



Understanding Safety, Victimization And School Climate Among Rural Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, And Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth

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Abstract

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Understanding safety, victimization and school climate among rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth

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ABSTRACT

Nearly three decades of research have examined the experiences of LGBTQ students in schools. These include numerous studies documenting elevated rates of school victimization, as well as how an LGBTQ affirming school climate may enhance safety among LGBTQ students. Of the studies conducted, research has focused mostly on LGBTQ students in urban and suburban communities, while few have focused on rural LGBTQ youth. Using a sample of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ secondary school students from a rural school district in California, this study explores the relationship between LGBTQ affirming school climates and the safety and victimization of LGBTQ students. Results indicate that LGBTQ support and peer and teacher intervention were associated with higher levels of safety among LGBTQ youth. In addition, the presence of a GSA at school was associated with lower levels of safety among LGBTQ students. Findings from this study inform school-based interventions for LGBTQ youth in rural schools and contribute to scholarship exploring LGBTQ youth issues in rural school communities.

KEYWORDS

Rural youth; LGBTQ youth; school climate; victimization

Introduction

In a recent report disseminated by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a survey of over 10,000 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth found that about 40% describe their communities as unaccepting. The same study also found that LGBTQ students were also twice as likely to experience a physical assault when compared to their straight-identified peers. Over 90% reported that they have heard negative messages regarding the LGBTQ community, with many reporting schools and peers as common places and sources of these messages (Human Rights Campaign, 2012).

School victimization has an adverse impact on the academic achievement and well-being of LGBTQ youth. A number of studies, for example, have illustrated

how victimization among LGBTQ youth is correlated with increased absenteeism, decreased academic performance, decreased ambition to pursue a higher education, higher rates of risky sexual behavior, and increased risk of suicide (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health, 2014). Affirming school climates can play a protective role in reducing harassment and assault among LGBTQ youth. Researchers have also found that safety is enhanced for LGBTQ youth when enumerated anti-bullying policies are in place. Supportive school staff, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) and LGBTQ representation in the curriculum further enhance safety. Moreover, studies show decreased rates of bullying and increased perceptions of safety among LGBTQ youth when teachers and peers intervene in instances of bullying (Dessel, Goodman, & Woodford, 2017; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2014).

While the information presented above sheds light on the experiences of LGBTQ youth, the vast majority of research in this area has been conducted in urban and suburban settings. In one of the few studies examining the experiences of rural LGBTQ youth, Kosciw, Palmer and Kull (2015) found higher rates of victimization and more negative perceptions of school climate among rural LGBTQ youth when compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. Given this gap in the research, this study explores the relationships between multiple dimensions of LGBTQ affirming school climates, safety, and victimization among LGBTQ students and non-LGBTQ peers in a rural school district in California.

Victimization, safety, and an LGBTQ affirming school climate

Within the last decade, the rights of LGBTQ individuals in various social institutions such as military and marital unions have expanded in the United States (e.g. the overturning of “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” legalization of same-sex marriage). Despite changing societal attitudes and growing acceptance, LGBTQ individuals continue to face prejudice and discrimination, often from an early age (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Oswald, & Culton, 2003). Equally troubling, these experiences frequently occur in schools.

Numerous studies have found that LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of harassment, exclusion, and assault throughout their K-12 education, when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2011; Kosciw et al., 2013). This includes verbal teasing, relational aggression, use of anti-gay language, and physical aggression/bullying. In 2013, the GLSEN National School Climate Survey found that nearly 100% of LGBTQ students heard homophobic remarks in their school, with over 75% having heard them frequently or often. The vast majority also reported being the victim of at least one form of harassment in the past year and feeling unsafe in school. Though peer victimization remains a significant problem for LGBTQ youth, teachers have also been identified as perpetrators of their victimization. Nearly two-thirds of LGBTQ students reported hearing homophobic remarks from school staff (Kosciw et al., 2013).

Persistent victimization has consistently been shown to adversely influence academic outcomes, emotional well-being, and behavioral health. In a study of high school students in a Midwestern school district, Aragon and colleagues (2014) found that school victimization was associated with an array of negative academic outcomes, including higher truancy rates, lower grades, and lower educational aspirations among LGBTQ youth. In addition, Liu and Mustanski (2014) found that peer victimization and lower levels of social support in school were significantly associated with a history of attempted suicide, suicidal ideation, and self-harm among LGBTQ youth. Studies have also documented positive associations between school victimization and substance use among LGBTQ adolescents (De Pedro, Esqueda, & Gilreah, 2017).

