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The impact of non-affirming Christian secondary schools on students who identify as LGBTQIA+: a phenomenological inquiry

Alexis C. Schneider

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Pepperdine University
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THE IMPACT OF NON-AFFIRMING CHRISTIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS ON
STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQIA+: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy

by

Alexis C. Schneider

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Gabriella Miramontes, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Alexis C. Schneider

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Doctoral Committee:

Gabriella Miramontes, Ed.D., Chairperson

Farzin Madjidi, Ed.D., Co-Chair/Committee

Maria Brahme, Ed.D., Co-Chair/Committee

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VITA

Education

- 2023 Pepperdine University
Ed.D., Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy
- 2008 San Jose State University
M.A., Education (Instructional Technology)
- 2004 California Polytechnic State University
B.A., English

Career

- 2022-2023 Vice Principal of Academics
Valley Christian High School
- 2014-2022 Dean of Instruction
Valley Christian High School
- 2018-2022 World Language Department Chair
Valley Christian High School
- 2010-2015 English Department Co-Chair
Valley Christian High School
- 2003-2014 English Teacher
Valley Christian High School

ABSTRACT

In the United States, nearly 100,000 LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) students attend non-affirming religious secondary schools yearly (Green et al., 2019; Institute of Education Sciences [IES] & National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019a, 2019b). Because organized religion can have both beneficial and harmful outcomes on LGBTQIA+ youth (Wolff, 2016) and a secondary school environment has a significant impact on a student's sense of academic success and well-being (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021), it is essential to understand and implement best practices that support LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious secondary schools. Using phenomenological methods within a qualitative approach, this study focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming religious secondary schools to evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive student outcomes. To honor the complexity of experience and empower participants, this study integrated the frameworks of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020), Spencer's (1995) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory, and Yuan's (2016) theology of compassion for the marginalized. This study used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 12 participants. Semi-structured interviews produced data relevant to the phenomenon being studied. The study found that in order to ensure positive outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools, school leaders must shift their school culture, institutionalize supports, and communicate the unconditional love of God, among other recommendations. Without implementing best practices, non-affirming schools risk distorting the gospel message and exacerbating the mental health challenges common in this vulnerable, at-risk population.

Chapter 1: Introduction

But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” (*New International Version [NIV] Bible*, 1973/2011, Luke 18:16)

Background/Historical Context

A crisis looms in Christian education, indicated by a growing number of lawsuits (*Alford v. Whitefield Academy*, 2020; *Hunter v. U.S. Department of Education*, 2021b; E. Meyer & Stader, 2009) and personal anecdotes describing harmful and discriminatory environments at religious schools for LGBTQIA+¹ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) students (Avery, 2021; Soulfource, 2019). Independent secondary schools with a religious affiliation served approximately 7% of students in the US in 2015, the last time the U.S. Department of Education published the data (IES & NCES, 2019a, 2019b). In the fall of 2015, independent secondary schools with religious affiliations showed an enrollment of approximately 1,092,430 students. Of these students, approximately 85% attended schools that adhered to a conservative understanding of biblical sexuality and gender (IES & NCES, 2019b), also known as non-affirming institutions (Wolff et al., 2016).

Religious institutions, including denominations, individual churches, schools, and other organizations explicitly affiliated with a religious tradition, can be classified as either affirming

¹ LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) is an acronym used to provide inclusivity to those who identify with a gender minority or sexual minority group. At times in this paper, the acronym will be abbreviated to correspond with the acronym used by the researchers being cited. For example, a 2021 Gallup phone poll (Jones, 2022) referred to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) individuals. Thus, that acronym is used when describing the poll to indicate its limitations. In contrast, the Trevor Project (Green et al., 2019) examined youth who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. As a result, this paper uses the acronym LGBTQ when referencing data or conclusions from the Trevor Project (Green et al., 2019). Any alteration to the LGBTQIA+ acronym within this paper can be understood as this author’s reflection of the research being cited. When more than one study is cited, an acronym inclusive of all groups cited between the combined studies will be used.

