

Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth's Experiences of School Climate

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth (N=22), within four years of high school graduation, were interviewed in southwestern Ontario to assess their perceptions of school climate. The findings indicate that LGB youth who have not disclosed their sexuality in high school did not do so for fear of reprisals from friends, family or peers. Those who did come out during high school were often verbally or physically harassed and all male respondents in the study, whether out or not, were harassed during high school. LGB youth often witnessed harassment of other LGB youth around them. Study participants also reported a range of reactions to the ubiquitous use of the phrase, “that’s so gay,” among their peers often disliking the phrase, correcting those around them who used it, or sometimes even using it themselves. Homophobia and fear of harassment continue to be concerns for LGB youth attending secondary school.

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In his study of secondary schools in the United States, Chesir-Teran (2003, p.270) found a dominant heteronormativity which he describes as manifest through “behavioural or social regularities that reflect a press towards heterosexuality and away from homosexuality.” In her study of Scottish secondary schools, Epstein (1997) found that both heterosexuality and conventional gender relations were often reproduced through the curriculum. Mandel and Shakeshaft's (2000) United States based study found that there is a “hidden curriculum” with reinforces heterosexuality as the only acceptable pattern of relating and loving, and reinforces masculine norms as dominant.

Recent research indicates that in secondary schools, homosexual youth are frequently the target of homophobic comments, and that the majority is also the target of some form of harassment or violence (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network – GLSEN - National School Climate Survey, 2005). According to GLSEN's 2005 United States based school climate survey, the majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth sampled felt unsafe at school. The Stonewall Report of the schooling experiences of British youth (2007) reports that 65% of young lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils have experienced bullying and that 35% of gay pupils do not feel safe at school. The California Healthy Kids Survey (2004), which conducted a state-wide study of safety and harassment in schools, found that 7.5% of students reported having been harassed on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation; this translates to over 200,000 California students being the target of this type of harassment every year. Even students suspected of being gay are often subjected to threats of violence, and exposed to it on a regular basis (Buston and Hart 2001). Rivers and Duncan (2002) also point out that students single out

peers for harassment if they are perceived to be gay; in this regard, verbal abuse is most common, followed by physical assault.

GLSEN (2005) reports lower grade points averages (GPAs) among the outcomes of harassment against LGBT youth. The effects of harassment and violence can extend beyond high school and affect their livelihood, as gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in the United States and Canada are more likely to drop out of school than their heterosexual counterparts (Saewyc et al. 2006). GLSEN (2005) reports that when LGTB students identify supportive faculty, they are more likely to do better in school, go to college, and have higher GPAs.

Frankfurt (2000) suggests that students use words like “faggot” and “homo” without a clear understanding of how they may be affecting their peers and those who do not conform to gendered stereotypes. Research by Renold (2002) in the United Kingdom indicates that homophobic name calling, as well as physical and verbal forms of homophobic harassment, emerges in primary school as a means by which children define, create and consolidate hegemonic masculinities and femininities, as well as heterosexual identities and hierarchies.

A growing body of literature links homophobia, masculinities, and school climate. Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman (2003) contend that homophobic name calling provides a quick and easy way for boys to claim masculinity. Pascoe (2005) found that the label, “fag,” is applied to non-masculine behavior to manage one’s own anxiety and discomfort and is hurled at others to deflect such an identity from oneself. Plummer’s (2001) Australia-based study found that homophobic epithets target anything that signifies a lack of allegiance to the collective expectations of male peers. Connell (1995, p.77) traces homophobic practices to hegemonic masculinity, the “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and

the subordination of women.” As changes in gender relations threaten this social order, men and women become “chained” to the gender patterns they have inherited.

While there is a growing body of literature on school climate in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, this paper was developed to better understand how LGTBQ youth in Canada experience school climate. The results of the research speak to: 1) how LGB youth perceive threats to their safety in secondary schools, and 2) how a friendlier or more inclusive environment for LGB youth might be created.

