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In Their Own Words: LGBTQIA+ Stigma in Secondary School

Erin Stevenson [1,*] and Gregory Sandman [2]

[1] Department of Social Work, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY 40475, USA
[2] Department Clinical Therapeutic Programs, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY 40475, USA; gregory.sandman@eku.edu
* Correspondence: erin.stevenson@eku.edu

Abstract: LGBTQIA+ youth often face stigma from society as they develop their personal identities. In the United States, legislation has recently been focusing on reducing protections in schools for queer youth and limiting access to resources like gender affirming healthcare. Youth have increasingly been targeted for identifying as queer and have experienced verbal and physical violence for expressing their gender identities. Research links stigmatization with increased mental health and substance use problems. However, there is limited information on how stigma experienced during adolescence may continue to impact young adults over time. Using a qualitative retrospective framework, LGBTQIA+-identified undergraduates (N = 8) at a 4-year university participated in one-hour virtual focus groups. Data were recorded and anonymized using individual participant codes with names of people or places removed from transcripts. Students were asked to reflect on their experiences as queer youth in secondary school including access to resources; interactions with teachers, staff, and peers; recommendations for supporting LGBTQIA+ students; and personal coping skills. The researchers used a thematic analysis to examine key issues students raised. Results provide insight into the challenges LGBTQIA+ youth face and highlight the strengths of these college-age young adults.

Keywords: stigma; LGBTQIA+; youth; education; academic success; mental health

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1. Introduction

The stigmatization of young people who identify as part of the queer community has grown over the past decade. With no federal legislation in place to protect youth based on their gender identity or sexual orientation, state and local policies aimed at oppressing children and adolescents in the lesbian, gay, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, plus all other identities (LGBTQIA+) community are widespread in the United States [1]. Examples of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation abound including the banning of gender affirming care in Louisiana, Florida, Nebraska, Missouri, and Texas [2,3]. Other legislative acts have prohibited transgender youth from using restrooms that match their gender identity or participating in school athletics (Arizona, Ohio, and Florida to name a few) [2]. School climate survey data highlight policies requiring schools use the child's legal name, not a child's chosen name [4]. These rules now require schools to alert parents when their child tries to deviate from the gender binary standards of a boy or girl [5]. Despite the growing legislation across states [5], there is not a clear understanding of the intended or unintended consequences and how this stigmatizes queer youth.

The Williams Institute using Youth Behavior Risk Survey data estimates that 9.5% of youth ages 13–17 identified as LGBTQIA+ in 2020 [6]. The number of adults 18 or older who identify as queer, a term used interchangeably with the term LGBTQIA+, has doubled from 3.5% in 2012 to 7.6% in 2023 [4]. This growth is in large part from increased self-awareness of gender identities among youth at earlier ages. Currently, over one in five of Generation Z young adults who were born between 1997 and 2003 identify as LGBTQIA+ [7].

Youth spend a majority of their time through late adolescence in school environments for learning and social activities [8]. Adolescence is a time when the individualization of

ideas and personalities occurs. Youth develop a sense of place and seek to find belonging in schools, families, and communities. For LGBTQIA+ youth, there are added challenges in this developmental phase [9].

1.1. Behavioral Health Impact of Stigma

Minority stress theory applied to the LGBTQIA+ community points to the potential for early exposure to stigma increasing negative behavioral outcomes as adolescents go through the normal process of identity development [10,11]. This level of discrimination, harassment, and oppression against youth stigmatizes them from an early age for how they express their developing gender identity, sense of belonging, and self-awareness [12]. These negative impacts can last into adulthood as they internalize and continue to experience stigma in society [13].

Though some progress has been made in society's acceptance and normalization of diverse gender identities, research indicates that youth coming out early in life may face greater challenges in adolescent development [14]. This early stigmatization of youth who do not fit the gender binary roles has been linked to higher rates of behavioral health issues like depression, anxiety, suicidality, alcohol, and drug abuse [13,15].

1.2. Academic Impact of Stigma

Though personal and contextual differences may occur in how youth interpret stigma, the experience of being rejected for their developing identity is potentially harmful to mental health and well-being [16]. The impact of stigmatization may extend to school performance and academic achievement for queer youth. LGBTQIA+ students often face academic struggles because the discrimination makes them feel unsafe at school and disengaged in the classroom [17,18]. School experiences are significant as they historically promote cisnormativity and binary acculturation of youth development [19,20]. For LGBTQIA+ students, this means that they often feel out of place at school and lack support or needed resources [21].