The protective role of an LGBTQ-affirming school climate

Research suggests that an LGBTQ-affirming school climate may act as a protective factor for LGBTQ students, helping decrease rates of victimization and increasing perceptions of safety (Wimberly, 2015). Research further identifies factors that contribute to an affirming school climate. LGBTQ-affirming schools provide students with school-based support groups and clubs (e.g., “gay straight alliances” (GSAs) (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). These groups provide LGBTQ students with opportunities to form friendships with LGBTQ peers and allies as well as opportunities to participate in advocacy and education efforts. Teacher and peer intervention in the face of harassment is also critical to the establishment of an affirming school climate, helping reduce rates of victimization among LGBTQ youth and increasing the likelihood of intervention when other students and teachers witness LGBTQ students being harassed or assaulted. Affirming schools further promote anti-bullying policies that specifically address sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (Wimberly, 2015). Inclusive, enumerated anti-bullying policies are designed to provide LGBTQ students with immediate protection, directly informing school safety policies and procedures. Enumerated anti-bullying policies also provide school personnel with institutional support and backing to enforce anti-bullying measures (Wimberly, 2015). Finally, researchers have found that LGBTQ affirming schools provide access to LGBTQ-related resources and positive representations of LGBTQ individuals in the curriculum (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010).

LGBTQ youth in rural school communities

The vast majority of studies on rural LGBTQ identified individuals have focused on the challenging life experiences of adults, rather than youth (Drumheller & McQuay 2010; Morandini, Dar-Nimrod, & Ross, 2015; NCLR 2016; Neely 2012; Oswald & Culton 2003, Queer Youth Project 2014; Sundstrand 2013). Research suggests that LGBTQ adults living in rural areas experience higher rates of discrimination, compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (Oswald & Culton,

2003; Morandini, Dar-Nimrod, & Ross, 2015). Rural LGBTQ adults also report frequent encounters with individuals possessing homophobic attitudes (in their communities) and a lack of resources. These studies, however also identified peer relationships and self-acceptance as factors promoting wellbeing among rural, LGBTQ identified adults.

The most comprehensive examination of rural LGBTQ youth to date utilizes GLSEN National School Climate Survey data to compare the experiences of rural LGBTQ students with the experiences of their urban and suburban peers (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). Overall, findings suggested that rural LGBTQ students were more likely to experience harassment when compared to their urban and suburban peers. School staff members and peers in rural localities were also less likely to intervene on behalf of LGBTQ students experiencing harassment. Anti-bullying policies, curricular representation, and LGBTQ focused clubs and organizations were found to play a powerful role in reducing LGBTQ harassment.

Though the Kosciw et al. study is perhaps the most comprehensive investigation of rural LGBTQ youth experiences to date, the study is not without its limitations. The Kosciw et al. study only sampled LGBTQ youth, which may have resulted in an underreporting of LGBTQ victimization and negative perceptions of safety. Reports have found that in rural communities, LGBTQ students tend to disclose sexual orientation and/or gender identity, colloquially referred to as *coming out*, later than urban LGBTQ students (NCLR, 2016). Thus, research that only includes LGBTQ-identified students excludes the voices of rural students who have not yet come out, a critical oversight given that these same students may also be experiencing higher rates of victimization and poor school climate despite not being “out.” The current study therefore felt it imperative to include students who identify as LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ.