or non-affirming (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Wolff et al., 2016). An affirming position toward LGBTQIA+ issues and individuals indicates that the institution affords LGBTQIA+ individuals the same rights and status in their organization as gender and sexual majority individuals (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Wolff et al., 2016). As a result, affirming congregations may have openly homosexual or transgender pastors or elders and perform same-sex unions (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). In contrast, non-affirming institutions “[condemn] same-sex behavior as sinful” (Barnes & Meyer, 2012, p. 505) and do not allow openly LGBTQIA+ individuals to serve as leaders or to engage in church practices, such as communion (Wolff et al., 2016). Non-affirming academic religious institutions may or may not have policies related to behavioral standards or outness for LGBTQIA+ individuals but have doctrinal statements indicating that same-sex sexual relationships or other deviations from a traditional biblical understanding of sex or gender violate the teachings of scripture (Wolff et al., 2016). Further, some non-affirming religious universities do not permit any expression that could be considered supportive of LGBTQIA+ issues or individuals, such as allowing gay-straight alliances (GSAs) to operate on their campuses (Wolff et al., 2016). Wolff et al. (2016) noted that although more than 200 non-affirming religious institutions of higher learning exist in the United States, there has been little research to indicate the impact of attending non-affirming institutions on LGBTQIA+ students.

This has particular relevance because polls have shown an increasing number of individuals in the United States who identified as LGBT. A 2021 Gallup phone poll of individuals over the age of 18 in the United States indicated that 7.1% (Jones, 2022) identified as LGBT. This represented a substantial increase since 2012, the first year Gallup collected data on sexual and gender orientation, up from only 3.4% (Gates & Newport, 2012) in 2012. Of significance, the percentage of gender or sexual minority adults born before 1980—from

generations known as Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, and Generation X—has held relatively steady, with less than 5% of each generation identifying as LGBT in polls between 2012 and 2021 (Gates & Newport, 2012; Jones, 2022). In contrast, while in 2012 only 6.4% (Gates & Newport, 2012) of adults ages 18-29 (from the generation identified as Millennials) identified as LGBT, by 2021, 10.5% (Jones, 2022) of Millennials identified as LGBT and 20.8% of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) identified as LGBT.

This trend extends to those under the age of 18. In 2019, the Trevor Project conservatively estimated that, among youth between the ages of 13 and 18, approximately 10.5% identified as LGBTQ (Green et al., 2019). If these students were equally distributed into public, independent, and Christian schools, this could indicate that more than 97,000 LGBTQ students attended non-affirming Christian schools. While the percentage may look small—only 10.5% of the 7% of students who attend secondary schools affiliated with a non-affirming denomination (Green et al., 2019; IES & NCES, 2019a, 2019b)—it represents nearly a hundred thousand students at any given time in a school environment with the potential to influence students during formative years of development.

In recent years, LGBTQIA+ students have described incidents of bullying and harassment at religious colleges and universities (Soulforce, 2019). Sexual minority students at non-affirming religious universities have also reported negative mental health symptoms (Wolff et al., 2016). Hatzenbuehler et al. (2012) found that sexual minority youth who live in areas where a high percent of the population is non-affirming demonstrate higher rates of suicidality, alcohol use, and more sexual partners. These concerning implications center around the common factors of LGBTQIA+ youth in religiously non-affirming environments.

The problem faced by Christian secondary schools is real and immediate. While they

attract students with small class sizes, academic rigor, and strong values (Nichols, 2019), the degree to which LGBTQIA+ students benefit from these outcomes—or perceive these as success factors—is unknown. Of additional concern, the spiritual, social-emotional, behavioral, psychological, and other effects on this vulnerable population due to their time at non-affirming secondary schools have gone largely unstudied. This represents not just an educational crisis but a moral imperative to discover the impact of Christian schools on this population of students at risk of marginalization.

Despite the increase in research into the effect of religion and religious schooling on students identifying as LGBTQIA+ (Bailey et al., 2022), several studies (Coley, 2020; Wolff et al., 2016; Yuan, 2016) related to Christian education have focused on those enrolled at post-secondary institutions rather than on students in a faith-based secondary school environment. Those studies (Anderson & Lough, 2021; Maher & Sever, 2007) that address the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious secondary schools have been limited, and little research exists into the impact of religion on individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community (Maher & Sever, 2007) or on students who identify as a gender minority (Simons, 2018). Further research is needed to fill this paucity (Stewart, 2015) and better understand how religious schools—K-12 through higher education—can support LGBTQIA+ students.