1.3. Perspectives from LGBTQIA+ Youth

What the youth themselves have to say about their experiences has been difficult to obtain. Interviewing youth in secondary schools who are minors (under age 18) involves acquiring parent/guardian consent. If the family is not accepting of their child as an LGBTQIA+ individual, or does not know their child identifies as queer, it may be challenging to obtain permission to talk to the youth [22]. Researchers for this study used a retrospective model asking young adults to reflect on the time when they were in secondary school to gain first-hand perspective from LGBTQIA+ individuals. Young adults, having recently graduated from high school, may be able to recall their experiences of stigmatization more clearly from their middle and high school years. The first-hand perspective of young adults who identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community as children and adolescents needs to be heard. For this paper, the term secondary school is used to indicate students in middle school grades 6–8 and high school grades 9–12. The researchers interchangeably use the terms queer or LGBTQIA+ as the umbrella term for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, plus all other gender identities.

1.4. Research Aim

The literature indicates a need for more granular data on how these early and ongoing experiences with societal stigma affect LGBTQIA+ young people. This exploratory study used small focus groups with LGBTQIA+ college students to discuss experiences with stigma in secondary school. Students voiced how stigma impacted them over time, ways they coped with and combatted stigma, and ideas to improve school experiences for children and adolescents. Listening to these stories may help provide insight into ways we can better support and provide resources for youth in secondary schools. The guiding

research question for the focus groups was as follows: how do young adults in college view their experiences with LGBTQIA+ stigma in secondary school?

2. Materials and Methods

Expedited approval was given for this exploratory research study by the authors' university institutional review board (IRB protocol #5085). Undergraduate students at a 4-year university who identify as LGBTQIA+ were invited to participate in small confidential focus group discussions about the impact of stigma in their lives as secondary school students. Recruitment for this study was conducted through flyers posted on campus with a scannable QR code to respond and volunteer.

2.1. Participant Characteristics

All participants met inclusion criteria for the focus group study, which required students to be enrolled as undergraduates at the university, ages 18–25 years old, and identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The focus groups opened with basic questions to give the researchers a sense of who the participants were as individuals.

Of the eight focus group participants, six stated that they grew up in rural communities, one from an urban area, and one from a suburban area; two participants moved from an urban to a rural area during their secondary school experiences.

2.2. Focus Group Format

Three one-hour focus group sessions were held virtually using zoom software (Version 5.17.11). There were 1–4 participants per group and a total of 8 participants overall. Informed consent was obtained verbally and ground rules for discussion were established. The groups were confidential, and participants were asked to respect confidentiality of shared stories and names once the groups ended. Participants were emailed an e-gift card of USD 20 and a list of supportive behavioral health resources after the end of the session.

The researchers led the discussions aided by an undergraduate research assistant who took notes. The interview guide questions focused on perspectives on the definition of stigma; experiences as LGBTQIA+-identified youth in secondary school; access to resources in their schools; interactions with teachers, staff, and peers; recommendations for schools to support LGBTQIA+ students; and coping skills for queer youth.

Each focus group was asked the same ten interview questions in the same order for consistency (see Appendix A). Questions focused on the guiding research question around how young adults in college view their experiences with LGBTQIA+ stigma in secondary school.

2.3. Qualitative Analysis Technique

Sessions were audio/video-recorded with the permission of the participants in order to obtain a transcript for the analysis. Recordings were password-protected on a secure server accessed only by the research team. Using Microsoft's transcription program, a narrative file was created and cleaned to remove any identifying names or information.

A thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's [23] method that includes six steps and a recursive model to ensure linking of topics. These steps include the following: (1) Reviewing and becoming familiar with the data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Reviewing themes; (5) Defining and naming themes; (6) Writing up results.

Two graduate and one undergraduate research assistant assisted with initial transcript coding with each reviewing and coding data separately. The students were trained to use a deductive and inductive lens, looking for codes within the data transcripts. Then, codes were compared and collapsed with the researchers' codes for inter-rater reliability. Codes were incorporated based on similar and different interpretations of the narrative to create overarching themes. This reduced bias potential from the lead researchers who developed

the questions and led the focus groups. The lead researchers selected the final themes and reflective quotes that exemplified each theme.

3. Results

3.1. Themes

Themes from the analysis of the transcripts were consistent across coders with six primary themes emerging: (1) Identity Development Challenges; (2) Family Relationships; (3) Religious Tensions; (4) School Relationships; (5) Ideas for Schools to Support LGBTQIA+ Students; and (6) Coping Tips for Queer Youth. Each theme is described followed by quotes from focus group participants to illustrate the theme. Quotes from different participants are identified with a code starting with P and a number to maintain anonymity.

