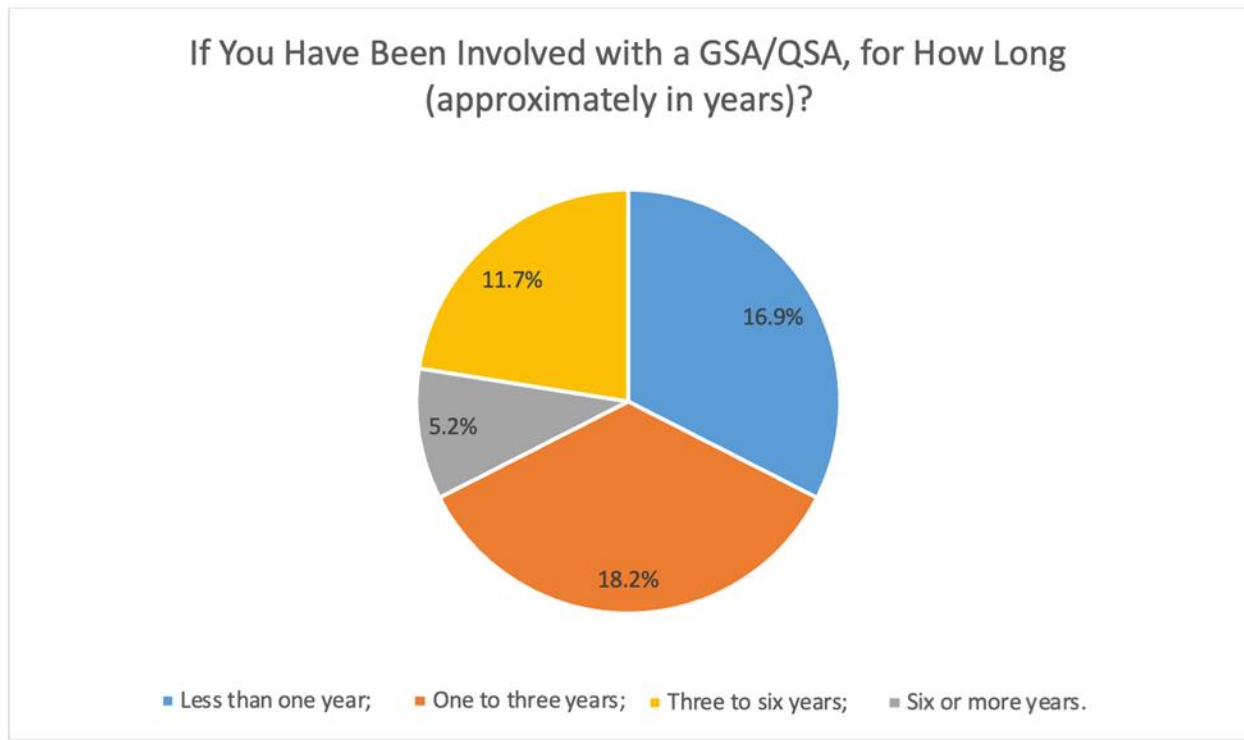


Figure 4

*Nature of the Participants' Involvement With the Gay-Straight Alliance/Queer-Straight Alliance in Their School*

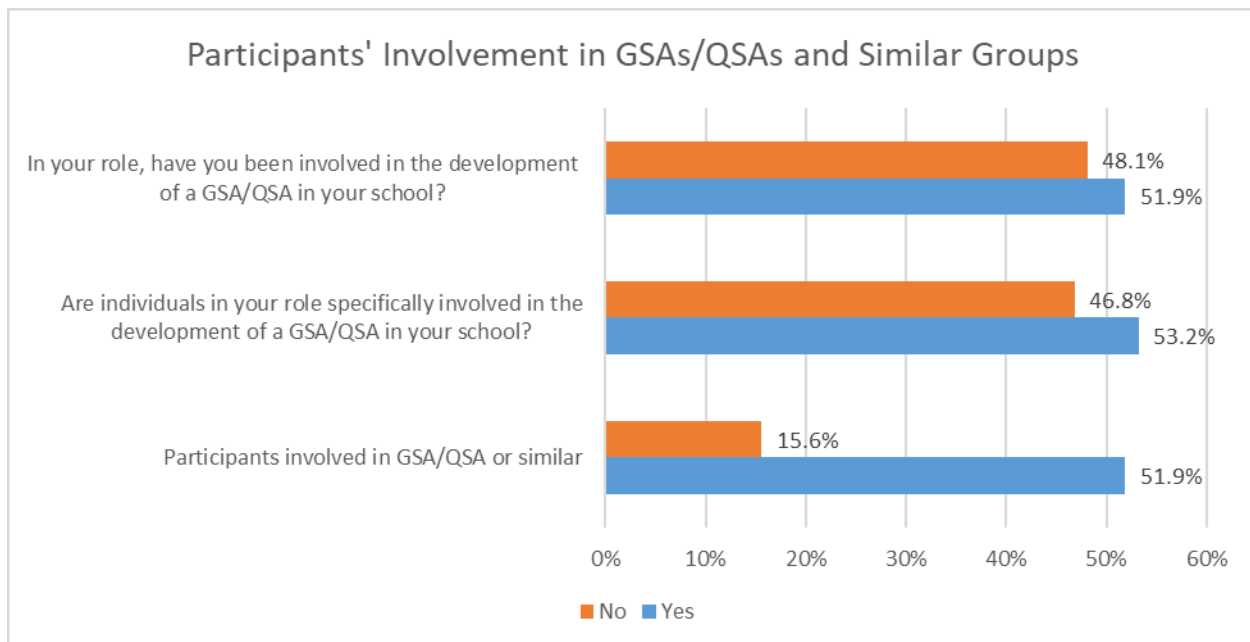




Figure 5

Survey Respondents' Feelings on the Importance of Supporting LGBTQ Youth in Their School

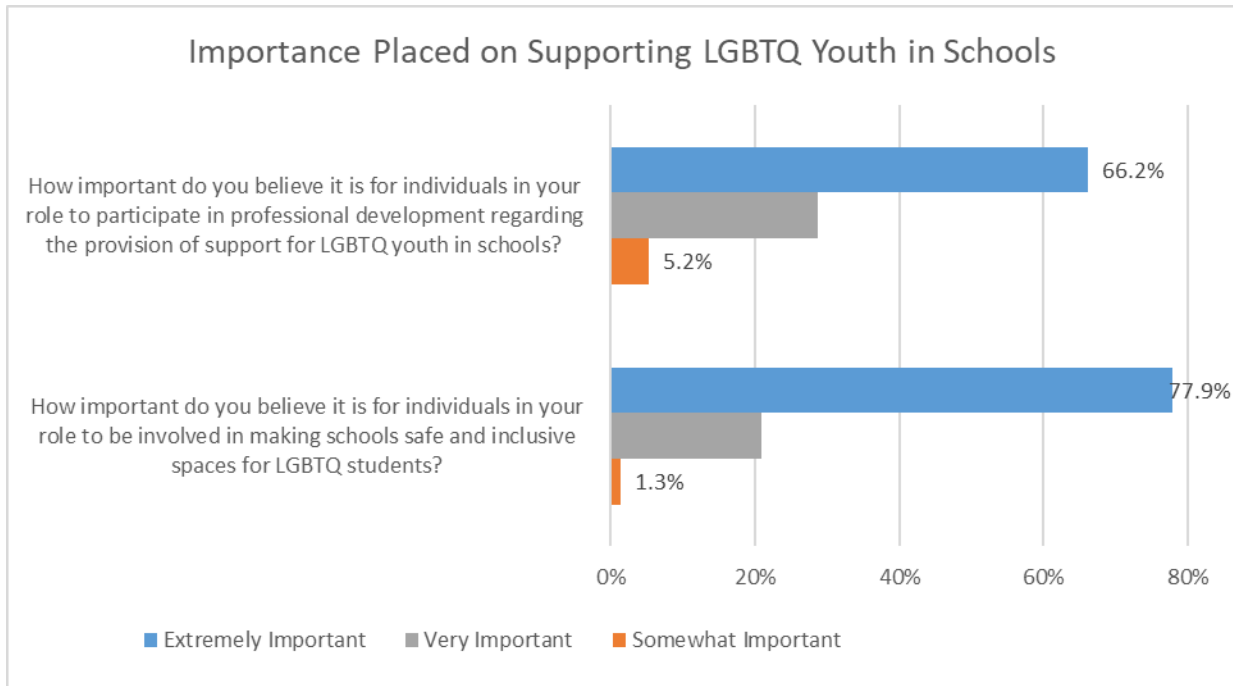


Figure 6

Level of Support From Other Members of the School Community With Regard to Supporting LGBTQ Youth Experienced by Participants