Methodology

The study is grounded in semi-structured interviews with 22 LGB youths ranging in age from 16 to 23 from southwestern Ontario who were within four years of having graduated from high school. There were 12 males and 10 females, 11 of whom identified as gay (10 males and 1 female), 5 as lesbian, and 6 as bisexual (2 males and 4 females). Although transgendered and questioning youth were included in recruitment efforts, none identified as such in the interviews. The ethno-cultural background of the sample included: 13 Canadian, 9 British, 4 French, 4 other European, 3 East/Southeast Asian, 1 Aboriginal, 1 Caribbean, 1 Middle-Eastern, and 1 German. Participants were able to select more than one ethnic identifier. Ten students had attended the Roman Catholic system, 12 the public system, 2 attended an international or private school, and 2 had attended both public and Catholic systems.

Interviewees responded to recruitment through e-mail messages, flyers, and invitations to participate through the local Pride committee, the university student group, the local AIDS service organization, gay websites such as gay.com, and social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, local gay establishments, and through advertisements in the local college and university newspapers. Participants were offered an honorarium of \$10 in gift

certificates for their time. Interviews were held at the university, the AIDS service organization, or in the homes of participants according to their preferences.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. These took half an hour to one hour to complete. With this type of interview, standard questions were used across participants, but we were able to probe their answers, and address or clarify their questions (Berg, 2004). See Appendix 1 for the interview questions. In answering the questions, youth were asked to reflect on their experiences in secondary schools. Interview questions addressed: how open the students were about their sexuality during high school; for those who were open, how comfortable it was; if they were harassed in schools, either verbally or physically; if they had witnessed any gay-related harassment; and when people around them say “that’s so gay,” what it means to them.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcript was then uploaded into QSR NVIVO 7, a software program used for qualitative analysis of data. Analysis of data was done using grounded theory methods (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Creswell, 1998). Text that shared common characteristics was coded together into a common category (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Categories were then organized thematically into related groups of ideas (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The analysis of findings was sent to each team member to ensure correct interpretation of selected quotations. Quotes have been selected that exemplify or best sum-up the theme discussed.

Findings

Not open about sexuality during high school

Of the 22 youth in the sample, 10 were out (that is known by others to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual) in high school. Of the remaining youth, 7 were not out during high school; 3 did not come out, but claimed that people (i.e. their peers, friends) knew of their sexuality anyway.

Respondents who were not out in high school were often uncomfortable at school. These youth were aware of how heteronormativity operates in schools, and how anything that went against this “norm” might be chastised. This young man’s quote exemplifies this sentiment:

I don’t think I am openly gay at school or anywhere for that matter ...even though I realize that it’s okay to be gay and it’s okay to sort of talk about it. I think there’s a certain part of me that doesn’t talk about it, and sort of is silent about it unless necessary. And so, ... it’s kind of still living in a heterosexual reality and not wanting to impose homosexual beliefs or homosexual ideas upon those people perhaps because the fear of judgement or perhaps for whatever other reasons. I don’t think that I’m as openly homosexual at school as perhaps I should be. (M, gay, 18)

It is a sentiment shared, as well, by young women.

I was very, very, very, very, good at hiding, you know [my sexuality]. Nobody knew, so no one... Deep down, I always knew, so if my uncle made a gay joke or whatever, I’d be like ... “I’m a little you know, I’m offended by that. Like, come on.” But other than that, I was closeted; I was *very* closeted. (F, lesbian, 23)

Many believed that those around them would not fully accept them due to homophobic attitudes.

Interviewer: Were you out in high school?

Oh no.

Interviewer: Was it because it was hard for everybody, or was it just a personal decision?

Mainly because I didn't think people would be too accepting, 'cause I know a couple of my friends, they are kind of homophobic, so I didn't want to freak them out. (F, bisexual, 20)

The widespread use of the phrase, "that's go gay," as a pejorative among peers heightened a sense of insecurity.

Right around grade 12 is when I actually started telling my close friends, so I was pretty closeted at that point, 'cause a lot of people, they still don't like gay people, like, you know "that's gay, you're so gay." (M, gay, 19)

"That's so gay" operates as exclusionary language to construct and reconstruct hetero-normative predominance (Adam, 2007; Bortolin, 2008). It acts to maintain homophobia by disciplining transgressions from "proper" gender behaviour, talk, or dress.

Several were aware of how the Catholic Church acts to regulate and police sexuality, (Epstein and Johnston, 1998) and felt uncomfortable being openly gay in a Catholic school.