3.2. Defining Stigma

Each focus group asked participants to define what LGBTQIA+ "stigma" meant to them. As researchers, we came into this study with our own preconceived ideas of stigma, so hearing definitions from individuals in the focus groups was helpful to center their perspective in the discussion. Responses focused on stigma being negative with obvious, as well as subtle, actions taken to discriminate against or "put down" another group like the LGBTQIA+ community. Definitions of stigma from participants included the following:

> *P3.1. "Like a social bad taste in your mouth, a negative association to one group".*
>
> *P2.2. "Stigmatization is the act of being prejudiced. . ..so they can think it, but when they act on it, then you know about it ...the stigma is out there".*
>
> *P1.1. "Any actively harmful or even passively negligent behavior on the part of an opposing party".*
>
> *P2.1. "Even though my parents haven't been outwardly against it they've still not done much besides tell me about why I'm wrong, and that's an answer isn't it? When they don't do anything, that's another response even though people say it's nothing".*
>
> *P2.3. "The people saying 'oh, I'll pray for you'. . .like your problems are your fault. . .they're because you belong to this group. They're because you're, you know, struggling with this. Like I'm so sorry, but you're on your own like you did this to yourself. That's kind of what I picture".*

3.3. Identity Development Challenges

3.3.1. Being Out

A part of identity development is often stating to others who you are and how you identify as an individual with your personal beliefs, values, musical tastes, clothing styles, and other aspects of yourself. Participants talked about how "out" they felt they were with their LGBTQIA+ identity with friends, family, and people at school. A few were openly queer to everyone in secondary school. Most of the participants reported varying degrees of openness depending on the individual or group with whom they were engaging at the time. One participant stated, *"My parents didn't know [I was LGBT]. They still don't know to this day, and I felt comfortable talking about it at school, and I felt like there was a pretty big community" (P2.4).*

This level of openness changed for some participants when they were teased and "got flack" for saying they were queer. Many came out to friends when they were younger, then decided to go back into the closet to protect themselves from rejection.

> *P1.3. "I feel like I kind of went back in the closet for a little bit my first like 2 years of high school. So, I kind of told everyone, 'No, it was a phase.' Definitely not because I, you know, I didn't want to be the bully loner kid who was getting told that they're going to hell. That was not cool and it was very, very difficult".*

P1.2. "So I don't remember consciously necessarily going back into the closet, but I did. I'd never talked about it. I stopped, you know, labeling myself outwardly as being trans and stuff".

P2.1. "I wasn't really out at all like during like middle and high school. I didn't really officially come out to like maybe the last month of my senior year of high school".

P2.2. "I came out as bisexual and most of my peers took it okay. It was when I came out as a lesbian at school is what I experienced a lot worse, I guess, kind of behavior from people".

A few participants were only open to their closest friends and waited to be fully open about being queer once they got to college. Over half of the participants were "out" to their families though only two felt truly supported, two had mixed responses, and two were rejected based on religious values and told that they were "going to hell". They talked about being sent to a "bible camp" to address their sinful life. Though it was not labeled as a "conversion therapy", the participant felt that the purpose was to change their gender identity to match their biological sex and to fit back into the binary roles of male or female.

3.3.2. Defining Terms for Identity

Participants felt that their identity developed over time with exposure to definitions or ideas that better helped them clarify their self-awareness and self-image. For example, this participant used several identity labels to describe aspects of themselves:

P1.1 "My pronouns are they, them, and theirs. My micro-label is technically gender fluid, but I use trans and nonbinary more often because those are terms that people know. I use any pronouns except for 'it.' That's just the only one I don't like".

Another person stated, *"Gender is less clear, like there's a lot of different labels I'd go with; like for most of my like gender journey I was trans male and I still kind of identify with the term FTM" (P3.1).*

There were differences for participants in their personal discovery of gender identity but also sexual orientation. Adolescence is typically complicated by development sex hormones, which can increase awareness of and interest in other people as intimate partners. For queer youth, whose sexual attraction varies from the binary assumptions common in society, this can be particularly challenging. Some participants felt that they firmly understood their sexual orientation since elementary school, while other participants identified with a variety of terms. Participants highlighted their experiences being different in this regard. Among the group participants, there was a broad representation of sexual orientations. One individual identified as "bi or bi-slash-pan". Two individuals identified as bisexual, one as lesbian, one as ACE, and one as transgender, and two individuals identified as pansexual. They gave descriptions of their views on developing these identities.

P1.2. "The difference between my sexuality coming out and my later gender coming out had two completely different experiences".

P2.2. "I always kind of knew since middle school that I was a part of the LGBT community. I was just never really out about it. I didn't really realize I was a lesbian until, like in the middle of high school".

P1.3. "I started questioning my own sexuality in elementary school because everyone was interested in boys and like all my friends. And then I was like, you know, I like boys, but I'm pretty sure I like girls too, you know? And I just, I was I can remember being like 10 and thinking that".

P3.1. "I am a Lesbian, F. E. M. M. E. Gender is less clear, like there's a lot of different labels I'd go with like for most of my like gender journey. I was trans male and I still kind of identify with the term FTM".