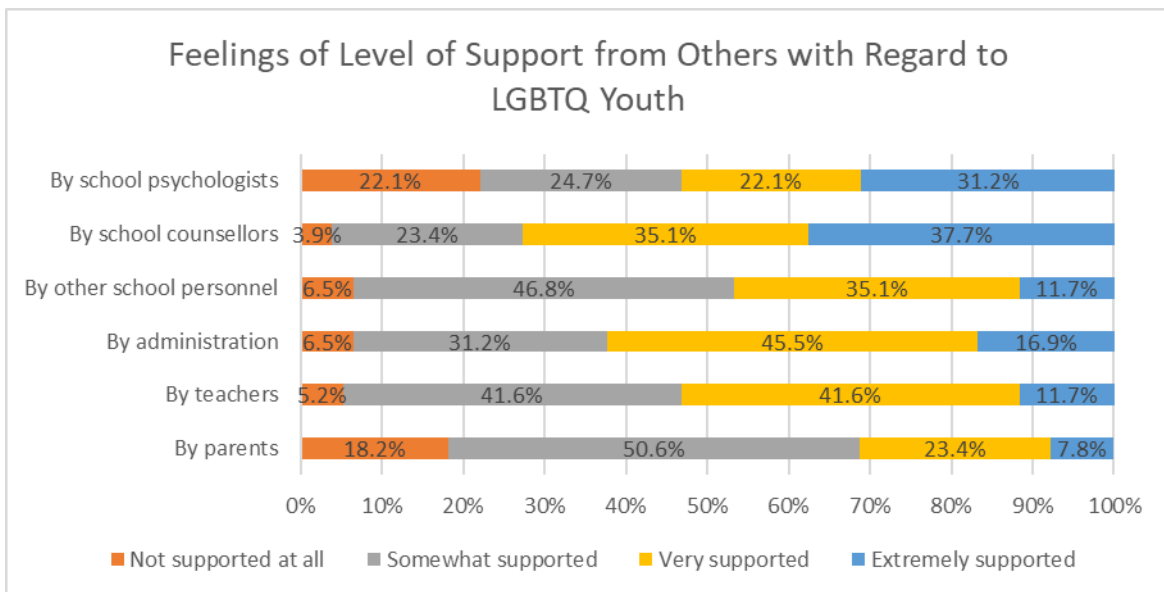
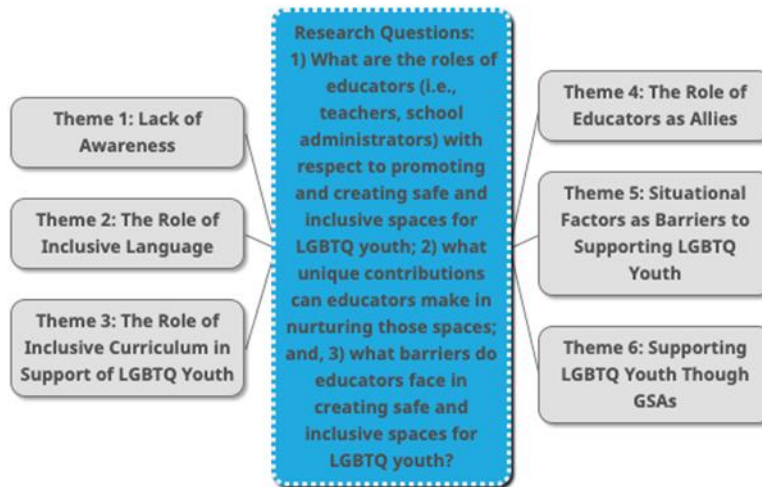


Figure 7

*Themes Generated Through Thematic Analysis Based On Survey Responses and Educator Interviewee Responses*



In phase one of the data analysis, the researchers familiarized themselves with the breadth and depth of the data. Next, each interview transcript was carefully read, and codes were generated with regard to the experiences of educators in supporting LGBTQ youth. The next phase involved beginning the process of organizing codes and their relevant excerpts from the transcripts into meaningful groups, themes, sub-themes, and patterns. In phase four, the researchers reviewed the themes. Phase five involved refining the themes, analyzing their related excerpts, and generating clear definitions for them. In the last phase, the final analysis of the data was completed and the report was written based on that analysis.

Figure 7 presents the themes generated through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as they related to the research questions of this study. Each theme generated provides insight and context to at least one of the research questions in this study.

Theme 1 (Lack of Awareness) relates to *what barriers do educators face in creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth?* Interviewees commented on how their pre-service training generally insufficiently prepared them to support LGBTQ youth; additionally, now that they are working in a school, professional development opportunities about supporting LGBTQ youth are scarce. For example, when asked about role-specific training, one administrator commented:

No, not that I'm aware of. Other than the ability to phone our ... office and ask what can I do about this situation. But as far as, like workshops, so that you just instinctively feel confident in it, not so much. I guess it's not too often that one would handle it completely alone. We bounce things off each other, but yeah, that's a gap too, I would say.

A teacher in a Catholic school mentioned how even the most basic training is not available to her:

... we've had nothing, ever, no training. So, if we could have a school PD day where we just got basic tips on, you know, like, "You have LGBTQ students in your school, this is how you can make them feel welcome." I think that would be amazing.

The lack of training around LGBTQ issues can contribute to the misconception that only students in senior grades face issues related to gender and sexual diversity. As one teacher commented, “I would like elementary teachers especially to know [more information], because they tend to, in my personal opinion, view issues about LGBTQ students as being for junior high or senior high teachers. Which is completely untrue.”

Theme 2 (The Role of Inclusive Language) relates to *what unique contributions can educators make in nurturing those spaces*, and, *what barriers do educators face in creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth?* One interviewee commented on the impact language can have and about the importance of educating others about the use of LGBTQ-invalidating language:

So just trying to educate parents on the words you say, the slang words, all that sort of stuff, kids are listening to that, little kids are listening to that. Like, I listened to my little pre-school neighbours the other day, and the little guy was ... teasing the other kid that he had autism, and that he was gay. And I thought, “You’re four, where is he getting this stuff from?” It’s not a school thing. So, parents need to be more cautious with their words.

Some educators interviewed commented on how some of their colleagues (e.g., teachers, administrators) lacked an awareness of LGBTQ-inclusive language, and at times, marginalized LGBTQ youth as a result (i.e., by using invalidating language). For instance, one teacher said, “I feel that it was just ignorance in a lot of cases ... I suppose [teachers] were just kind of comfortable using certain phrases because they had never been challenged before.” However, interviewees commented that the tolerance for invalidating and offensive language is often specific to certain groups (e.g., LGBTQ), but would be considered inappropriate if it impacted other marginalized youth:

... if you were to say something that was kind of a little bit racist, somebody would call you on that, for sure, in the classroom. But if you accidentally said something that was against a gender-minority group, that you didn’t even realize you were saying, nobody is ever going to say anything to you.