Although Maher and Sever (2007), Simons (2018), Stewart (2015), and Bailey et al. (2022) revealed few findings explicitly indicating best practices for non-affirming religious secondary schools to support their LGBTQIA+ students, research into non-affirming religious post-secondary institutions and in secular secondary and K-12 settings provided indications of existing best practices. A brief overview of existing literature follows. Pragmatism suggests that these supports and priorities demonstrate transferability to non-affirming religious secondary

school settings, though the impact of religion itself and of religious education must also be examined.

Religious Perspectives

Any study of non-affirming religious institutions must explore the religious history and beliefs that have led to their stance against what has been rhetorically termed a “homosexual agenda” (Mitchell & Fries, 2016, p. 189). Although many Christian denominations and religions have taken a stance that is not supportive of LGBTQIA+ individuals, the Bible’s treatment of sexuality, gender, and the treatment of those marginalized by society is multifaceted and disputed. Gender is explicitly addressed early in the Bible. In Genesis 1:27, the creation of human beings is described with the words, “male and female He created them” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). This has been interpreted in mainstream evangelicalism within the United States to mean that only two genders are in keeping with a biblical worldview and that any gender other than one’s biological gender at birth is contrary to the Bible’s teaching (Brownson, 2013; Gushee, 2015). Genesis 2:24 described marriage as between a man and his wife (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011), which many denominations interpret to mean that only heteronormative marriage fits within God’s design for the institution (Gushee, 2015). Jesus echoed these words from Genesis in Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:7 (*NIV Bible*, 2011), and church leaders have used this account as Jesus’ tacit approval of only heteronormative marriage (Gushee, 2015). The apostle Paul quoted the same phrase in Ephesians 5:31 in a passage describing the marriage union between a woman and a man that reinforced traditional gender norms within marriage, at one point describing a wife’s role as submissive to her husband (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011).

Further, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 referred to sexual relationships between members of the same gender as

prohibited under biblical law (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Not all scholars agree that these passages mean what translators have asserted (Gushee, 2015). For instance, Hedlund (2017) argued that *ἀρσενοκοίται* could be interpreted as having to do with the abuse of power inherent within same-sex sexual relationships of the time (Hedlund, 2017). However, other biblical scholars have rejected a contemporary interpretation of these passages and maintained that the use of *ἀρσενοκοίται* was used as a general condemnation of homosexuality (DeYoung, 1992; Jepsen, 2006).

Arriving at consensus is challenging both between denominations and even within a denomination. Protestant evangelical churches in the United States largely observe the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which asserts that the Bible is the ultimate and original authority and the inspired word of God (Gushee, 2015; O’Callaghan, 2017). As anticipated by reformation theologians, this empowered laypeople to read and interpret the Bible for themselves; however, it simultaneously established a populist approach to hermeneutics (Gushee, 2015) with the potential for interpretations of biblical truth to change with prevailing opinion. Gushee (2015) has noted that the individual passages problematic to modern audiences—such as those regarding slavery—have been contextualized within the last two centuries to reconcile scripture passages with modern sensibilities and mores. Competing interpretations of scripture regarding homosexuality (DeYoung, 1992; Gushee, 2015; Jepsen, 2006) complicate any discussion of the roles and rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals in overtly religious spaces.

In addition, the situation of LGBTQIA+ individuals within the Christian church should be considered in the broader context of the Bible’s teachings, not only in relation to sexual orientation and gender. Yuan (2016) identified a need to recognize those who identify as LGB or who are attracted to members of the same sex as marginalized within the Christian community.

Yuan's (2016) framework of compassion for the marginalized members of sexual minorities within the church shifted the focus from rules imposed on the LGBTQIA+ population to instruction for Christians as a whole on how to treat members of a marginalized group. Built on the motifs of the sojourner, the widow, and the orphan—found throughout the Old and New Testaments—Yuan (2016) urged practices centered on compassion and sacrificial love for those who have been marginalized by society and drew parallels between the individuals and groups marginalized in the Bible and the current societal status of LGBTQIA+ individuals in many churches and Christian organizations, focusing on Christian colleges. This perspective indicates that a review of biblical references to sexuality and gender should not be limited only to the church's stance as it relates to LGBTQIA+ issues but must include the Bible's exhortations on the treatment of others, specifically those marginalized by society.