3.3.3. Online Influences

Online communities appeared to play a big role in learning about what it means to be a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, which could be challenging for many of the participants who had limited information available at school or from family. This was particularly challenging for youth whose schools did not have resources for queer students, families did not talk about gender diversity or sexual identities, and religious views suppressed questioning. They turned to social media sources like Tumbler, TikTok, YouTube, and Discord for information.

> *P2.4. "Instagram was very big for learning stuff and YouTube, I spent so much time on YouTube watching other like queer YouTubers talk about their experiences and just, you know, live in their life. And that's where basically I learned about everything".*

> *P2.2. "I would go on YouTube, and I remember specifically watching BuzzFeed videos where they talk about like six lesbians you'll meet in college, or what Hogwarts house are you based on your favorite queer band, or just random things like that. Those just started to just steadily like introduce me to what LGBT meant and the different identities and what all the flags meant".*

> *P3.1. "I had to do it all in secret but yeah I was on Tumblr a lot and you know, just talking with other like trans youth".*

Participants were quick to note that online sites could be both positive and negative sources of information. Many participants said that online was the first place they actually found an LGBTQIA+ community and felt accepted. At the same time, they recognized the need to be cautious about information shared online.

> *P1.1. "And with that, do still practice like online safety. Like maybe don't tell them your exact age and where you live. If you're a minor, you know, like you still keep up that level of security and safety. Use an anonymous name you know, like trust them with your heart, but maybe not your safety".*

Overall participants discussed often feeling safer with online friends where they would not be outed to people in real life.

> *P1.1. "I found a lot of support and love on just online communities".*

> *P2.2. "When I finally got to TikTok that was where I got introduced to a lot of queer theory and history".*

> *P1.1. "Like P1.2 and P1.3. . .even though none of us as far as I'm aware, are really all that out or transitioned all that much, we were able to find a lot more people in our communities just because we went on to Discord and just found each other".*

3.4. Family Relationships

In secondary school, young people typically still live with their parents or guardians. Being able to exercise your voice and personal identity as an adolescent might depend on how accepting your family is of you as an individual. Parents were allies for some participants as seen in these quotes.

> *P1.3. "So, like I did come out to my mom and she's very chill about it, but we just kind of keep it low key just because of like the area. But I have a very supportive and a very fabulous family".*

> *P1.2. "And my parents took her [the school counselor] seriously and got me into therapy. I don't think it was very effective because that lady she wasn't a bad therapist, but she also did not specialize in gender affirming care. She was just a general family therapist, so that wasn't very helpful for me and my situation. But I liked knowing that my parents were willing to get me help".*

Other parents were not supportive with one parent stating that it was "stupid' their child felt they were part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Another parent noted that being

queer was not really an option and several parents rejected the adolescent's identity due to religious beliefs.

> *P1.1. "I texted them in July of last year about it because I just sort of bottled it up for a while. And then I realized, and I was like I need to tell them. And then we didn't talk for six months. It was just one of those things of we're not going to touch it until you want to talk to us about it".*
>
> *P2.4. "I just had really unsupportive parents and siblings".*
>
> *P1.1. "Because even though my parents haven't been outwardly against it, they've still not done much besides tell me about why I'm wrong, and that's an answer too, isn't it? When they don't do anything, that's another response. Even though people say it's nothing".*
>
> *P1.2. "Adults in my life, my extended family was not as accepting. Like, I remember at one point just very offhandedly saying to my mom, you know like it really bothers me whenever people call me Miss. Like I would prefer Mr. over that. And she got so angry, like irrationally angry over that".*

Some parents are still not aware that the participant is queer even though the participant is now in college and considered a young adult.

3.5. Religious Tensions

Participants talked a lot about the tension of wanting to be religious or spiritual while at the same time being rejected and condemned by the religious community for being queer. Many were raised in a church with their families and yet had difficulty finding acceptance within the church group as they explored their queer identity more deeply in adolescence.

> *P2.2. "I was raised very Catholic and that obviously it [being bisexual] just like wasn't accepted very well. I went on a few bible retreats after being outed to my family and they weren't specifically listed as conversion or anything like that, but I mean they still were bible retreats that would just not say anything specific, because that would get them in trouble. It would just be more like reintroducing God into your life by getting rid of sinful lifestyles".*
>
> *P1.3. "I go to church every Sunday. I read my Bible. But you know, my God doesn't hate. That's what I believe. And so, I would get told that I was going to hell constantly. And that was very difficult for me to hear. . .Like that was the most heartbreaking thing".*

There was a sense of desire expressed to be a part of a spiritual community for many of the participants. Yet, participants made statements about how the potential or real rejection from religious groups was not worth trying to get involved.