Theme 3 (The Role of Inclusive Curriculum in Supporting LGBTQ Youth) relates to *what unique contributions can educators make in nurturing those spaces*, and, *what barriers do educators face in creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth?* For example, one interviewee commented on how topics explored in Biology can perpetuate heteronormativity: “the [Biology] 30 curriculum talks about things in a really binary way (i.e., that only males and females exist).” Some educators commented on the importance of combatting heteronormativity in the classroom by normalizing LGBTQ-related topics. One educator commented:

... but I just try to portray, like anytime an issue comes up that it’s not a big deal to me and it’s just 100% okay. And I find that a lot of kids will come out to me, lots of times in their writing, because you know they’re writing a personal reflection and they’ll come out in their writing, just in a no big deal way, like, “Me and my girlfriend went to the movies this weekend.” So, I think they do get a sense from me that, at least in my classroom, it’s a safe space.

Some educators interviewed reported on some of the subject areas (e.g., Physical Education, English) that lend themselves well to infusing LGBTQ-affirmative content, and some of the strategies they use. One educator commented, “So, English class, Social Studies class for sure,

human rights in Canada. I mean there's so many opportunities [for] trans-curriculum or [to] trans-weave in through different curriculums"

Theme 4 (The Role of Educators as Allies) relates to all three research questions in this study. One interviewee commented on the importance of visible male teaching staff as allies:

... gender roles are so rigid, the fact that we have male staff, all of our male staff buying in, has already changed a lot of behaviours at the school. I'm hoping that it's not temporary, but the change is tangible. It's really noticeable.

Further, educators interviewed commented on the value of having staff members (e.g., teachers) who are openly LGBTQ, as they can be very influential toward students. As one administrator interviewed said:

Two of our staff members are actually married to each other—two women—and they have their wedding picture of each other on their desk. So, then all the students who are in contact with those teachers are very aware of it, and they're very well-liked and respected teachers, and I think it's made a big impact. They're able to put a face and a personality to it all, instead of it being an unknown entity.

Several educators interviewed explained that they had assumed the official or unofficial role of "safe contact" in their school or school board. This usually occurs when an educator ally advocates for safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth; they may possibly complete professional development to learn how to support those youth, and as a result, are regarded by their colleagues as the de facto human resource on many matters related to supporting LGBTQ youth. Amongst the educators interviewed who had assumed the safe contact role, they said that it was generally an unpaid responsibility whose tasks were in addition to their regular teaching load. One educator described her safe contact role:

I think I'm looked to in our district as a go-to person, which I feel very proud of. I also feel it's a lot on me because just the fact that ... I've taken this on because nobody else was taking it on and it needs to be done. So, I'm almost resentful, like, "Why do I have to do this?" But at the same time, I really enjoy it and I'm really proud of it. So, it's a bittersweet feeling. But my staff is super supportive. They're totally on the same page with me.

Theme 5 (Situational Factors as Barriers to Supporting LGBTQ Youth) relates to *what unique contributions can educators make in nurturing those spaces*, and, *what barriers do educators face in creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth?* One educator interviewed commented on how difficult it was to support LGBTQ youth while maintaining the values of the [faith-based] institution:

Because we're expected to teach from a faith-based perspective, I need to make it work so that I'm not alienating any of the students in my class and everybody still feels like my class is a safe space, regardless of what some parents might be thinking.

Religious barriers and tensions were consistently highlighted among educators interviewed who worked in Catholic schools. One administrator interviewed commented on how LGBTQ students find themselves in a difficult position if they attend a Catholic school:

The idea that [students] have to come forward and ask for a GSA is a little bit ridiculous, especially when the message in their religion class, which they have every day, is that “We don’t hate you but we hate everything that you might want to do because [you are LGBTQ].”

Many educators interviewed stated the importance of framing their LGBTQ-affirmative efforts in such a way as to not rouse controversy from conservative parents or a religious community. For example, many educators interviewed and surveyed said that they referred to their GSA by another name (e.g., Rainbow Club, Diversity Club) because the alternative club names were less controversial, even though their scope was the same as a GSA. One educator interviewed explained how she balances supporting LGBTQ youth with not raising concerns from a community that opposes LGBTQ-affirmative efforts:

The way to get the community members to be more comfortable with [LGBTQ-affirmative efforts], I suppose, is to frame it as “diversity.” It is a religious community and, unfortunately, to state certain things overtly would be to push people away, or at least certain people, and then it would probably make things more difficult for [LGBTQ] students.

Theme 6 (Supporting LGBTQ Youth Through GSAs) relates to all three research questions in this study. Educators interviewed often highlighted the importance and value of allowing GSA members to plan and determine GSA activities and initiatives. In doing so, those members have a chance to express their needs and have their voices heard: “We allow the students to structure it more. Like, what do you want to do, what do you need, what do you see happening? What needs aren’t being met? That kind of stuff.”

For some LGBTQ youth, GSA meetings provide support and strategies to address the marginalization they face:

In the past also, it’s been a little bit of conflict resolution conversation of like, “Okay, here’s maybe a way to approach a teacher or a principal or a community member or a person or like, here’s stuff you could try out when you’re having those difficult conversations.”

## Discussion

### Roles of Educators in Support of LGBTQ Youth in Schools

When survey participants in the current study were asked about how important they felt it was for individuals in their roles as educators to be involved in making schools safe and inclusive for LGBTQ youth, 77.9% reported that it was *extremely important*. These results are unsurprising given the method of sampling used (i.e., probability sampling through advertisements on LGBTQ-affirmative social media), and that educators who show supportive attitudes and behaviors toward gender and sexually-diverse youth are generally attuned to the victimization those youth face (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2008). However, according to research, these supportive attitudes and behaviors are inconsistent with how students may perceive educators to be with regard to the LGBTQ-affirmative behaviors (i.e., educators seem unresponsive to LGBTQ victimization; Kosciw et al., 2016). The relationship between teachers who believe that more should be done to support LGBTQ youth but who do not act accordingly is reflected in recent literature. Thein (2013) found that most of the participants in her study (i.e., 20 Language Arts teachers) held neutral or positive stances toward LGBTQ individuals and the issues they face, but that 75% of those participants

believed that LGBTQ themes and texts could not or should not be taught in Language Arts classrooms. Their participants provided reasons for their non-action including that teaching about sex is not their job (i.e., appropriateness), threats to their career, the fear that raising awareness around LGBTQ issues will contribute to more bullying, that teaching about LGBTQ issues is unfair to those who hold anti-gay views, and that they do not feel able or prepared to teach about LGBTQ issues. Their research contributes to our understanding of why there is such a misalignment between educators' attitudes about and efforts to support LGBTQ youth, and the perceptions of students with regard to those same attitudes and behaviors. However, a gap in the research still remains with regard to surmounting the common barriers to supporting LGBTQ youth in schools (which is addressed in the present study).

The teachers interviewed in this study gave some specific examples of how they sought to create a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ youth, and the benefits of doing so. For example, they shared the importance of building a sense of connectedness with the LGBTQ youth in their schools. Research has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between LGBTQ youth's sense of connectedness to school and educators, and positive outcomes in psychosocial, academic, and attendance domains (Craig & Smith, 2014; Goodenow et al., 2006; Konishi et al., 2010; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Russell et al., 2001). Educators interviewed fostered this sense of connectedness by demonstrating LGBTQ-affirmative attitudes toward students, being out to students (i.e., for those teachers who identified as LGBTQ themselves), using correct gender pronouns, and communicating openness and acceptance in the way they interact with students and discuss issues about gender and sexual diversity. For instance, one educator interviewed works in an outreach school where student attendance can be inconsistent; this educator commented that her LGBTQ-affirmative attitude had a positive effect on student success as those students are attending her classes regularly and graduating. These findings are consistent with research that shows that LGBTQ youth who can identify a supportive adult in school are less likely to report having been victimized (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2013), have better attendance, and higher GPAs and graduation rates than those who cannot identify a supportive adult (Kosciw et al., 2016). On a more general level, Liboro et al.'s (2015) study in a Catholic school found that nurturing whole-school values toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (i.e., values espoused by many Catholics) could contribute to an environment of kindness and acceptance toward LGBTQ individuals. The current study contributes to the body of research in this area in the way that educators gave specific strategies to facilitating an environment in which LGBTQ youth felt connected to their teachers and felt accepted in their schools.