No not really, it was Catholic, [the school] so... [I didn't come out]. (F, gay, 19)

I felt that I couldn't [come out] because I thought ... you know, I'm Catholic... I shouldn't be feeling what I'm feeling (F, lesbian, 23)

Other youth did not come out because they had trouble identifying as homosexual and could not yet accept this identity for themselves.

Um, I wasn't open at all because I couldn't... I had real troubles identifying and so much coming out of high school. (F, lesbian, 21)

I was scared out of my mind. As bad as it sounds, it was actually kind of fun 'cause, I mean, it was probably more accepting if I would have said something,

but I was having trouble with myself, I couldn't accept myself. I still can't kind of. (M, gay, 21)

Like Ellis and High's (2004) study of the schooling experiences in London that found that youth who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) worried about increased verbal abuse, physical assault, and isolation, some youth in this study were not comfortable coming out because they were acutely aware of peers who had been bullied for doing so.

There was one guy a year older than me who was openly gay and he was fine with it even though he got harassed a lot. So I think it scared a lot of people just because he got a lot of bullying and it was pretty public. (F, gay, 19)

Well the first year it wasn't comfortable, like, 'cause I knew a lot of people didn't accept that, and like, there was a lot of guys at my school... like there was more guys at my school than there were girls. Guys like beat up gay guys. (M, gay, 18)

Being out in high school

Of the 10 youth that were "out", and the 3 that "didn't come out, but people knew", 9 reported that it was comfortable to be "out". As mentioned in the previous section, some felt uneasy coming out in a Catholic school. One public school in particular was cited as having an accepting school climate. Overall, there did not appear to be any significant differences between Catholic and public schools in terms of comfort levels.

It was comfortable 'cause I had a lot of good enough friends and they were all very accepting and they were all like in the community. Like, we weren't all these outcasts that everyone hated; I mean everyone knew everyone else. Not really close knit, you have these few little groups of people who were the bad

homophobes, but nobody hated anyone. No one listened to them. (F, bisexual, 19)

I was actually surprisingly comfortable. Again, small town, small school, there was the odd time when I felt uncomfortable but for the most part, I had a really good class, good friends. (M, gay, 20)

Although the youth cited below reported that high school was comfortable overall, there were still some people in their school that they were not completely comfortable with.

Overall, it was relatively easy. I didn't really have any major problems with it.

There were a few people, I'm bringing back to the 'gangstas' again. I guess, it wouldn't really be that easy with them. Personally just 'cause I am a small person. I worry 'cause I don't want to be beaten up over something like that.

But with the majority of the school, it was okay. I had no problems. (M, gay, 18)

I was in a private school earlier this year, that was not that open about it but among the friends I had it was wonderful. And pretty much anyone I talked to knew about it but there are homophobes every once in awhile, like the same in my new school, [but] a little less often. (M, bisexual, 16)

Some schools are better than others.

I think the fact that it's an arts school and there's expression involved in everything and everybody's sort of.... you know... you have a certain dynamic added if you're gay, or if you're in an arts program or if there's something about you that sort of adds that special dynamic or that makes you a smaller percentage of a certain population, you're automatically kind of elevated to this much more dynamic personality type thing. (M, gay, 18)

I was lucky I went to [performing arts school] and [this school] was a very... open school so either you were gay or your best friend was - it was like that. (F, lesbian, 21)

This particular secondary school is known for its competitive drama and singing programs and has a reputation for being more accepting of differences, as this respondent noted. Three of the respondents in this study attended this school. Two females had noted positive experiences, that is, being out and not experiencing harassment, however, one male experienced harassment at this school.

Some of the youth in this study had not become out in high school by choice; they had been “outed” or had their sexuality revealed to others in the school by friends.

I actually was forced to come out in grade nine by one of my best friends. [It] wasn't something I was ready for then, however definitely, you know it builds on your personality. You deal with it, right?... I was actually surprised how well my school did deal with it... I think it was more accepted because I was so sociable and I guess, like, more personable. Okay well she's a lesbian okay well she's not wearing Birkenstocks and like not shaving her legs and climbing trees on us. (F, lesbian, 18)

Well, I came out when I was 12, that wasn't by choice. I was 12 when I went into high school 'cause I'm a year behind everyone. I started school when I was 3 and I have a late birthday. I told my best friend of 8 years in grade nine that I was gay, after seeing an episode of Degrassi actually where Marco came out to the school. It made me realize, “oh my god, I think I am gay.” ... He decided to tell the whole school. He thought that might be fine. (M, gay, 17)

For the above respondent, high school became more comfortable towards the end (grade 12). However, he had experienced harassment when he was first “outed.”