Religious Incongruence

Religious beliefs and affiliation contribute to the complex identities of students who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Sexual minority students who personally identified as Catholic reported fewer negative mental health symptoms or negative perceptions of their own sexual identity than students from other religious affiliations, according to Wolff et al. (2016). Researchers theorized that this might have resulted from the lack of policies at Catholic universities explicitly forbidding students from participating in same-sex relationships (Wolff et al., 2016). This aligned with their finding that Mormon sexual minority students experienced higher perceptions of religious incongruence with their faith since Mormon schools not only forbid same-sex relationships but the Mormon church itself excommunicates those in same-sex relationships, meaning they are not welcome to be church members (Wolff et al., 2016). Because participation in Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) resulted in “less negative perceptions of sexual

identity, less difficulty with one's sexual orientation, and less religious incongruence" (Wolff et al., 2016, p. 209). Such participation may hold potential positive results for sexual minority students at non-affirming religiously affiliated universities (NARAU; Wolff et al., 2016). Liboro et al. (2015) similarly posited the possible positive impact of GSAs in Catholic high schools based on their qualitative study of a small Catholic school in Canada. In addition to supportive practices that may aid LGBTQIA+ students, existing practices in religious environments that may negatively impact students must also be investigated. Wolff et al. (2016) found that 17% of participants reported that someone from the mental health field had attempted to persuade the participant to engage in conversion therapy to change their sexual orientation, a practice condemned by the American Psychological Association. Additional aspects of identity and well-being must be further explored to fully understand the impact of a non-affirming religious secondary school environment.

The Complexity of Identity and Intersectionality

As the research on religious affiliation suggests, students who identify as LGBTQIA+ are not a homogenous group (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020); instead, different sexual and gender identities impact a student's experiences, self-perception, and coping skills (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). The breadth of a student's identity disclosure may vary based on their identity within the LGBTQIA+ community, race, and the denomination of their educational institution (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). In addition, race, culture, and abledness played a role, adding to the complexity of understanding LGBTQIA+ students' educational experience (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). Overall, Forber-Pratt et al. (2021) concluded that intersectionality was a critical aspect of identity within a school setting and had a significant impact on students'

experiences, indicating that future research should include investigations of the intersecting of factors, such as race, disability, and sexual identity. They posited that the identity others perceive most prominently in a student might substantially influence that student's school experience. Studies of school climate indicated that colleges and universities are often defined by normative whiteness, which can oppress and marginalize students of color (Duran et al., 2020). Further research into the school experiences and success outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students must, therefore, examine intersectionality (Jang, 2020) to avoid exacerbating the marginalization already faced by sexual and gender minority students in non-affirming religious institutions of education.

Factors Impacting Student Well-being

Factors such as an institution's commitment to LGBTQ+ students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021) and their treatment by other students (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021) impacted LGBTQ+ students' well-being and academic success. BrckaLorenz et al. described institutional commitment as including official policies, practices, and resources that supported LGBTQ+ students and intentional opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to participate in pursuits that built a sense of belonging. Such supports might help mediate the harmful external factors LGBTQ+ students face (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Unfortunately, negative experiences are typical for gender and sexual minority individuals (Avery, 2021). Students who identify as LGBTQIA+ are often subject to bullying and slurs at secondary schools (Campos, 2017) and higher education institutions and report higher levels of suicidal ideation (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). Not only may LGBTQ+ students face hardships related to their academic experience, but they also may not benefit to the same extent as students who identify as members of the sexual majority. Kilgo et al. (2019) found that not all high-impact academic practices had significantly improved the

academic development of LGBTQ+ students. Of the practices Kilgo et al. (2019) investigated, participating in undergraduate research was shown to have the greatest positive outcomes related to LGBTQ+ students' academic success. Another significant finding in their study was the strength of the environmental factors of relationships with instructors and the type and extent of control exerted by the institution on LGBTQIA+ students' academic development. Institutional policies and practices impact not only students' social and emotional experiences but their academic successes; it is essential to understand LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions of the issues that bring about both positive and negative student outcomes in non-affirming religious secondary schools.

Belonging and Loneliness. Studies in higher education indicated that an increased perception of belonging or school connectedness was associated with improved student outcomes: academic success and persistence (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). Belonging is commonly understood to include how someone perceives their own importance and feels they relate to, connect with, and matter to others in their environment (Duran et al., 2020). Results of experiencing belonging often have a positive relationship with students' school academic achievement and scholarly persistence (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020). Duran et al. (2020) noted that living on campus had the potential to develop a significant sense of belonging in college and university students. This is an advantage that higher education institutions have over their secondary counterparts as they attempt to impact the experiences of their students positively.