For many interviewees in Liboro and colleagues' study (2015), the success of their school's LGBTQ-affirmative efforts was largely due to the support and progressive thinking of their administrators (e.g., principals, vice-principals). The administrators interviewed in the present study highlighted the importance of building relationships with and openly demonstrating support for LGBTQ youth in their schools. Wright and Smith (2015) provided examples of how administrators can create more affirmative environments for LGBTQ youth through consistently enforcing policies related to the use of homophobic language, providing professional development about the learning needs of LGBT students and respect for all members of the school community, and by raising awareness of the need to intervene when LGBT people are treated disrespectfully.

The findings from Liboro and colleagues' study (2015) are unique as extant research has largely neglected the strategies administrators use to support and build relationships with LGBTQ youth, and the present study extends that body of research. However, given the overall dearth of research available on the role of administrators in supporting LGBTQ youth, further qualitative

investigation with a larger sample is merited. Administrators interviewed commented that building relationships with LGBTQ youth was essential in rendering them approachable should those youth wish to request a GSA, or report incidents of victimization. Administrators interviewed highlighted the importance of being attuned to and addressing the victimization faced by LGBTQ students; they also expressed the importance of building relationships with as many students and their families as possible. That relationship-building process can begin when students initially register in the school and principals have the opportunity to interview them and their families, learn about their needs, and seek to meet those needs (e.g., providing all gender washrooms). Administrators interviewed also discussed the importance of dealing with LGBTQ victimization (i.e., discipline issues) in a discreet and thorough way.

Wright and Smith's (2015) research highlighted the overall lack of training administrators had received as it relates to supporting LGBTQ youth, and they provide some examples of general ways that administrators can improve the school climate for those youth (see above); however, none of the literature reviewed by the researchers of this present study gave examples of specific administrator actions and behaviors that intended to create safer and more inclusive climates for those youth. Therefore, the present study advances our understanding in that area as the administrators interviewed provided specific strategies they use in their roles to support LGBTQ youth (e.g., meeting with all new students, using discretion and maintaining anonymity of students when dealing with discipline issues, visibly showing they are an ally).

Among survey participants who were asked about the level of support they experienced from administrators (in their efforts to create safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth), 62.2% reported feeling *very supported* or *extremely supported*. These findings seem to be unique in that extant research has largely neglected to quantify the level of support from administrators experienced by educators with regard to supporting LGBTQ youth. However, given the nature of the sampling used in the present study, these seemingly positive results may overestimate the perceived level of support from administrators on a grander scale. For example, Kosciw et al. (2016) reported that more than a quarter of students said that their administration was *very* or *somewhat unsupportive*. As such, further investigation with regard to the perceived support from administration (by teachers and students) is merited, as well as the specific actions that communicate positive levels of support.

The teachers interviewed commented on how the support shown by administrators is most effective when it is public (i.e., when others can see administrators showing LGBTQ-affirmative attitudes and behaviors). That public demonstration of support can communicate a culture of safety and inclusivity toward LGBTQ students as well as legitimize the LGBTQ-affirmative efforts made by teachers (e.g., communicate to teachers that discussing LGBTQ topics is acceptable). Administrators can publicly demonstrate their support for LGBTQ youth by allowing school staff to openly ask questions and express concerns about issues surrounding gender and sexually-diverse students (e.g., in staff meetings). Educators interviewed felt that when students witness administrators demonstrating LGBTQ-affirmative attitudes, a message of safety and inclusivity is communicated. Research supports these public efforts on the part of all educators as being crucial in the way they contribute to greater feelings of safety for all students—not just LGBTQ youth (Russell & McGuire, 2008).

Educators interviewed commented on the importance of intervening when anti-LGBTQ comments were made in the classroom. They gave examples of the assertive but respectful ways in which they addressed those comments so not to alienate any student in particular. Those efforts are particularly meaningful given that some research has identified teacher intervention (i.e.,

when LGBTQ victimization occurs) as the most important factor in creating a climate of safety for LGBTQ youth (Russell & McGuire, 2008). Conversely, recent research shows that teachers' responses to LGBTQ victimization often exacerbates the problem, which suggests that not all action on the part of teachers is actually helpful. Gowen and Wings-Yanez (2014) highlighted what educators should not do in the face of LGBTQ victimization. The students in their study commented on the unhelpful "exclusive" strategies some teachers use, and those include: silencing (e.g., ignoring the LGBTQ topic; stating that the topic cannot be addressed); heterocentricity (e.g., only discussing vaginal intercourse); and pathologizing (e.g., bringing up LGBTQ identities in the context of AIDS/STDs, statistics on risky behaviour). The present study furthers our understanding in this area as educators interviewed gave specific examples of how they intervened effectively (e.g., responding consistently, explaining impact of language used); these kinds of specific examples have been largely absent from extant literature.

Educators interviewed in this study expressed the importance of infusing LGBTQ topics and identities into the curriculum and gave specific examples of the strategies they used to do so. The value they place on those efforts is consistent with extant research that suggests that the presence of LGBTQ-affirmative content in the curriculum contributes to an overall sense of safety for LGBTQ youth (McGuire et al., 2010). Results from McGuire and colleagues' (2010) study suggest that even one educator advocating for LGBTQ youth through their curriculum can have a substantially positive impact on how safe those youth feel. However, educators interviewed also expressed concerns about the existing [Alberta] curriculum in that it does not inherently contain LGBTQ representation; as such, those educators make extra efforts to include LGBTQ identities and LGBTQ-affirmative content in the topics covered in class and to normalize those identities by using inclusive language. For example, one educator maintained that the Sexual Education curriculum is heteronormative (i.e., lacks any representation of non-heterosexual relationships), and that her LGBTQ students have asked to explore topics of sexuality during GSA meetings. These reports from teachers interviewed are consistent with the literature that maintains that many educators assume their students are heterosexual (i.e., heteronormativity); those assumptions translate into a lack of LGBTQ representation in the curriculum, thus invalidating the identities of LGBTQ students in class (Burt et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2020). Some educators reported that when they communicate their LGBTQ-affirmative attitudes to students through the delivery of curriculum, those students may feel comfortable enough to confide in those educators about private matters, and sometimes come out to them. This is consistent with Goodenow and colleagues' (2006) research which found that gender and sexually-diverse youth were more likely to disclose issues of victimization to teachers with whom they felt comfortable (i.e., teachers who communicated LGBTQ-affirmative attitudes); further, LGBTQ youth are more likely to come out if they have trusted teachers around them (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2008). The findings from the current study further our understanding of the specific behaviours educators employ in order to build a relationship of trust and safety with their students.

Educators interviewed highlighted some specific subject areas that lend themselves well to infusing LGBTQ representation and affirmative content. Drama teachers, for instance, can use role-play strategies of diverse families (e.g., same-sex couples); Physical Education teachers can make reference to students in gender non-specific ways (e.g., "leader and follower" instead of "male and female;" "hey class" instead of "boys and girls"); English teachers can select books that have LGBTQ characters and themes in them, and Science teachers can teach about the diversity of various species and how not all of them are exclusively male or female. There has been some research focusing on specific subject areas and the challenges educators face when infusing



LGBTQ-affirmative curriculum in their classes (e.g., Language Arts; Thein, 2013), however, more research on the specific strategies used by educators to communicate their support for and availability to LGBTQ youth is needed (e.g., Craig & Smith, 2014; Goodenow et al., 2006; Rivers & Noret, 2008; Russell et al., 2001). Therefore, the present study is unique in the way that it extends our understanding in this area as educators provided subject-specific strategies to communicate LGBTQ-affirmative attitudes to their students.

Several educators interviewed commented that past initiatives to represent diverse cultural identities into the curriculum have been successful in Alberta (e.g., inclusion of topics related to Indigenous peoples, French-Canadian culture); currently, themes of diversity are present in the curriculum but do not include LGBTQ people. The youth in Taylor and Peter's (2009) study echoed these findings in the way that they felt other cultural identities were represented in the curriculum, but not their own (i.e., LGBTQ). That lack of representation communicates to students that other forms of diversity are respectable, but not their own.