> *P1.1. "I don't necessarily know their stand, the churches our churches stance on other people. It's just one of those things of I'm not going near it even if they are supportive. . .I broke away from Christianity when I was 12 and when I told that to my mom, she got really upset. . .and ended the argument by saying, 'I just don't want my kids going to hell'. . ..I will say I gave up on it [religion] a long time ago because it was so damaging and hurtful. And I wish I could go back, but maybe when I'm 70. I don't know. I can't see a way back right now".*

This sense of desire for religious or spiritual (R/S) acceptance and involvement and a corresponding sense of rejection by the church is not uncommon among the LGBTQIA+ community [24]. R/S involvement offers many people positive mental health benefits, and this is inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community. Unfortunately, there is a wide sense of divergence between churches regarding their acceptance or rejection of queer individuals, which can dramatically affect members' sense of belonging and involvement in the church community [24].

3.6. School Relationships

Age-appropriate development in adolescence centers individuation from family while turning to develop stronger relationships with peers. As young people begin to create their sense of self separate from their families, they look to peers for affirmation [14]. LGBTQIA+ youth often struggle more with this aspect of development, especially if they experience bullying, harassment, or discrimination that stigmatizes their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. One participant said, *"I was harassed so much that I was followed home [from school]. My girlfriend at the time was followed and [they] threatened her safety" (P1.2).*

Several participants talked about asking for help from teachers or counselors and being told to just ignore the bullying. "When I went to teachers for help and faculty a lot of them just said, 'Well, it's jokes and stuff that you just need to get used to in school. So just brush it off and go along'" (P2.2).

Teachers are responsible not only for the educational aspects of a classroom, but the learning environment as well. When that space is safe for students to question things and explore ideas, they can thrive both academically and socially. Some schools allow teachers to post a "safe space" sign with a pride flag on their classroom doors to indicate acceptance and support for the LGBTQIA+ community [14].

Feeling safe at school is not always the case for queer youth [14]. Participants talked about learning what was truly safe or unsafe in school by witnessing others' experiences. For example, seeing how another queer student was treated by the school might silence other queer students when they experience bullying or need adult support [12].

> *P1.1. In my senior year, I worked at the school's library as like a one of the little hour-long segments of my day and there was a big discussion of, well, we have all these LGBT books and we don't really have a section for them since they're across so many genres. Should we add a little flag on there to let people know? And so a. . . big counterpoint that was brought up by the by a trans friend of mine who was also working there was saying if we make this obvious the bullying is going to increase".*

> *P2.1. "I was just never really out about it, because it was a very small school, so like the only other person that I knew that had come out was one of my friends. She was openly like a lesbian and stuff, and like the teachers, and like other students, they weren't very accepting of it".*

One focus group participant saw another student being bullied. They wanted to tell the teacher, but said that their teacher had bibles and religious messages around their public-school classroom. They said, *"I didn't feel comfortable encouraging her to go to someone at that school to talk with them because she may experience even more stigma" (P2.3).*

When students who felt safe with a teacher shared their identity as a queer youth, they had mixed reactions. Instead of being supported, some were stigmatized by the teacher telling other people, peers, or their parents.

> *P1.2. "My parents found out that I was trans because of a teacher I trusted. I told them that at the time I use he/they pronouns and wanted to go by [a different name], and she called my parents and she said as a mother and a Christian, you know, that type of a thing. It ruined my relationship with my parents for a while".*

One school had a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), though once the teacher who ran the group changed jobs, the GSA was disbanded. Another student's school had a club for LGBTQIA+ also run by a teacher that included youth who identified as cisgender allies of the queer community. The participant was scared to attend because people might ask why you are there and "out" you to your family or friends.

One participant's school allowed them to start an LGBTQ club. They and a few other students got involved and met for a while to support each other. When the academic year ended and the yearbook was published, the LGBTQ club was mislabeled to indicate that the club supported school pride and not to reflect the group's queer identity.

P1.2. "The club was so frowned upon that in the yearbook…it says that we are a 'school pride club' and that we are a 'volunteer service organization' instead of being anything LGBTQ".

Two different participants were publicly harassed at school through media presentations. One student was humiliated through the daily student newscast.

P2.1. "We had a student-run news broadcast that would play during this one class period and there were some students who were very transphobic…. they specifically did a segment making fun of me being trans and it was broadcast to the whole school. One of the vice-principals, she took it down and she banned those kids from doing that broadcast…no one did anything significant except…took down the video".

Another participant was harassed and humiliated through a social media video made by peers about the queer students at their school. Since it was not published through the school media, there was no recourse to get the video taken down at that time.

P1.3. "After I'd already come out and then what kind of led me to going back in the closet is a TikTok was made about me and the other openly out people [at] the middle and high school that we went to. And it was a picture of me, a picture of a bunch of other kids. And yeah, I reported it. It never got taken down. I had people showing me the video, like, you need to do something about this. You and a bunch of other people are being targeted".