Study objectives

A review of past research reveals a dearth of knowledge in regard to the educational experiences of LGBTQ students in rural contexts. Research on rural LGBTQ issues has focused primarily on rural adults, with only one study examining perceptions of school climate, safety and victimization among rural LGBTQ youth. Given the current scope of LGBTQ-focused research, a significant gap in our understanding of rural LGBTQ youth persists. Drawing from a sample of LGBTQ students and non-LGBTQ peers in a rural California school district, this study addresses this gap in several ways. First, this study examined the relationships between LGBTQ affirming school climate, safety, and victimization among students attending rural schools. Second, this study assessed the extent to which multiple dimensions of an affirming school climate (e.g., LGBTQ support, LGBTQ issues discussed in the classroom, enumerated bullying policies, GSA’s, peer intervention, teacher intervention) are associated with safety and victimization among LGBTQ students. We expected each dimension of an affirming school climate to

be positively associated with higher levels of safety and lower levels of victimization. Finally, this study drew from a sample of LGBTQ youth, and analyses were then conducted on non-LGBTQ students in the same schools to include the perspectives of students who have not yet “come out” and to corroborate the study’s findings.

Methods

This study is a secondary analysis of the 2013–2015 California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), one of the largest statewide assessments of elementary and secondary school climate in the United States (Austin, Bates & Duerr, 2013). Participating school districts are required by the California Department of Education to administer a core module with the option of administering additional supplemental survey modules (e.g., gender and sex-based harassment) to a representative sample of 5th, 7th, 9th, and 11th grade students.

For this study, a subsample of 7th, 9th, and 11th grade students enrolled in a rural school district¹ in Central California was utilized based on their completion of the core module and the supplemental gender and sex-based harassment module. The core module included items assessing students’ race, ethnicity, and biological sex, while the gender and sex-based harassment module included items assessing students’ perceptions of affirming school climates, safety, and victimization.

Measures

Dependent variables

In this study, victimization and safety were assessed using two composite variables. Each variable was comprised of multiple items that were summative in nature. Victimization was assessed using four items. Students were asked how many times they were harassed or bullied on school property for the following reasons: 1) because they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender or someone thought they were; 2) because they aren’t as “masculine” as other guys or because they aren’t as “feminine” as other girls; 3) because they have LGBTQ parents or family members or because someone thought they were; and 4) because they have LGBTQ friends or because someone thought they were. Response to these items were collected using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 0 times, 2 = 1 time, 3 = 2-3 time, and 4 = 4 or more times. Safety was assessed using six items including whether students believed their school was safe for: 1) guys who are not as “masculine” as other guys, 2) girls who are not as “feminine” as other girls, 3) students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning (LGBQQ), 4) students with LGBTQ

¹For the purposes of this study, the research team utilized National Center for Education Statistics locale designations, designations that define rural using three descriptors—fringe, distant, and remote (Definitions, 2006). Based on these designations, the rural school district sampled in this study is categorized as rural fringe, a U.S. census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area and/or less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

parents, 5) teachers and staff who are LGBTQ, and 6) straight allies (people who are supportive of LGBTQ people). Responses to these items were collected using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree.

Independent variables

Independent variables included six composite variables, which represented the following components of an LGBTQ affirming school climate—LGBTQ support, the presence of a gay-straight alliance (GSA), the presence of LGBTQ issues in the curriculum, the presence of enumerated anti-bullying policies, peer intervention, and teacher intervention.

Dimensions of LGBTQ affirming school climates

A total of eight items were used to measure LGBTQ support. Students were asked to what extent would they go to: 1) a school counselor or school psychologist, 2) a teacher, 3) a school principal or assistant principal, 4) other adult at school (e.g. school custodian, hallway monitor, or parent volunteer), 5) a friend at their school, 6) an older brother or sister, 7) their parent or guardian, or 8) a friend's parent or other adult not at school, if they wanted information and/or support related to sexual orientation or LGBTQ issues. Responses to these items were captured using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not at all likely, 2 = A little likely, to 3 = Very likely. Students were also asked whether or not their school sponsored support groups or clubs for students who identify as LGBTQ and/or allies of LGBTQ students (e.g. Gay-Straight Allies), and representation of LGBTQ people and/or issues (i.e., whether LGBTQ people and/or issues were discussed in their classes at school). Enumerated anti-bullying policies were assessed using two items. Students were asked whether or not their school had a policy that prohibited students and staff from harassing someone based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (transgender, or not being “feminine” or “masculine” enough). A dichotomous item was constructed, with students reporting a policy that included at least one of these policies receiving a score of 1 and those who reported none of these policies receiving a score of 0.