The present study sheds light on a unique role some educators assume in support of LGBTQ youth—the “Safe Contact.” Similarly, some participants in Beck's study (2020) took on an unofficial similar role in their school prompted by their personal [victimization] experiences, and/or because they recognized that no such support was available in their school to LGBTQ youth and their families. Educators interviewed in the present study reported that the safe contact in schools is an individual who provides information on how to support LGBTQ youth. The safe contact may consult with teachers and other staff, present LGBTQ-related topics in staff meetings, or serve as a reference point for LGBTQ families or LGBTQ youth in the school. Most often amongst the educators interviewed, the safe contact also served as the GSA advisor to students. At times, the safe contact may be called upon to intervene when there is a crisis involving youth from the LGBTQ community, but they can also provide general information to staff on how to support LGBTQ youth through the curriculum, or explain the use of LGBTQ-affirmative language and gender-neutral pronouns. Safe contacts may have specific training in the area of supporting LGBTQ youth, they may belong to the LGBTQ community themselves, or may simply be allies and advocates for gender and sexually-diverse youth with no specialized training at all. The safe contact title may be official or unofficial; some educators reported that they received time-release and recognition from administrators for their safe contact efforts, whereas others fulfilled the responsibilities of the role in addition to their regular teaching load. The presence of a safe contact in schools highlights the need for LGBTQ advocates as well as educators who can provide guidance and training to others in support of gender and sexually-diverse youth.

## **Discussion Related to Barriers in Supporting LGBTQ Youth**

Educators interviewed in the present study highlighted a number of barriers they experience to supporting LGBTQ youth. Sometimes those barriers differed based on the situational factors of the school (e.g., rural, Catholic). For instance, educators interviewed expressed concerns and frustration with the lack of guidance on infusing LGBTQ content into the curriculum; those concerns seemed more pronounced among educators in Catholic schools.

Research has also consistently shown that educators lack the training and guidance to incorporate LGBTQ-related topics into their curricula (Bahr et al., 2000; Bradley et al., 2019; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008). The challenges to infusing LGBTQ-affirmative content are well-documented in the literature (e.g., Callaghan, 2019; Liboro et al., 2015), and the current study extends our understanding of how those challenges uniquely impact LGBTQ youth in Catholic

schools as detailed below.

Helpful and subject-specific resources on infusing LGBTQ content into the curriculum may be scarce in general, however, educators in Catholic schools may need to seek approval to use [what are perceived to be] controversial resources, and they may experience the added challenge in finding ones that do not directly conflict with Catholic doctrine. Educators interviewed and surveyed often stated that it was challenging to find available resources that used inclusive language and depicted diverse families (e.g., same-sex couples). Only few studies to date (e.g., Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015; Pearce & Cumming-Potvin, 2017) have examined how LGBTQ-affirmative content can be infused into specific areas of the curriculum; two of the aforementioned studies focus on the language arts classroom, and none of them discuss specific strategies from the Catholic school perspective. Therefore, the present study highlights a gap in the literature with regard to how educators can infuse LGBTQ-affirmative content into a variety of school subjects, and with the added constrictions of Catholic school doctrine.

Educators interviewed highlighted a constant concern that their efforts to infuse LGBTQ-affirmative content into their curriculum may provoke strong negative reactions from parents or other members of the school community. Some educators interviewed feel that they would not be protected from job loss should a parent raise a complaint about the LGBTQ content in their classes. The fear of complaints from parents have been documented in the literature as a major concern from educators who wish to support LGBTQ youth; further, complaints from parents create extra burdensome administrative tasks for educators as well (e.g., meetings, responding to emails; Fredman et al., 2015). Educators risking job loss as a result of their LGBTQ-affirmative attitudes and practices has been commonly documented in extant literature (e.g., Fredman et al., 2015; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; Szalacha, 2004, Wright & Smith, 2015). Some of those educators interviewed in the present study had never been explicitly told not to use LGBTQ content in their classes but felt that there were unspoken rules in the school forbidding it. Educators interviewed in other qualitative studies experienced similar uncertainties with regard to what they are allowed to teach in support of LGBTQ youth (e.g., Fredman et al., 2015). Some male educators in other qualitative studies reported concerns about being perceived as homosexual themselves, or if they were elementary school teachers, being perceived as pedophiles by other members of the school community should they advocate for LGBTQ youth (Bliss & Harris, 1999; Graybill et al., 2009). Concerns from educators about being perceived as homosexual or a pedophile did not emerge in the present study; however, only two male educators were interviewed in the present study and both were administrators. Some of the barriers to supporting LGBTQ youth in schools elicited in the present study echo findings from Their's research (see above) and continue to highlight the need for specific strategies to support, not only LGBTQ youth, but their teacher allies. Further, strategies to address the threats specific to male teachers, as well as those who work with younger students, present a gap in the current literature with regard to supporting LGBTQ youth.

Educators interviewed were most likely to experience opposition to supporting LGBTQ youth from parents (e.g., in the present study, 68.8% of educators reported feeling *somewhat supported* to *not supported at all* by parents on the survey). According to educators interviewed, parents may refuse to acknowledge their own child's preferred gender pronoun, express criticism about LGBTQ-affirmative content in the classroom, protest the establishment of a GSA, or disagree with a teacher who reprimands a child for using homophobic language. Those educators interviewed often felt that rousing complaints from parents could lead to job loss; some referenced examples

of colleagues who had lost their teaching positions for delivering what was deemed inappropriate LGBTQ-related content.

### **Empirical and Practical Implications of the Study**

Within the Alberta context, educators report inadequate training and professional development to support LGBTQ youth; as a result, those educators feel ill-equipped to infuse LGBTQ-affirmative content into their curriculum as well as to support LGBTQ youth with some of the issues those youth face.

Extant research supports the protective role that educators can have in buffering LGBTQ youth from negative outcomes (e.g., McGuire et al., 2010); findings from the current study support that research (i.e., educators report that it is especially important to provide adult support to LGBTQ youth) and extend our knowledge by providing specific ways in which educators can build meaningful relationships with LGBTQ youth.

Educators in the present study consistently reported the influential role school administrators have in legitimizing the efforts of LGBTQ-affirmative initiatives (e.g., GSAs, LGBTQ-affirmative curriculum). With the exception of few studies (e.g., Beck, 2020; Wright & Smith, 2015), the highly influential role of administrators in supporting LGBTQ youth has been largely absent from the literature. The current study provides some insight into how administrators can use their influence to create safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth and teachers alike, as well as their allies. Moreover, the findings in from this study suggest that more focused research with respect to administrators' perceptions, roles, and training needs relative to LGBTQ students and GSAs within schools is needed.

GSAs can foster social support for LGBTQ youth and contribute to an overall sense of safety and inclusivity for all students (Kosciw et al., 2016; Russell & McGuire, 2008); GSAs in the present study were seen to provide and contribute to similar positive outcomes. The current study extends our knowledge of how GSAs can provide unique opportunities to support LGBTQ youth (e.g., sex and health-related education) as well as specific strategies that aid in the ongoing maintenance of GSAs (e.g., inviting guest speakers, letting students lead). More research related to specific strategies for maintaining and enriching GSAs in schools as well as more research relative to the benefits of GSAs in schools would seem to be important to undertake as society and educational policies evolve in the future.

Administrators can support LGBTQ-affirmative efforts by visibly demonstrating their support for gender and sexually-diverse youth (e.g., supporting GSAs and their initiatives) and by legitimizing LGBTQ-affirmative initiatives in the school (e.g., mandating LGBTQ-affirmative training, ensuring that LGBTQ identities are present in the curriculum). Administrators can also support LGBTQ youth by hiring LGBTQ-affirmative educators. The need for administrator-specific professional development has been identified in the present study.