3.7. Ideas for Schools to Support LGBTQIA+ Students

Participants discussed ways that they felt secondary schools could better support LGBTQIA+ students. Responses were focused around adding or increasing access to resources, improving safety for queer youth, and including queer history in the curriculum.

3.7.1. Increased Resource Access

Though some schools had pride clubs or information about LGBTQIA+ resources in counselor offices, there was limited information or support available for LGBTQIA+ youth across the groups.

P1.2. "I would also say have resources available, not just, you know, like their guidance counselors, like have posters up with like The Trevor Project and things like that all around the school in inconspicuous areas. Information around the school not hidden, but conspicuous so kids can see it in bathrooms, lunch room, hallways".

P2.4. "There was really a lack of just any sort of like queer like when we were in history. No talking about like we're like historical figures. Anything like that. We didn't really talk about any queer literature, anything like that, even though there was some that was like very, very popular, and would have been very like helpful to the curriculum at the time. We just never talked about it, and I wish there was more of that in schools, and I think that would be helpful, for like LGBTQ+ students to feel connected to their community, and also like give them a space to talk about what being LGBTQ+ looks like as a like as a young as a young student".

One participant suggested that schools should have information available to help parents and families learn how to support their LGBTQIA+ child. The counselors might help the youth in talking with their families about their gender identity and sexual orientation.

P1.2. "That if they say I want to come out to my parents, but I need help doing so helping that child form a plan in place and maybe having the school stand with the child, you know. Maybe their favorite teacher who is supportive or a counselor and stuff to help mediate that discussion with the parents and help the parent, you know, with questions that maybe the child doesn't know how to answer and give them that safe environment. Maybe give the parent resources".

Often clubs were dependent upon a single teacher organizing it and the club dissolved if the teacher left the school. "We had a Native American club and we had like three

Native American students, but we didn't have an LGBT club which I think is kind of weird" (P1.3).

3.7.2. Safety in Secondary Schools

Participants talked about the need to feel safe at school and the importance of being aware of personal safety needs. Since students in most states are required by law to attend school until age 18, participants felt that schools should have systems in place to protect all students, not just cisgender individuals. *"They [the student] can act like nothing's wrong and seem fine but it's important to help the kids who are 'out' feel safe. It's important to let the ones who aren't 'out' know that it's okay to 'come out'" (P2.3).*

Participants felt that many schools ignored bullying or discrimination against LGBTQIA+ students. One participant said the best safety rule as *"I will say a zero-tolerance bully policy for people bullying LGBTQ+ people" (P1.2).*

Participants specifically reported issues with feeling safe going to the bathroom and not having access to gender-neutral bathrooms. Some schools gave students access to a shared teacher bathroom or a one-person bathroom in response, but these spaces were often across the building from the student's classes and hard to access. Additionally, accessing the gender-neutral bathroom made their status obvious to everyone even if they did not want to be "out" in that way to everyone.

P3.1. "What I wish my high school would have done better is let me use the freaking boy's bathroom without threatening detention…. the compromise was to let me use the teacher's bathroom which is on one end of the school…. or use the bathrooms like outside the special education classrooms…. Everyone's going to the bathroom across the hall and then like I'm down here walking down the stairs…it was like a very outing experience".

P2.1. "And for the schools basically just not to treat 'gay' like it's a bad word. Pretty much like any kid would mention that in class, and teachers would just immediately like shut them down, or just tell them not to say that, and they would just treat it like this like awful like dirty word or something".

Another participant wanted to join an athletics team at school. They talked about the stigma and discrimination that was expressed by the coaches.

P3.1. "I did try sports once like I wanted to join lacrosse or cross country… most sports team that they had and they were like we need to check if you can be on the boys team. Even as cross country and they're not really divided by gender".

Feeling safe at school and other public spaces is an important part for anyone, and especially perhaps for LGBTQIA+ youth. Participants mentioned that having resources available to them such as clubs, supportive teachers, and strict anti-bullying initiatives would have made them feel safer at school. This aligns with suggestions from researchers who have stated that schools with supportive faculty and staff are generally considered safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ students. Additionally, schools with strict anti-bullying policies provide an environment where LGBTQIA+ students are supported. Completing this safety plan involves, as students sensed, access to Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSAs) which are student run clubs for queer students and allies, as well as other supportive groups [25].

Parents and school personnel who are willing to be involved in creating a safe space for LGBTQIA+ students could begin by openly supporting youth when they do decide to come out. Coming out is an important and potentially dangerous time as the participants of this study stated. Therefore, when a youth decides to come out and identify publicly as LGBTQIA+, the adults around the youth would speak volumes by openly and enthusiastically supporting them in doing so. Furthermore, ongoing education about LGBTQ+ individuals may reduce the stigma and homophobia surrounding this vulnerable population [8].