Research is inconsistent concerning subgroups of the LGBTQ+ community and to what degree they experience belonging in a college or university environment. Duran et al. (2020) found that students of color generally reported lower perceptions of belonging than their white

counterparts and that there was little research examining the intersectional influences of race and sexual identity on college and university students' sense of belonging. The nuanced nature of belonging further exacerbates the complexity of this issue; for instance, many students found a sense of community by identifying as LGBTQ+ (Duran et al., 2020). This aligned with research that suggested LGBTQ+ students may experience a greater sense of belonging than straight university students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020). While Duran et al. (2020) cited Lowy (2017, as cited in Duran et al., 2020) and Pascale-Hague's (2015, as cited in Duran et al., 2020) findings that students who identified as bisexual reported a lower sense of belonging than other members of the LGBTQ+ community, BrckaLorenz et al. (2021) found that bisexual students viewed their sense of belonging more positively than other members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Implications for Research

Wolff et al. (2016) indicated that further research to support students who identify as LGBTQIA+ should include both quantitative and qualitative studies, exploring the impact of academic institutions—both in terms of the institution type and practices—on student outcomes (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Kilgo et al., 2019). Because of the perception that private institutions often have unwelcoming climates for LGBQ+ students, Kilgo et al. (2019) recommended additional research to “detangle these findings” (p. 433) and discern how differing individual and institutional factors impact the academic development of LGBQ+ students. Kilgo et al. (2019) concluded that access to high-impact academic opportunities is not enough to ensure the academic development of LGBQ+ students. Instead, researchers must further investigate how universities can provide supportive campuses that provide a climate where LGBQ+ students can grow and thrive academically (Kilgo et al., 2019). Further, BrckaLorenz et al. (2021) and Duran

et al. (2020) found that institutions of higher learning should conduct outreach targeted toward subgroups of their LGBTQ+ community to ensure all students experience a sense of belonging and institutional support. In addition, researchers advised that methodologists must take care not to make whiteness the standard in their studies and thereby bias their data from the outset (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Research into the experiences and outcomes of LGBTQIA+ students should be approached with empathy and sensitivity, centering the lived experiences of this population to prevent further marginalization.

Statement of the Problem

In the United States, almost 100,000 students each year who identify as LGBTQIA+ attend non-affirming religious secondary schools (Green et al., 2019; IES & NCES, 2019a, 2019b), yet little research exists to monitor the impact of religious educational experiences on student outcomes or success (Maher & Sever, 2007; Simons et al., 2018). Because organized religion can have both beneficial and harmful effects on LGBTQIA+ youth (Wolff et al., 2016), and a secondary school environment has a significant impact on a student's sense of academic success and well-being (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021), it is essential to understand and implement best practices that support LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious secondary schools. In addition, religious school leaders have a religious duty to serve and meet the needs of marginalized communities (Yuan, 2016). Despite this moral imperative, evidence suggests that non-affirming religious schools can have a negative and even traumatizing impact on LGBTQIA+ students (*Alford v. Whitefield Academy*, 2020; Avery, 2021; *Hunter v. U.S. Department of Education*, 2021b; Soulfource, 2019). The problem is clear and immediate, and, to prevent further harm, it is essential to engage marginalized communities in defining meaningful support and assessments of success (Freire, 1970/2020).

Purpose Statement

This study focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming religious secondary schools to evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive student outcomes. In keeping with this purpose, the study sought to identify:

- The challenges LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools faced in their school environment.
- The best practices for non-affirming Christian secondary schools that aid LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges.
- LGBTQIA+ students' perceptions of success factors and how they measured their successes in a school environment.
- Strategies leaders at non-affirming Christian secondary schools should adopt to support LGBTQIA+ students.

Research Questions

To ascertain the best practices for supporting LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious secondary schools, the following research questions (RQ) were addressed in this study:

RQ1. What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?

RQ2. What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?

RQ3. How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure LGBTQIA+ students' success?

RQ4. Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders at non-affirming secondary schools recommend to leaders within these institutions

to support LGBTQIA+ students?

Guest et al. (2017) and Moustakas (1994) informed the definition of *key stakeholders* in this study. Participants should have close, personal experience related to the research field (Guest et al., 2017) and be able to describe it to the researcher without undue harm or discomfort (Moustakas (1994).