Educators in the present study highlighted a number of barriers to infusing LGBTQ-affirmative content into their curriculum (e.g., lack of resources, lack of direction), and these barriers are consistent with extant research (Ngo, 2003; Wright & Smith, 2015). The present study extends our knowledge in this area as educators interviewed provided specific examples of how LGBTQ-affirmative behaviors and practices could be easily implemented across various subject matter (e.g., exposing students to newspaper articles about diversity issues in English class).

Parents have been seen to play a critical role in shaping the attitudes of young people with regard to their LGBTQ-related attitudes. If educators consistently report a lack of training and

professional development to understand and support LGBTQ youth, it stands to reason that parents are also generally quite unaware of the victimization LGBTQ youth experience. Therefore, efforts can be made to raise awareness among parents regarding the needs of LGBTQ youth and how the school community as a whole can support them.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the primary interest and focus of this study was to explore the roles of educators in creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth, the unique contributions those educators make, and the barriers they encounter. The educators interviewed in the present study take supportive roles toward LGBTQ youth by building relationships with those youth, leading GSAs, infusing LGBTQ-affirmative content into the curriculum, supporting their colleagues with information and strategies to support LGBTQ individuals, and by advocating for sexual and gender minority students. Educators may experience barriers to supporting LGBTQ youth due to a lack of training and professional development in related areas, fear of job loss, backlash from religious and conservative community members, lack of resources, and lack of guidance and leadership from administration. Despite these barriers, most educators surveyed felt it was extremely important to support LGBTQ youth in their schools.

Much research to date about LGBTQ-issues in schools has focused on quantitative analysis and reporting of victimization rates. That type of research should continue, as some studies suggest that the victimization rates of LGBTQ individuals are actually increasing in school despite raised awareness and more legislation to protect sexual and gender-minority youth. Principal preparation programs (e.g., around issues of homosexuality) can help administrators consider the issues faced by LGBTQ youth analytically, as opposed to those principals acting based on emotions or religious-based views. Given that parents are a critical source of guidance and education to their children with regard to LGBTQ-affirmative or heteronormative values, those principal preparation programs can also focus on support and education for parents (e.g., how to work collaboratively with them).

Given the highly influential role of administrators in creating safe environments for LGBTQ students, educators, and their allies, more emphasis on professional development opportunities for administrators in this area is needed. Further, adequate training around supporting LGBTQ youth in schools for all educator roles continues to be an area for development in teacher/principal pre-service and professional development programs. Given that training programs and legislation continue to lag behind the realities of LGBTQ victimization in schools, educators benefit from ready-to-use strategies to make positive impacts on the LGBTQ youth they come into contact with every day.

Given the need for and benefit of coordinated efforts to address LGBTQ victimization in schools, teacher associations (e.g., Alberta Teachers' Association) should consider establishing task force committees to make recommendations for moving forward with LGBTQ protective policies and procedures, and to address many of the issues presented in this study. Furthermore, Faculties of Education should closely examine how topics of diversity, inclusion, and equity are featured in their programs and work toward better preparing pre-service candidates to raise awareness of LGBTQ issues and be advocates for gender and sexually-diverse youth in schools.

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Andrew Luceno is a Registered Psychologist with the College of Alberta Psychologists. He has completed undergraduate studies in psychology and education, and graduate-level studies in international counselling and educational psychology. Prior to moving to Calgary 4-years ago, Andrew worked internationally as a special educator and school counsellor for 12-years. His experiences as a classroom teacher, special educator, university admissions counsellor, social-emotional counsellor, and psychologist

span the globe from Toronto, Calgary, Istanbul, Amsterdam, and Hong Kong where he held a split role as Counsellor and Learning Strategist. Andrew has a passion for social justice and has dedicated his research efforts to examining how educators facilitate safe and inclusive school environments for sexual and gender-diverse youth. He is a founding member of the Psychologists' Association of Alberta's Technology in Practice Task Force, and the recent recipient of the Canadian Psychological Association's Certificate of Academic Excellence.

*Dr. Jac J.W. Andrews*, Professor and Chair, School and Applied Child Psychology, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary and Registered Psychologist in the Province of Alberta. Over his career at the University of Calgary, Dr. Andrews have produced over 100 publications and have conducted over 200 presentations, workshops, and seminars. He has written/edited 10 books (1990-2015), 3 Provincial and International Teaching Manuals (1986-1991), 3 Special Editions in Educational and Psychology Journals (1993-2017). He is currently finalizing a book on the mental health of children and adolescents to be published by Springer (2021) and has submitted a proposal for a book on clinical reasoning to Academic Press/ Elsevier (2021). He has three times received the Award of Teaching Excellence and Honorable Mention from the University of Calgary Student Union (1996, 1997, 1998) as well as the Award of Teaching Excellence from the Faculty of Education, University of Calgary (1997), and the Award of Teaching Excellence from the Undergraduate Society, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary (1996). He has been nominated for the Instructor of the Year Award, Students Union, University of Calgary (1995) and received the Great Supervisor Award, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Calgary (2014). He was nominated for the Award of Outstanding Researcher, Alberta Teachers Association (1999) and the Annual Distinguished Lecture Award for the Faculty of Education, University of Calgary (1999). Moreover, he has been twice nominated for the National 3M Teaching Fellowship Award, Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and 3M Canada (2003, 2005). Dr. Andrews has been recently awarded the Werklund School of Education Distinguished Research and Lecture Award (2018) as well as the Werklund School of Education Leadership Award (2018) and received the University of Calgary Group Leadership Award (2019). In 2020, he received the "Psychologist of the Year Award" from the Psychologist Association of Alberta.

*Tom Strong* is a Professor and Counsellor-Educator who recently retired from the University of Calgary. He writes on the collaborative, critical and practical potentials of discursive approaches to psychotherapy—most recently on concept critique and development (particularly with respect to therapy and research), and critical mental health. Among Tom's books are *Medicalizing counselling: Issues and tensions*, *Patterns in Interpersonal interactions* (Co-edited with Karl Tomm, Sally St. George and Dan Wulff), *Social constructionism: Sources and stirrings in theory and practice* (co-authored with Andy Lock) and *Furthering talk* (with David Paré). For Tom's website and contact details, please see: <https://wpsites.ucalgary.ca/tom-strong/>



**Appendix A: Survey of School Counsellors, School Psychologists, and Educators with Regard to GSAs (Gay Straight Alliances)/QSAs (Queer Straight Alliances), and Safe and Inclusive Spaces**

**Information on Participants and Their School Context**

Please provide your name or email address:

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**Questions 1–10 pertain to background information regarding your training and current role.** *Please select your primary role in which you support LGBTQ students from the list below. In the subsequent survey items, please consider how the questions relate specifically to the primary role you selected.*

1. Please select the following that best describes your role:
  - a. School Counsellor
  - b. School Psychologist
  - c. Teacher
  - d. Administrator
  - e. Teaching Assistant
  - f. Other School Personnel
2. Gender
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Neither of those options apply to me, I prefer to identify as:
3. Age:
  - a. 20–29;
  - b. 30–39;
  - c. 40–49;
  - d. 50–59;
  - e. 60 and above.
4. Level of school in which you currently work in your role (please choose all that apply):
  - a. Elementary School
  - b. Junior High School
  - c. Senior High School
5. School's geographical setting:
  - a. Urban
  - b. Rural
  - c. Suburban
6. Student population in the school where you are currently employed:
  - a. 250 or less
  - b. 251–500
  - c. 500–750
  - d. 750–1000

- e. 1001–1500
  - f. 1501–2000
  - g. 2000 or above
7. Number of other staff in the school currently employed in your role:  
*Response Type: Free Numeral*
8. Your highest level of education:
- a. Bachelor’s degree;
  - b. Master’s degree;
  - c. Doctoral degree.
9. Specialized training obtained in your role:
- a. Diploma;
  - b. Certification;
  - c. Master’s degree;
  - d. PhD.
10. Years working in the current primary role you selected:
- a. Less than one year;
  - b. One to three years;
  - c. Three to six years;
  - d. Six or more years.