Peer intervention was assessed using four items. Students were asked how often they saw or heard students stop others from making negative comments or using slurs based on the following four characteristics: 1) sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or straight), 2) gender identity or expression (transgender, or not being “feminine” or “masculine” enough), 3) having LGBTQ parents or family members, and 4) having LGBTQ friends. Teacher intervention was also assessed using four items. Students were asked how often they saw or heard teachers or school staff members stop others from making negative comments or using slurs based on the same four characteristics identified above. Responses to the items were captured using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never stop, 2 = Rarely stop, 3 = Sometimes stop, and 4 = Often.

Data analysis plan

Data analysis for this study was conducted using IBM SPSS Version 23. Drawing from LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ samples, bivariate and multivariate analyses were employed to address the goals of this study. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare perceptions of LGBTQ safety and LGBTQ victimization among students who reported a GSA in their school versus students who reported no GSA, students who reported that they discussed LGBTQ issues in their classroom versus students who did not, and students who reported the presence of enumerated anti-bullying policies versus students who did not. Correlational analyses were then conducted to examine associations between dimensions of LGBTQ affirming school climates (i.e., LGBTQ support, peer intervention, teacher intervention, and presence of anti-bullying policies,) and perceptions of LGBTQ safety and LGBTQ victimization (see Tables 2 and 3). Multiple linear regression analyses were then conducted to evaluate relationships among multiple components of an LGBTQ affirming school climate and the dependent variables, LGBTQ safety and LGBTQ victimization (see Tables 4–7).

Results

Sample characteristics

As seen in Table 1, a total of 611 middle and high school students comprised the overall study sample. Of these students, 47.1% identified as male, 48.6% as female,

Table 1. Sample demographics.

	Total (n = 611) %	LGBTQ (n = 151) %	Non-LGBTQ (n = 460) %
<i>Race</i>			
American Indian or Alaska Native	2.6	2.1	2.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.9	2.8	1.6
Black or African American	3.8	7.7	2.6
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.5	1.4	0.2
White	62.0	54.5	64.5
Mixed (Two or More) Races	29.1	31.5	28.3
<i>Latino, any race</i>	29.2	29.9	29.0
<i>Biological Sex</i>			
Female	50.0	50.3	50.1
Male	50.0	49.7	49.9
<i>Gender Identity</i>			
Female	48.6	45.6	50.2
Male	47.1	40.9	46.8
Transgender	1.8	5.4	0.0
Questioning	2.5	8.1	0.0
<i>Parent Educational Level</i>			
Did not finish high school	7.9	11.6	6.7
High school graduate	17.6	12.9	19.1
Some college	15.6	8.8	17.7
College graduate	38.8	32.0	41.0
Don't know	20.2	34.7	15.5

Table 2. Correlational analyses of LGBTQ affirming school climate, victimization, and safety among LGBTQ students.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. LGBTQ Support	—	.32*	.14	.22*	-.02
2. Peer Intervention	.32*	—	.61*	.30*	-.10
3. Teacher Intervention	.14	.61*	—	.39*	-.15
4. Safety	.22*	.30*	.39*	—	-.30*
5. Victimization	-.02	-.10	-.15	-.30*	—

* $p < .05$.

and 1.8% as transgender, and 2.5% reported that they were questioning. About 62.0% of the participants identified as white, while 38.0% identified as racial-ethnic minority students. Approximately 75.3% of the sample identified as heterosexual, 8.9% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning, 1.6% identified as other, and 14.2% declined to respond. As seen in Table 1, the results also showed that the LGBTQ sample ($n = 151$) and non-LGBTQ sample ($n = 460$) were racially diverse. Almost half of all LGBTQ participants (45.5%) identified as non-white, while 35.5% of heterosexual participants identified as non-white.

Drawing from both the LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ samples, a series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to assess differences in mean scores of LGBTQ victimization and LGBTQ safety among LGBTQ students who reported the presence of GSA at their school vs. no GSA, reported that LGBTQ issues were discussed in the classroom vs. no LGBTQ issues in the classroom, and the presence of enumerated anti-bullying policies vs. no enumerated anti-bullying policies. Within the LGBTQ subsample, independent samples t-test results indicated a significantly higher mean LGBTQ victimization score among students who reported a GSA ($M = 1.61$, $SD = .95$), when compared to students who did not report a GSA ($M = 1.25$, $SD = .66$); $t(146) = 2.51$, $p < .05$). The results also indicated a significantly higher mean score of LGBTQ victimization among LGBTQ students who reported LGBTQ issues were discussed in the classroom ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.04$), when compared to LGBTQ students who reported that no LGBTQ issues were discussed in the classroom ($M = 1.28$, $SD = .68$); $t(145) = 2.51$, $p < .05$).