3.7.3. Queer History

Inclusive education was important to the participants. They reported feeling like LGBTQIA+ history was intentionally excluded from the curriculum. One participant said, *"So, for me, both my middle and high school there was a never really representation at all like in terms of books, movies, authority figures or talking about it" (P2.3).*

The lack of exposure to mentors and historical figures who identified as LGBTQIA+ was noticed by these students more in retrospect now that they are in college and have learned more on their own about key events in history that included LGBTQIA+ individuals. They suggested finding ways to incorporate queer figures into secondary school lessons to be fully inclusive of all students. Education regarding LGBT+ persons throughout history would provide context for the LGBTQ+ youth where many adults may seem to not understand that there have always been LGBTQ+ individuals in all societies [25].

> *P1.1. "Make inclusivity in the classroom a priority. Like you know we all take history class, never once did we talk about queer people in it. Yet here we are, you know like Alan Turing existed. Why did we never talk about him whenever we went over WWII? You know like you can incorporate it. It is not that hard. You're going out of your way to avoid talking about queer people".*

> *P2.2. "I would also tell schools to teach things about Stonewall and what happened to queer people throughout history, especially like in the Holocaust that was so skipped over in school. Like I didn't know what the upside-down pink triangle meant until like a year ago and I feel like that should have been covered. . .I would tell schools to learn about queer history earlier".*

3.8. Coping Tips for Queer Youth

Learning to cope with the stigma as an LGBTQIA+ person is essential, and the participants were quick to highlight both personal safety and social support as key elements in coping. All the participants stressed that queer youth need to understand that they have a choice about when and how they share their gender identity and/or sexual orientation with other people. *"You do not owe your sexuality or gender identity to anyone. Be stealth if you want to be stealth, you do not have to tell people. That is your right, your business, it is personal" (P1.2).*

They discussed the social pressure that they felt to come out as if it was a requirement in order to be queer. Yet looking back, participants said that many of them realized that they could have made more nuanced decisions about their decision to share their identity with other people.

3.8.1. Coping by Maintaining Personal Safety

Being safe includes making a conscious decision to share their identity or not share it with different people based on whether it was going to be safe. The idea that society expects you to disclose your gender identity and/or sexual orientation was something participants stated should be kept personal to share or not. Being safe includes knowing if you would be kicked out of your home if you came out to your family.

> *P1.2. "And then I will also say my advice to younger queer people this I, and I mean this seriously, do not come out if it is not safe. . ..The social pressure and cultural idea that you have to come out to be your true self, that's BS and you can quote me on that. That gets people killed. That gets people like my friend homeless. . .you know"?*

Another participant said, "Don't come out if you don't have those resources that support system because it will make things worse" (P1.3).

3.8.2. Use of Social Support to Cope with Stigma

All the participants identified support from friends, LGBTQIA+ people online, and caring adults as being important for queer youth to cope with stigma. One person said, *"It was just like other queer friends that I had, and teachers that were allies like those were my resources" (P3.1).*

Participants talked about the need to share their experiences and challenges with other people who understood their struggles and were willing to listen, not necessarily solve problems. They suggested finding support online if they cannot find in-person allies.

> *P2.1. "I would say just like talk to people in the community because, like, I know that they can actually understand, like my struggles and stuff for, like I understand, even if they don't really give me a solution to the problem and I've always found a lot of solace listening to music".*

They also noted the positive changes when they got to college, where they felt safe to be more open about their identity as a queer person. For example, this participant compared secondary school to their current college experience with social support.

> *P2.1. "During like middle school and stuff there weren't really like teachers to go to. I didn't have, like a there weren't a lot of LGBT like friends. . .. but like now [that I'm in college] I have like a big friend group of LGBT people so I have plenty to go to that can like understand like my point of view and stuff. So, I think that having people that like know what you're going through helps a lot even if they don't give you a real solution to it".*

Participants noted the significance of being able to meet in person with other people in the LGBTQIA+ community now that they were at college. *"I've been able to really express who I am fully in college and I didn't feel like I could do that as much in high school" (P2.4).*

Thinking back to what it felt like to be in secondary school, participants talked about encouraging LGBTQIA+ youth to think to the future and know that things will get better.

> *P3.1. "I guess the things I would tell like a young trans person is you know like be like I was being like unapologetically you like even in the face of a lot of rough things. And to you know stay close with the people that do support you even if it's not you know the traditional kind of support kids have of like parents. You know if your support has to be your high school counselor and your friends and your English teacher, then you know that's how it is. And you know appreciate them like they were family, the resources that are there".*

> *P2.4. "I would say to my younger self, I would tell her it doesn't matter what people think, especially in high school and especially in middle school because once you get to college you're going to meet so many people that think like you and act like you that you are not going to really care what those people thought about you and you won't see them again".*

4. Discussion

Though we met with a small number of participants in the focus groups, hearing their experiences as queer youth provided fresh insight into how young adults may handle the stigma often associated with being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. As adolescents exploring and developing their personal identity, many discovered that being "out" as a queer person came with significant challenges like peer group rejection, religious, and family tensions.