Harassment in Secondary School

Of the 13 youth in this study who were out, or “did not come out, but people knew” in high school, 7 reported that they had been harassed (2 of whom reported only minor harassment), and 3 reported some difficulties. There did not seem to be a difference in reports of harassment among public or Catholic secondary schools. The majority reported verbal harassment.

I’m sure I’ve been called faggot more times than I can remember. (M, gay, 20)

There was [sic] a couple of guys who were pretty stupid, who would call me “fag” every now and then, just walking through the hall. I didn’t really care, ‘cause I knew they were idiots. (M, gay, 19)

I did feel harassed a lot, and I think it continued through high school, and it kind of continued outside, because people sort of yell comments to you, you know, and it’s very intimidating and [you] eventually sort of grow thick skin around it... I’ve also developed a sort of reaction to the initial harassment where ... you notice somebody looking at you a certain way and you automatically register it to be something that you associate with those initial harassments where you hadn’t developed that thick skin, so I think it still effects me. (M, gay, 18)

Others experienced both verbal and physical harassment.

In grade ten, I was gay-bashed. I was thrown to the floor – I was trying to sign my friend’s locker for her birthday, ‘cause that’s what we do at our school. So, they took my pen, threw it on the floor and said, “go and get it faggot,” and then they like kicked me on the ground. (M, gay, 17)

Of the 7 youth who were not out, 5 still got harassed. This harassment was often attributed to being perceived as gay, “weird,” or because of their physical appearance.

I was pushed around or shoved around for being gay, but for being more flamboyant. In elementary school leading up to high school, yeah I was beat up, well not really beat up but bullied because of it. Even in high school it lasted a little but somehow, they’ve gotten better in high school. They use verbal jabs – like “you’re queer, you’re a fag” stuff like that. (M, gay, 18)

Not so much physically; it was just verbally which can be equally damaging. (F, gay, 19)

Some of the youth who were not harassed still believed it could happen to them, and tried to avoid situations which they perceived may put them at risk.

No, I haven’t gotten any. I might have, if I had, you know, decided to be really open about being gay at a younger age, like grade nine or ten but I always avoided any of those situations, like the people that would call me fag, or something like that, I think they would try to beat me up ‘cause I’m gay earlier on, but they kind of matured slightly by grade 12. (M, gay, 19)

It’s horrible, like we keep hearing all these stories about gay bashing. What can we do about it? I don’t know too much. I don’t know what to do about it but sit there and take it, even for me, even now. I walk down the street and people scream, but now I am like, “hey!” but I’m like scared. (M, gay, 21)

Harassment once removed still has the power to intimidate and exert gender discipline.

Those who did not experience harassment, whether they were out or not, often attributed it to having good social support, and a strong group of friends.

I got really lucky, 'cause I had so many people backing me up. More girls than guys. I had my one gay friend who was a year younger than me and he came out when I was in grade 12. He was in grade 11...so I had him, a few guys, and everybody else just didn't care. It was the whole school of not really caring, and if they did, they didn't say it to our face, they didn't do anything, they didn't harass us, and like the teachers were pretty good as well. Most of them, you know, looked away. That's cool. I got lucky. I got lucky, 'cause I hear it's crap now. (F, bisexual, 19)

Like, the group I hang with...they probably were open about it, they didn't care, they love me. But I was way too nervous. I had so much troubles [sic] in school, I mean I left. I was teased a few times about it. (M, gay, 21)

In this instance even a supportive friendship network could overcome school troubles.

Witnessed Harassment of Others

Though not harassed themselves, many witnessed the harassment of LGB peers, most commonly students yelling "gay" or "fag" in the hallways at school and sometimes physical harassment as well.

I've been there, seen it [others harassed]. It's wow... yeah. Well, I was dating this guy and we were all hanging out in a group, and we were high, and a bunch of guys came over and asked if we were gay, and I wasn't open, and they were, and they said it. Yes, you asked them a question and they said it... so they basically chased them down and hit them. I felt like I couldn't do anything. I felt bad, like I should have done something, but I couldn't. (M, gay, 21)

Lesbian students are no less immune.