Within the non-LGBTQ sample, the results indicated a significantly higher mean score in LGBTQ safety among students who reported the presence of GSA

Table 3. Correlational analyses of LGBTQ affirming school climate, victimization, and safety among non-LGBTQ students.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. LGBTQ Support	—	.26*	.20*	.31*	.06
2. Peer Intervention	.26*	—	.47*	.30*	-.06
3. Teacher Intervention	.20*	.47*	—	.21*	-.04
4. Safety	.31*	.30*	.21*	—	-.15*
5. Victimization	.06	-.06	-.04	-.15*	—

* $p < .05$.

Table 4. Multivariate linear regression analyses of safety by LGBTQ affirming school climate variables among LGBTQ students.

Independent Variable	B	SE (b)	β	t	R ²
Constant	1.04	.55		1.90	.35
LGBTQ Support*	.04	.02	.20	1.94	
Peer Intervention	.03	.03	.16	1.25	
Teacher Intervention*	.04	.02	.26	2.13	
GSA*	-.68	.19	-.36	-3.62	
LGBTQ Issues*	.45	.21	.21	2.11	
Anti-Bullying Policies	.12	.09	-.14	1.36	

* $p < .05$.

($M = 2.86$, $SD = .79$), compared to students who reported no GSA ($M = 2.50$, $SD = .77$); $t(449) = 4.77$, $p < .05$). In addition, the results showed significantly higher mean score of LGBTQ victimization among students who reported the presence of LGBTQ issues in the classroom ($M = 1.17$, $SD = .56$), when compared to students reported no LGBTQ issues in the classroom, ($M = 1.08$, $SD = .30$); $t(449) = 1.95$, $p < .05$). In addition, students who reported the presence of enumerated anti-bullying policies reported significantly higher mean scores of LGBTQ safety ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .81$), when compared to students who reported no enumerated anti-bullying policies ($M = 2.50$, $SD = .77$); $t(451) = -2.64$, $p < .05$).

Correlational analyses were conducted to examine relationships between multiple components of LGBTQ affirming school climate and LGBTQ safety and victimization within the LGBTQ and heterosexual subsamples. Within the LGBTQ sample (see Table 2), the results indicated a significant positive relationship between LGBTQ safety and LGBTQ support ($r = .22$, $p < .05$), peer intervention ($r = .30$, $p < .05$), and teacher intervention ($r = .39$, $p < .05$). Within the non-LGBTQ sample, there were also significant positive relationships between LGBTQ safety and LGBTQ support ($r = .31$, $p < .05$), peer intervention ($r = .30$, $p < .05$), and teacher intervention ($r = .21$, $p < .05$). In addition, within the LGBTQ sample, the results indicated a significant negative correlation between LGBTQ victimization and LGBTQ safety ($r = -.30$, $p < .05$). Within the non-LGBTQ sample (see Table 3), the results indicated that a significant negative correlation between LGBTQ victimization and LGBTQ safety ($r = -.15$, $p < .05$).

Table 5. Multivariate linear regression analyses of safety by LGBTQ affirming school climate variables among non-LGBTQ students.

Independent Variable	B	SE (b)	β	t	R ²
Constant	1.60	.55		4.98	.18
LGBTQ Support*	.05	.02	.27	4.67	
Peer Intervention*	.03	.03	.13	2.06	
Teacher Intervention*	.02	.02	.12	1.79	
GSA*	-.33	.19	-.19	-3.21	
LGBTQ Issues	.15	.21	.07	.121	
Anti-Bullying Policies	.04	.09	.05	.86	

* $p < .05$.

Table 6. Multivariate linear regression analyses of victimization by LGBTQ affirming school climate variables among LGBTQ students.