*Comment:*

**Questions 11–18 concern your training and professional development specific to working with LGBTQ populations.** *Please select the response most appropriate for you and elaborate on your choice in the space provided below each question where applicable.*

11. To what extent was work with LGBTQ populations featured in your specialized training?

*Response Type: Not at all/Inadequately/Adequately/Thoroughly.*

*Comment:*

12. How well do you feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in your role?

*Response Type: Not at all/Inadequately/Adequately/Thoroughly.*

*Comment:*

13. How well do you feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in mental health/counselling-related work?

*Response Type: Not at all/Inadequately/Adequately/Thoroughly.*

*Comment:*

14. How well do feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in regard to policy and program development?

*Response Type: Not at all/Inadequately/Adequately/Thoroughly.*

*Comment:*

15. How well do you feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in regard to the development and maintenance of an inclusive and safe learning culture?

*Response Type: Not at all/Inadequately/Adequately/Thoroughly.*

*Comment:*

16. In what areas (e.g., mental health/counselling, policy/program development, inclusive curriculum, etc.) with regard to LGBTQ youth do you feel most prepared?

*Response Type: Free Text*

*Comment:*

17. What other professional development or related opportunities have prepared you in supporting LGBTQ youth, if any?

*Response Type: Free Text*

*Comment:*

18. In supporting LGBTQ youth, what areas do you feel you could develop further?

*Response Type: Free Text*

*Comment:*

**Questions 19–22 concern LGBTQ programming at the school in which you are employed.**

19. Check any of the following that are offered at your school:

- a. Gay Straight Alliance/Queer Straight Alliance
- b. Other LGBTQ/Diversity Program/Group—
- c. If “other” please specify

*Response Type: Free Text*

*Comment:*

20. If any of the above is offered at your school, are you involved with it in some capacity?

- a. Yes
- b. No

21. If you answered “Yes” above, describe the nature of your involvement:

*Response Type: Free Text*

22. If you have been involved with a GSA/QSA, for how long (approximately in years)?

- a. Less than one year;
- b. One to three years;
- c. Three to six years;
- d. Six or more years.

*Comment:*

### Safe and Inclusive Schools Questions

#### Questions 23–27 pertain to the safety and inclusivity of LGBTQ students.

23. What do you believe makes for a safe and inclusive learning environment in school?

*Response Type: Free Text*

24. How important do you believe it is for individuals in your role to be involved in making schools safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ students?

*Response Type: Not important at all/Somewhat important/Very important/Extremely important*

*Comment:*

25. How might individuals in your role uniquely contribute to making learning and involvement in school safe and inclusive for LGBTQ students?

*Response Type: Free Text*

26. In what ways do you currently support LGBTQ youth at your school?

*Response Type: Free Text*

27. In your role, how do you uniquely contribute to the development of a safe and inclusive learning culture and spaces for LGBTQ students in your school?

*Response Type: Free Text*

#### Questions 28–41 pertain specifically to the development of GSA/QSA Programs.

28. In your opinion, what helps the development of a successful GSA/QSA within a school?

*Response Type: Free Text*

29. In your opinion, what hinders the development of a successful GSA/QSA within a school? *Response Type: Free Text*

30. In your opinion, what contributes to the ongoing maintenance of a GSA/QSA within a school? *Response Type: Free Text*

In your opinion, what hinders the ongoing maintenance of a GSA/QSA within a school?

*Response Type: Free Text*

31. How might individuals in your role specifically contribute to the development of GSAs/QSAs or equivalent in schools?

*Response Type: Free Text*

32. Are individuals in your role specifically involved in the development of a GSA/QSA in your school?

a. Yes

b. No

*Comment:*

33. If “Yes”, how are they involved?

*Response Type: Free Text*

If “No”, why are they not involved?

*Response Type: Free Text*

34. In your role, have you been involved in the development of a GSA/QSA in your school?

a. Yes

b. No

35. If “No” to Question 34, what has stopped you from becoming involved?

*Response Type: Free Text*

36. If “Yes” to Question 34, what have you contributed?

*Response Type: Free Text*

37. If “Yes” to Question 34, what has been helpful to you?

*Response Type: Free Text*

38. If “Yes” to Question 34, what challenges have you faced?

*Response Type: Free Text*

39. If “Yes” to Question 34, what would have been helpful were it available?

*Response Type: Free Text*

40. How important do you believe it is for individuals in your role to participate in professional development regarding the provision of support for LGBTQ youth in schools?

*Response Type: Not important at all/Somewhat important/Very important/Extremely important*

*Comment:*

41. How supported do you feel you are in your efforts to support LGBTQ youth:

a. By parents

*Response Type: Not supported at all/somewhat supported/very supported/extremely supported*

b. By teachers

*Response Type: Not supported at all/somewhat supported/very supported/extremely supported*

c. By administration

*Response Type: Not supported at all/somewhat supported/very supported/extremely supported*

d. By other school personnel

*Response Type: Not supported at all/somewhat supported/very supported/extremely supported*

e. By school counsellors

*Response Type: Not supported at all/somewhat supported/very supported/extremely supported*

f. By school psychologists

*Response Type: Not supported at all/somewhat supported/very supported/extremely supported*

*Comment:*

Further comments:

*Response Type: Free Text*

Please tick the following box if you would be willing to participate in brief follow-up telephone or Skype interview of 20-30 minutes. Please provide your email address so that we may contact you: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Thank you for participating in this important survey!**

*By pressing the Submission Button below, you are giving your informed consent that your answers to the survey above can be used in this study.*

## **Appendix B: Follow-up Interview Questions (Survey of School Counsellors, School Psychologists, and Educators)**

This interview is being conducted with:

- School Counsellor
- School Psychologist
- Educator *Specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

42. Our study is concerned with safe and inclusive environments in schools—in our survey we asked, “What do you believe makes for a safe and inclusive learning environment in school?”
  - a. What more would you like to add here?
  - b. Describe an instance where safety and inclusivity (for LGBTQ students) were demonstrated at your school?
  - c. Have there been any instances when you thought safety and inclusivity (for LGBTQ students) were compromised in some way?
43. What do you believe is your role in supporting LGBTQ and gender minority youth in schools?
  - d. How does the school and administration recognize this role?
  - e. What aspects of your role bring you into contact with LGBTQ students?
  - f. Describe a specific instance when your role brought you into contact with LGBTQ student(s).
  - g. How did this happen?
  - h. Describe the nature of the support you offered and the strategies you used.
  - i. Describe the impact your support had on the student(s).
44. How is your role in supporting LGBTQ students distinct from other education professionals?
  - j. Are other staff/educators in the school suited to support LGBTQ and gender minority youth?
2. What specific aspects of your pre-service training have equipped you to support LGBTQ students?
  45. What kind of professional development have you completed that has equipped you to support LGBTQ students?
  46. What is an area of competency that you wish to further develop in regard to supporting LGBTQ students?
    - a. What would help you to develop this competency?
  47. What challenges have you have faced in supporting or working with LGBTQ students?
    - b. Describe a specific instance(s) you can recall.

- c. What made that situation challenging?
48. Does your school currently have a GSA/QSA?
- d. YES:
    - i. What are specific factors that have contributed to its success?
    - ii. What are some specific factors that have thwarted its success?
    - iii. How have these factors influenced or been influenced by your role in developing or sustaining a QSA?
  - e. NO:
    - i. Describe what you feel has prevented this development?
49. What other policies/practices/groups/programs in schools can provide support and facilitate safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth?
50. Describe an instance where you felt supported in your efforts (to support LGBTQ youth), if any:
- f. By parents
  - g. By teachers
  - h. By administration
  - i. By other education professionals
51. Describe an instance where you felt these efforts were resisted, if any:
- j. By parents
  - k. By teachers
  - l. By administration
  - m. By other education professionals
52. What would make school spaces more inclusive and safe—visually, and in any other ways you could suggest (e.g., displays, material design, announcements, lighting)?
53. In what ways can safe and inclusive spaces be "visible," i.e., communicating safety, acceptance, and tolerance in a visual way?
54. What do you believe will promote the continued development of safe and inclusive spaces in Alberta schools?