As stated above, the minority stress model posits that members of minority groups experience increased amounts of stress due to stigma, prejudice, and discrimination [10]. Coming out or openly identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community is an experience fraught with anxiety and often rejection by members of the heterosexual community, especially those closest to the person coming out. It is a small wonder that the youth in this study often advised against coming out unless a person felt safe to do so.

The majority of participants had limited access to resources that would help them understand or learn about what it means to be a part of the LGBTQIA+ community so they turned to online sources including social media. Some found information and support online as their primary source of coping. The participants across the focus groups highlighted the need for educational safety in secondary schools and supportive resources for queer youth. They wanted young people to know that questioning when and how to

share your identity was a decision to make and not a requirement of being queer. In fact, choosing when and how to share your identity was a matter of personal safety and should be considered carefully to protect yourself.

Many of the participants stated that they were hopeful that they would find protection from stigma within their churches. There are times when a church will offer support to an individual identifying as LGBTQ+; however, often this is not the case. It is possible to assist churches and other faith communities to open their arms to their LGBTQ+ members. One of the first steps that is in this process would seem to be education. Educating members of faith communities of the important source of protection that they are to all vulnerable populations may open discussions to a wider understanding and acceptance of who are vulnerable populations. Furthermore, as churches are willing to become more open to vulnerable groups, they may discover that this particular group already exists within the church but is hidden in a spiritual closet [26].

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the focus groups included a small sample of individuals who volunteered to speak with researchers about their experiences with stigma as queer youth. It may be that only students who had strong opinions about stigma volunteered or only those with negative experiences instead of those who may have had very positive secondary school experiences. Second, the focus groups were each kept to one hour to respect participants' time, and this may have hindered a deeper exploration of topics. Third, we know that vulnerable populations like the LGBTQIA+ community often are wary of speaking up and being "out" about their gender identity. We were able to interview only those who were willing to respond to the focus group flyers, though we know there is a much larger population of queer students.

5. Recommendations

The participants in these focus groups shared important narratives that help provide a deeper understanding of the need to address LGBTQIA+ stigma affecting youth. Though this is only a small sample of individuals, their stories are similar to others we hear from different communities and in other research studies with queer youth. Recommendations for future research include larger focus group discussions and more detailed information from youth in a variety of different locations and settings.

Additionally, schools and faith communities can make adjustments to include and protect queer youth. Religious or spiritual groups should be aware that queer youth want to be involved, though they fear being stigmatized for their gender identity and rejected or discriminated against. Reaching out to the LGBTQIA+ youth population and offering a safe and welcoming environment may provide a spiritual haven that they are seeking.

Finally, schools must begin to talk with and listen to queer youth in order to truly hear what they are experiencing. Administrators and teachers should make it a priority to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ youth when thinking of the best ways to support the mental and physical health, safety, and personal development of the adolescents at their schools. Schools can reduce stigma by expanding learning materials to include voices of queer individuals who have made a difference in the world. They can make spaces for clubs or groups to support the queer community of youth. Administrators can ensure that policies around bullying and abusive language are enforced particularly in regard to gender identity.

Stigma is clearly an ongoing issue at the macro-level with federal and state policies that discriminate against youth based on gender identity. The results here reflect some of the individual- and school-based challenges that LGBTQIA+ youth may be facing and the stigma that they experience in secondary schools. By listening to their stories and asking for suggestions on changes to make schools safer and more inclusive, we can begin to improve the learning environments. We should all be advocating for inclusive policies that protect rather than stigmatize and harm LGBTQIA+ youth.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Guide Questions

1. Please share a first name we can call you for this discussion. It can be real or a pseudonym. We will not use names in our research paper to maintain confidentiality. If you are comfortable, share your pronouns, gender identity and sexual orientation.
2. Tell us a few things about your secondary school when you were ages 12–18 (middle and high school). Was it a public or private school? Was it in a rural or urban area?
3. How "out" were you as an LGBTQIA person during secondary school?
4. In your school what LGBTQIA resources or supports were available?
5. How do you define stigma that impacts LGBTQIA individuals in society?
6. In what ways do you feel stigma impacted your experience at school (i.e., bullying? micro-aggressions?)
7. Talk about how you were treated at school—by staff, teachers, or administrators and by other students.
8. What tips would you share with a younger person on how to cope with or combat stigma in their daily life?
9. In your opinion, what could schools do to improve the experiences of LGBTQIA students and address stigma and discrimination?
10. Is there anything more you would like to share about your experiences with stigma and discrimination as an LGBTQIA individual?

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