Independent Variable	B	SE (b)	β	t	R ²
Constant	2.84	.74		3.83	.07
LGBTQ Support	-.01	.03	-.04	-.36	
Peer Intervention	-.01	.04	-.06	-.39	
Teacher Intervention	-.02	.03	-.13	-.88	
GSA*	-.34	.25	-.16	-1.34	
LGBTQ Issues	-.21	.29	-.09	-.73	
Anti-Bullying Policies	.03	.12	.03	.28	

* $p < .05$.

Multivariate linear regression analyses were conducted to assess relationships between multiple components of an LGBTQ affirming school climate, safety, and victimization. Within the LGBTQ sample (see Table 4), LGBTQ support ($\beta = .20$), teacher intervention ($\beta = .26$), and the presence of LGBTQ issues in the classroom ($\beta = .21$) were significant predictors of LGBTQ safety. In addition, the findings indicated a significant, negative relationship between the presence of a GSA and LGBTQ safety ($\beta = -.36$). In the non-LGBTQ sample, as seen in Table 5, LGBTQ support ($\beta = .27$), peer intervention ($\beta = .13$), and teacher intervention ($\beta = .12$) were significant predictors of LGBTQ safety. The results also indicated a significant, negative relationship between the presence of a GSA ($\beta = -.19$) and LGBTQ safety in the non-LGBTQ sample. The results also indicated a few significant predictors of LGBTQ victimization (see Tables 6–7). Within the LGBTQ sample, as seen in Table 6, the presence of a GSA ($\beta = .16$) was positively associated with LGBTQ victimization. In addition, within the non-LGBTQ sample, LGBTQ support ($\beta = .13$) and the presence of a GSA ($\beta = .06$) were associated positively associated with LGBTQ victimization (see Table 7).

Discussion

Despite many studies focused on the role of an affirming school climate in school safety and victimization among LGBTQ students, few have systematically examined this relationship within a rural school context. Overall, findings from this study show that LGBTQ affirming school climates in rural school communities are

Table 7. Multivariate linear regression analyses of victimization by LGBTQ affirming school climate variables among non-LGBTQ students.

Independent Variable	B	SE (b)	β	t	R ²
Constant	1.05	.18		5.97	.04
LGBTQ Support*	.01	.01	.13	2.00	
Peer Intervention	-.01	.01	-.14	-1.93	
Teacher Intervention	.00	.01	.01	.02	
GSA*	.05	.06	.06	.89	
LGBTQ Issues	-.08	.07	-.08	-1.18	
Anti-Bullying Policies	.03	.03	.06	.97	

* $p < .05$.

associated with more positive perceptions of safety for LGBTQ youth, consistent with prior research (Kosciw et al., 2013; Wimberly, 2015). This study found that within a rural district context LGBTQ support, peer intervention, and teacher intervention were associated with higher levels of safety among LGBTQ youth. Contrary to past research, the presence of GSA's was associated with lower levels of safety.

A key contribution of this study is its examination of multiple dimensions of LGBTQ affirming school climates as unique predictors of LGBTQ victimization and safety. LGBTQ support emerged as one significant predictor of LGBTQ safety. This aligns with past research, which has found that safe school environments for LGBTQ youth include supportive adults who are knowledgeable about issues regarding sexual orientation and gender identity (Marshall, Yarber, Sherwood-Laughlin, Gray, & Estell, 2015). Affirming and knowledgeable school staff may be more likely to implement school and classroom procedures that help LGBTQ youth feel safe in their schools. We recommend that future studies examine professional development for teachers and other school staff, specifically uncovering strategies that help them facilitate safe spaces for LGBTQ youth in rural school communities. Such studies could focus on the impact of this professional development on safety, victimization, and well-being among LGBTQ youth and the attitudes of non-LGBTQ peers.

This study found that peer and teacher intervention was a significant predictor of LGBTQ safety, aligning with past research (Horn & Romeo, 2010). Prior studies conducted in urban and suburban contexts have found that perceptions of safety among LGBTQ youth are enhanced when peers and teachers actively intervene during instances of homophobic and transphobic victimization. We recommend that future research examine the extent to which peers and teachers intervene in response to multiple forms of anti-LGBTQ victimization in rural school communities, including physical, nonphysical, verbal, and cyber bullying. Moreover, future studies could also explore factors mitigating the impact of peer and teacher intervention on anti-LGBTQ victimization, including participation in active bystander training.