One of my friends she's lesbian and she's dated girls in our schools and she's been harassed by girls in our school ... Nothing was done [about it]... It was done in front of a teacher in their class, but the teacher unfortunately didn't even speak the language very well. (F, gay, 18)

While much literature has been written on males as perpetrators against other males (Van de Ven, 1995, Mason, 2001) this aspect of gendered violence warrants exploration in future research.

Masculinity and harassment

Whether out, not out but peers knew, or closeted, *all* the males in this study were harassed in some way in high school, however, many of the females that were out were not harassed. Reasons as to why males get reprimanded for real or perceived homosexuality are explored in this section.

I have one friend who I'm sure I'm pretty sure is gay. He won't ... come out. I'm pretty sure it's due to all the harassment he got in high school because he's a very feminine guy so he's always trying to resist the femininity in him kind of thing. Like he's always growing goatees and stuff like that, trying to pump iron at the gym kind of thing. (F, lesbian, 21)

There were a couple, like, guys who were like really feminine and like widows, you know, in the drama. I know they got harassed if I was ever around (F, lesbian, 18).

Particular groups of students sometimes did the harassing.

I remember one of my friends as being very, very, flamboyant and I remember the jocks in our school ... He would get harassed, ironically, because they are at the school... but we're not going to go there. (F, Lesbian, 21)

This is in line with Pascoe's (2003) findings from her ethnographic study of a US high school. She found that jocks participate in emphasized displays of heterosexuality, including teasing other boys. Based on his study of adolescent boys attending a coeducational high school in Perth, Australia, Martino (2000, p.106) contends that footballers established themselves "at the top of a pecking order of masculinities." According to Martino, this order is maintained through differentiation from other boys (such as those who work hard, do not play football, are quiet, or not cool) through the use of derisive labels such as "faggot" applied to non-footballer boys. In some instances, harassment apparently springs from young men imagining themselves as "injured" through being the potential object of sexual attention (Bortolin, 2008).

A lot of the guys, they reacted really strangely, 'cause you are one of their guy friends, so they're think you want to have sex with them. They think "you're attracted to me because you're gay", like, I'm not attracted to every single man possible. (M, gay, 19)

In her ethnographic school based study in the United Kingdom, Kehily (2001) discusses homophobia in young men as part of a dynamic to expel the "other" from within. For young men, homosexuality is forbidden and produces a heightened anxiety and repulsion. Perhaps this discomfort with gay peers or the fear of being "hit on" may operate to conceal their vulnerabilities while securing a heterosexual identity to peers.

One study participant found a way to challenge homophobic anxiety and aggression in his male peers.

The straight kids think it's funny if they say, "hey baby, what's up?" I'll jump on their lap and say, "hey, babe good," and I'll start flirting back with them and they're like, "hey, get off me," and I'll say, "what, you were fine with it a second ago, now what?" So, I kind of like scare them a bit. I instil fear into the straight guys, so that's kind of good. (M, gay, 17)

Being properly masculine can also mean enacting contempt against women.

It was mostly exclusion but now I think about it there was a group of boys who would walk by and scream dyke. (F, lesbian, 21)

Connell (2002) argues that men's emotional commitments include prejudice against women and homosexuals. According to Redman's (2000) study of English boys, opposition to the homosexual secures recognition from the anti-gay and lesbian discourses of the wider social formation, in particular, in secondary schools. It also seeks identification with a hegemonic position in the gender/sex hierarchy. In their study of young men in Canadian schools, Frank, Kehler, Lovell and Davison (2003, p.127) sum up males' uneasiness with homosexuality as "a fear to talk, a fear to touch, a fear to be unlike the rest of 'the boys' that threatens to maintain and sustain what many young men understand to be the only way to be 'real men.'" These findings also speak to Van de Ven's (1995) suggestion that more attention must be devoted to challenging current heterosexual masculinities.

"That's so gay"

The youth in this study recognized that the phrase, "that's so gay," has become common language around them, and that "gay" was used to signify "stupid." Of the 22 youth, 9 were

bothered when people around them say, “that’s so gay.” Others were bothered by the phrase depending on how it was used, that is, if it seemed to have a negative or homophobic intent, versus meaning “stupid.”