## **Appendix C: Qualitative Analysis of Open Text Comments Made by Educators on Surveys**

Survey Question	Number of Open Text Responses	General Summary of Responses
To what extent was work with LGBTQ populations featured in your specialized training?	8	Respondents generally stated that they had received very little training to support LGBTQ youth; some respondents commented that they had pursued professional development in that area, or learned through experience supporting LGBTQ youth.
How well do you feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in your role?	7	Respondents generally commented that they had received no training to support LGBTQ youth.
How well do you feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in mental health/counselling-related work?	6	Respondents generally commented that they were not suited to support LGBTQ youth in mental health/counselling-related work. One respondent commented that the need for this type of training is increasing for teachers—not just for counsellors.
How well do you feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in regard to policy and program development?	6	Respondents generally commented that they were not prepared to support LGBTQ youth in regard to policy and program development.
How well do you feel your specialized training prepared you to support LGBTQ youth in regard to the development and maintenance of an inclusive and safe learning culture?	6	Most respondents deferred to their previous comments (i.e., that their training had been inadequate/they were not prepared to support LGBTQ youth).
In what areas (e.g., mental health/counselling, policy/program development, inclusive curriculum, etc.) with regard to LGBTQ youth do you feel most prepared?	54	Respondents generally commented that they felt unprepared to support LGBTQ youth. Some respondents commented that they had sought professional development opportunities, and as a result, feel they can create a safe classroom environment for LGBTQ youth. Some respondents commented that their professional experiences prior to teaching (e.g., social worker) helped prepare them to support LGBTQ youth. Some respondents commented that they were supporting LGBTQ youth through the GSA they lead.
What other professional development or related opportunities have prepared you in supporting LGBTQ youth, if any?	54	Respondents generally listed helpful professional development opportunities they have sought: (e.g., Egale Canada Conference, Alberta Teachers' Association Equity and Human Rights Conference, Alberta Teachers' Association PRISM Workshop).
In supporting LGBTQ youth, what areas do you feel you could develop further?	54	Respondents commented on wanting to develop skills to support and teach their colleagues about gender and sexually-diverse youth. Many respondents also wished to better understand the terminology about gender and sexually-diverse identities.

Survey Question	Number of Open Text Responses	General Summary of Responses
Check any of the following that are offered at your school ( <i>Gay Straight Alliance/Queer Straight Alliance/Other LGBTQ/Diversity Program/Group</i> )	34	Respondents commented with the following: Gay-Straight Alliance, DEHR to Care, Diversity Club.
If any of the above is offered at your school, are you involved with it in some capacity?	7	Most respondents who commented said they led the GSA or supported it in some way.
If you answered "Yes" above, describe the nature of your involvement:	28	Respondents mostly commented that they led or co-led the GSA or similar (e.g., GLOW Club).
If you have been involved with a GSA/QSA, for how long (approximately in years)?	2	Respondents clarified that their GSA club had only recently started.
What do you believe makes for a safe and inclusive learning environment in school?	54	Respondents generally alluded to an environment in which all students and staff feel respected and part of the community. Respondents also commented on the need to have staff consistently support students and address homophobia.
How important do you believe it is for individuals in your role to be involved in making schools safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ students?	4	Respondents commented on the need for positive adult role-models (e.g., LGBTQ-affirmative staff) in school.
How might individuals in your role uniquely contribute to making learning and involvement in school safe and inclusive for LGBTQ students?	54	Respondents commented on the importance of educators being advocates for LGBTQ youth, and demonstrating openness toward those individuals. Some respondents commented that having an environment in which students and teachers feel safe to come out is important. Respondents commented that more staff should seek professional development to support LGBTQ youth. Respondents commented that staff must be consistent in supporting LGBTQ youth (e.g., consistently addressing homophobic comments from students, posting Safe Space stickers).
In what ways do you currently support LGBTQ youth at your school?	54	Respondents commented that they try to create a safe classroom space for all students, call out homophobic language, use inclusive language, lead GSAs, and serve as the school's Safe Contact.
In your role, how do you uniquely contribute to the development of a safe and inclusive learning culture and spaces for LGBTQ students in your school?	54	Respondents generally commented on their advocacy role for inclusive practices (e.g., using inclusive language, posting displays depicting diverse individuals), serving as a trusted contact for LGBTQ youth, serving as a GSA advisor, and maintaining a safe classroom for all students.
In your opinion, what helps the development of a successful GSA/QSA within a school?	54	Respondents commented that education and training is helpful to students and staff who take part in the GSA. Respondents commented that active and consistent student leadership is needed, as well as a staff advisor who can support that consistency. Respondents commented that having supportive teachers of the club is important, as well as supportive administration.

Survey Question	Number of Open Text Responses	General Summary of Responses
In your opinion, what hinders the development of a successful GSA/QSA within a school?	54	Respondents commented that a lack of support from administration, inconsistent attendance, reluctance from non-minority staff to participate/be supportive, lack of feelings of safety amongst teachers (e.g., fear of being outed, fear of being labeled "gay," fear of community backlash), and students' fear of being outed are factors that can hinder the development of a successful GSA.
In your opinion, what contributes to the ongoing maintenance of a GSA/QSA within a school?	54	Respondents commented that supportive staff, GSA members who take on a leadership role and who are committed, supportive administration, a supportive school community, and having meaningful and relevant activities contribute to successful GSAs.
How might individuals in your role specifically contribute to the development of GSAs/QSAs or equivalent in schools?	54	Respondents commented that they could support the development of GSAs by advocating for LGBTQ youth to administration, remaining informed about laws and legislation that support GSAs, seek professional development on the maintenance of a GSA, and communicating openness to students.
Are individuals in your role specifically involved in the development of a GSA/QSA in your school?	10	Respondents generally expressed concerns about a lack of support for a GSA (e.g., a student has not requested one, administration is unsupportive, it is not accepted in the primary school).
If "Yes", how are they involved?	32	Most respondents commented that they were a leader or co-leader of the GSA.
If "No", why are they not involved?	22	Respondents commented that administration has not sanctioned the GSA, and that there is resistance from the community.
In your role, have you been involved in the development of a GSA/QSA in your school? If "No" to Question 34, what has stopped you from becoming involved?	27	Respondents commented that the need for a GSA is not clear, that time does not permit, and that they do not feel sufficiently prepared to develop a GSA.
If "Yes" to Question 34, what have you contributed?	27	Most respondents commented on their contribution to the GSA as staff supervisor.
If "Yes" to Question 34, what has been helpful to you?	27	Respondents commented that community resources (e.g., Woods Homes, Alberta GSA Network, the Alberta Teachers' Association resources), and support from colleagues and administration have been helpful.
If "Yes" to Question 34, what challenges have you faced?	27	Respondents generally commented that unsupportive administration and teacher colleagues, an anti-LGBTQ/conservative/religious environment/culture, and parent backlash have posed challenges.
If "Yes" to Question 34, what would have been helpful were it available?	27	Respondents commented that connections with LGBTQ-affirmative organizations in the community, supportive and educated (i.e., about LGBTQ issues) administration, evidence of successful LGBTQ-affirmative actions in other schools, and more district in-service training would be helpful.

Survey Question	Number of Open Text Responses	General Summary of Responses
How important do you believe it is for individuals in your role to participate in professional development regarding the provision of support for LGBTQ youth in schools?	3	Respondents commented that professional development on supporting LGBTQ youth is necessary for all teachers.
How supported do you feel you are in your efforts to support LGBTQ youth?	14	Respondents commented that in some circumstances they feel supported by parents, teachers, administrators, school psychologists, school counsellors, other school personnel, and in others they do not. Also, some respondents commented that their school did not have access to school psychologists with regard to supporting LGBTQ youth.
Further comments:	8	Respondents expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in this research.