This study found a negative relationship between the presence of GSA's and LGBTQ safety. This finding was unexpected given prior research showing the presence GSA's to be positively associated with reduced rates of bullying and enhanced perceptions of school safety among LGBTQ youth and their peers (Poteat et al., 2013). Scholars have recognized that the impact of GSA's on LGBTQ safety and school climate may vary widely across schools and geographic contexts. This is often attributed to the levels of student engagement and school adult support for a GSA. In some schools, GSA's may have an active and consistent membership whose members promote safety and education initiatives and are supported by teachers and administrators. Alternatively, GSA's in other schools may face numerous barriers to successful implementation (e.g. pervasive homophobic attitudes, lack of resources, and few student allies). Another possible explanation for

this finding could be that students and teachers formed GSA's in response to a school's concerns about the lack of safety among LGBTQ students. Future research is therefore needed to explore associations between the size, activity of, and support for GSA's and perceptions of LGBTQ safety and rates of bullying in rural school districts. Similar research might also be beneficial for urban and suburban school districts.

In addition, the multivariate results of this study indicated that the presence of enumerated anti-bullying policies was not a significant predictor of LGBTQ safety and victimization. The findings of this study stand in contrast to many others, which have found that the presence of enumerated anti-bullying policies is associated with higher levels of safety and lower levels of victimization among LGBTQ youth (Russell et al., 2010). It is possible that the degree to which principals, teachers, and other school professionals implement anti-bullying policies vary widely across schools. Future research in rural school communities could explore the degree to which students, principals, teachers, and other school staff know about and implement enumerated anti-bullying policies and how the extent of implementation is related to safety and victimization among LGBTQ youth.

Limitations

When interpreting the results of this study, the following limitations should be considered. First, this study is an analysis of cross-sectional survey data. Cause and effect relationships could not therefore be assessed. Experimental studies are needed to explore causal relationships between LGBTQ affirming school climates and perceptions of anti-LGBTQ bullying and safety. Second, the variables used in this study relied on student self-reports, which may have affected the reliability of the items. The CHKS is comprised of only self-reported items. Future research could utilize more objective measures of LGBTQ school climate, including the actual number of anti-LGBTQ incidences of physical assaults and harassment. Third, two dimensions of LGBTQ affirming school climates—discussion of LGBTQ issues in the classroom and presence of a GSA—were assessed using a single item. Multiple items may be necessary to more comprehensively explore each phenomenon. Last, we acknowledge that researchers must examine and acknowledge the diversity of school experiences LGBTQ students may have, as well as the issues facing those attending rural schools outside of California. California educational policies are often more supportive of LGBTQ youth (California Department of Education, 2015). Statewide policies mandating the inclusion of positive LGBTQ content, images and role models, into school curriculums in addition to enumerated anti-LGBTQ bullying policies help protect LGBTQ students from discrimination and contribute towards the establishment of an affirming LGBTQ school climate. Future research should thus focus on perceptions of LGBTQ safety, victimization, and school climate in states lacking in, or actively

prohibiting, enumerated anti-bullying policies, as well as those that are enacting “no promo” laws (e.g., Texas, Mississippi, and South Carolina) or rolling back existing protections.

Conclusion

Overall, this study is one of few empirical investigations examining the educational experiences of LGBTQ youth attending rural schools. Additional empirical investigations are needed to move towards a more robust knowledge base in regard to the experiences of rural LGBTQ youth in schools. Future studies are also needed to understand the experiences of LGBTQ students in urban, rural, and suburban school contexts, as well as the extent to which dimensions of LGBTQ affirming school climates influence perceptions of safety and victimization. LGBTQ youth in rural communities may have difficulty accessing basic resources and support; resources and support that are typically found in urban areas (e.g. LGBTQ community centers, social services, and a more progressive, LGBTQ affirming populace). Lack of access to resources, support, and LGBTQ affirming communities may facilitate a sense of isolation among LGBTQ youth, potentially enhancing their vulnerability to school victimization. Finally, future research might examine whether the current socio-political climate results in changes in climate for LGBTQ students in urban, suburban, and rural school contexts using pre-post survey data.

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