I hate when people say, “that’s so gay,” and I’m sure a lot of gay people share that sentiment. (M, gay, 18)

I think that “that’s so gay” does hurt people. People don’t even know especially people that are out. I mean, there was no enforcing about that. I guess no one gives a rat’s ass that there is policy, there are rules out there. (M, gay, 18)

I dislike it very much, and for the longest time, people who did say it, it just irritated me so much. Like, the things they are talking about, they’re not gay per se, they are just dumb, lame, not cool. It’s not that it’s ‘gay.’ I think they are the using the term wrong, completely. Then there’s the people who justify it and say, ‘oh, it means happy,’ and that’s bullshit, ‘cause that’s not even how they are trying to explain it. (M, gay, 18)

Some respondents corrected those around them who used the phrase.

To me, I try to correct them, and no one around me really says that anymore.

Like I say, “I didn’t know – whatever they’re referring to- was a homosexual”

For instance, if someone says, “that table is so gay,” I say, “does that table have sex with other tables?” and that usually shuts them up. (M, gay, 18)

They are trying to say that something is stupid or unpleasant, and sometimes I will correct [them] and I’ll be like, “oh what the food here is homosexual it’s attracted to other food?” and then they’ll go like, “sorry dude.” It’s really

annoying. I usually try to correct them but other times its like “just grow up and find a different word.” (F, gay, 19)

Pascoe’s (2005) study of American adolescent boys at a California high school found that the word “gay” is a fairly common synonym for “stupid.” Adam (2007, p.76) notes that the epithet ‘that’s so gay’ has become one of the most widespread insults in Canadian schoolyards today “despite the fact that it almost never refers to anything that is characteristic of gay worlds or sensibilities.” These youth were bothered by the fact that the word “gay” had become synonymous with the words “stupid” or “lame”. None were sure just how this word took on this meaning, but agreed that other words should be used instead.

Other respondents were bothered by other words like “homo” and “fag” but not the phrase “that’s so gay.”

It depends on how they use it, like “that’s so gay”, and then “he is gay” or you know, “faggot” or what else, those are direct, those I do take offence. I used to take offence when I was in the closet, anytime someone would say that, even the word, I would get really defensive, I guess, trip out, angry, like “why you got to say that?” (M, gay, 21)

Personally, I couldn’t care. If someone said, “oh, you’re a fag,” I think that’s more than “that’s so gay.” (M, gay, 17)

Others were not bothered by the word “gay” because they believed it had lost its negative connotation over time and that most people did not use the word with a negative intent. Some used the term themselves.

I used to take offense to it when I first came out but then I’m like, everybody’s saying it and you know what? Now I say it, so. (M, gay, 18)

It's kind of weird because I use the term myself all the time... and sometimes I do think about it. I do think about the dynamics of that word and like what exactly it means to every person that says it and then I wonder, is the fact that it's being used in that way, like is it becoming less significant as a word that I can identify myself with, you know, because all of a sudden it takes on new meaning? And...it's kind of like saying, "oh my god." (M, gay, 18)

Conclusions

These findings indicate that homophobia and safety continue to be concerns for LGB youth in secondary school. Many LGB youth continue to fear coming out from an awareness of how heteronormativity and homophobia operate in secondary school. Some youth did not come out for fear of being bullied as they had seen other LGB youth in their school bullied as a result of coming out or even being perceived as gay. Others did not come out or reveal their sexual orientation because they felt it was incompatible with Catholicism, while others could not fully accept a homosexual identity for themselves.

Of those youth that were out, those most comfortable in high school reported having good friends they could count on for support, while others who attended a performing arts school in the city reported relative ease due to the climate of this school. However, even in the most comfortable situations, homophobic peers remained. Most youth who were out reported having experienced verbal harassment, while a few experienced both verbal and physical harassment. Some students who were not out also experienced harassment, while those who did not still felt they had to avoid certain situations as to not put themselves at risk.

One of the starkest findings is that all male students, whether out or not, experienced some form of harassment – either physical or verbal. Heterosexual male peers particularly

targeted “flamboyant” youth and were reported to be uneasy with homosexuality. These findings were explored in relation to hegemonic masculinity and pointed to a need to challenge current formations of heterosexual masculinity.

Some of the youth in this study were bothered by the phrase, “that’s so gay.” None could understand why or how the word “gay” had taken on such a different meaning. Many corrected those around them who used the phrase. Others were not bothered by the phrase, “that’s so gay,” but more by words like “fag” or “homo” which they believed to carry a more negative innuendo. Finally, some youth were not bothered by the phrase, “that’s so gay,” because they believed that it had lost any negative connotation pertaining to sexuality and had become a common discourse of the time. Still, the phrase contributes to a heteronormative environment by disciplining any transgressions from proper gender behaviour.

Out of Harassment grows Resilience

But basically, like those experiences, [being harassed] they make you like, realize, “why am I ashamed of who I am?” This is who I am and I’m not going to say, “you know what? I am tired of being gay” ‘cause teens that do that, they want to commit suicide then ‘cause they are like “I don’t want to be this anymore. I didn’t ask to be like this. You got to rise above everything, and that’s what I did. Because of that, I am really well respected at our high school, so a lot of kids will say, “oh he’s all right, he’s gay, we don’t care, ‘cause you know what? We’re fine with it now. (M, gay, 17)

This young man experienced verbal and physical harassment in his secondary school, yet shows great resiliency. His account demonstrates that not all outcomes of harassment are negative for LGB youth. Savin-Williams (2005) encourages researchers to move beyond the singular view of

the same-sex attracted teen as misdirected and instead, become aware of resilient adolescents who are coping with life. Savin-Williams (2005, p. 193) argues that although our portrayals of injustice and the harmful effects of mainstream culture on gay youth may be well-intentioned, we must attend to accounts of power and resiliency and that “targeting “gay youth” generically for special programs might very well increase self-destructive behaviour rather than promote wellness”. All the same, while personal resiliency is an important strategy worthy of recognition, all students, including LGB students should have the right to feel secure and comfortable at school, and to have institutional support for that security.

McCaskell (2005) suggests that in dealing with homophobia, openly gay students can be brought in from other schools to act as resource people, as many gay and lesbian students may not want to come out in their own schools. As Epstein (1997) suggests that many gay youth express a need for support from other openly gay youth, McCaskell’s recommendations should be considered. Other suggestions include the formation of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in secondary schools. American studies have documented positive effects such as support, social interaction and education (Deppler, 2001). In addition, GSAs have fostered the creation of alliances with straight peers (Fetner, 2003; Sweat, 2005).

As Smith (1998) reports from his study of school aged gay teenagers in Canada, teachers actively participate in stigmatizing gay youth or are complicit in their silence. Therefore, avenues for creating a more inclusive school climate should begin by involving secondary school faculty and administration. For example, Adams, Cox and Dunston’s (2004) UK study of 19 secondary schools reports that secondary school staff highlighted a need for training on issues around sexuality and homophobic bullying. In a similar vein, schools (and teachers) can play an active part in enforcing the use of proper language – this applies to the term “that’s so gay” or

derogatory comments towards LGB or perceived-to-be gay youth. As previously suggested, education may also need to address homophobia implicit in heterosexual masculinities. Connell (1995) suggests that boys participate in curriculum organized around girls, and straight students to participate in curriculum organized around the interests of gay and lesbian students. He argues that this would foster empathy and taking the viewpoint of the other, which is denied in hegemonic masculinity. Martino (2000) suggests that educators must use the skills and capacities for self-problematization that boys already have and use these to help them interrogate masculinities in their lives at school. It appears that educational practices must take into account the understanding and perspectives of young heterosexual men in order to challenge their conceptions of gender and ways of relating to LGBT peers.

This paper has focused on presenting an understanding of school climate experiences from the perspective of LGB youth. Since the analyses presented in this study rely on 20 youth in one location, we do not know the degree to which these findings reflect those in other secondary schools across the province or country. This paper does however illustrate that LGB youth continue to face bullying, harassment and homophobia in secondary schools. These findings point to a need for anti-homophobia education and programming in schools. Adequate information, resources and outreach are required for LGB youth so that they all may feel supported and safe at school.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Climate questions:

- How open were you about your sexuality in high school?
 - How comfortable was it to be open?
- Were you harassed in school?
 - Verbally?
 - Physically?
 - Did you witness gay-related harassment?
- When people around you say “That’s so gay,” what does that mean?
 - What do you think about it?