Research Approach and Theoretical Frameworks

The research framework, approach, and methods should be determined by the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Broad questions beginning with words such as *how* or *what* indicated that a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Further, a qualitative approach was selected because of the complex nature of the research problem and the nascence of the specific phenomenon and population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, qualitative inquiry is appropriate when a goal of the research is to “hear silenced voices” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). Creswell & Creswell (2018) indicated that phenomenological research should be selected when investigating participants' perceptions about their experience with a phenomenon. Guided by an appreciative inquiry framework, qualitative data will be collected through interviews, and participants will be recruited using purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Procedures will take place to ensure the protection of human subjects, including IRB approval through Pepperdine University (Pepperdine University, 2018; Protection of Human Subjects, 2018).

This study examines the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students during their time at non-affirming religious secondary schools, integrating the frameworks of appreciative inquiry, critical theory, and Spencer's (1995) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory into the research design. Originally, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) proposed appreciative inquiry

as an alternative to critical approaches to research, identifying appreciation as a way to value and affirm the rich complexities of experience in order to create and build new systems collaboratively. However, when used in tandem, appreciative inquiry and critical theory provide methodological and interpretive practices that ensure a holistic view of both problems and solutions when studying complex human issues enmeshed within power imbalances (Duncan & Ridley-Duff, 2014; Grant & Humphries, 2006).

Ontologically based on social constructivism, appreciative inquiry emphasizes what works well rather than focusing on failures or shortcomings (Grant & Humphries, 2006). A framework from action research is appropriate to this phenomenological study because action research is an inherently iterative process that allows for adjustments to methods and approaches as new information is discovered and integrated (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Without an appreciative inquiry approach, action research tends to repeat existing patterns rather than break those patterns to produce authentic change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) proposed appreciative inquiry as a 4-step process:

1. Seek sources of input and collect observable data to interpret
2. Identify and appreciate positive processes and outcomes, acknowledging inherent complexities
3. Engage participants in identifying the ideal future
4. Implement practical, novel approaches

Through this process, appreciative inquiry provides an alternative to a reductionist, postpositivist approach to research, instead enabling the construction of rich meaning from complex qualitative data (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Critics have raised concerns that appreciative inquiry's focus on finding what does work

in existing policies and structures risks perpetuating harmful systems along with those that are good (Grant & Humphries, 2006). Grant and Humphries (2006) noted that critical theory and appreciative inquiry might appear to be contradictory approaches to research because appreciative inquiry emphasizes building on the positive, while critical theory relies on deconstructing that which is negative or deleterious. However, both appreciative inquiry and critical theory are driven by a desire to see meaningful improvements that transform not only systems but the lives of those who live within those systems (Grant & Humphries, 2006), and the approaches may be viewed as complementary. Duncan and Ridley-Duff (2014) identified appreciative inquiry as a research method that provided participants from marginalized communities with opportunities to define their identities for themselves and speak the truth to those in positions of power. Although appreciative inquiry has been critiqued as overly optimistic, by providing a new lens through which to view existing structures and problems, appreciative inquiry enables the deconstruction of that which hinders positive organizational development (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Approaching appreciative inquiry through the framework of critical theory provides a path to identifying oppressive structures with the intent of breaking those down for the purpose of “emancipation and transformation” (Grant & Humphries, 2006, p. 406).

A critical approach must go beyond raising awareness of oppression to engage the community in its liberation from that oppression (Freire, 1970/2020). Critical theory democratizes social practices and policy evaluation to empower and legitimize authentic grassroots solutions (Levinson et al., 2009). Because of the power structures inherent in school systems—both between leaders and students and between members of the religious majority and a marginalized group, critical theory provides an avenue to protect potentially vulnerable

participants from exploitation or further marginalization. Thus, the complementary frameworks of appreciative inquiry and critical theory provided an appropriate structure for this qualitative phenomenological research into the lived experiences of LBGTQI+ students at non-affirming religious secondary schools.

Positionality

Bettez (2015) describes positionality as the researcher's declaration of their own relevant personal and social experiences and identities. Although qualitative phenomenological research began with the perspective that researchers could achieve objectivity through bracketing their own experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 1913/1983), later critical scholars have articulated a need for researchers to declare their potential biases in order to diminish the impact of the power structures inherent in society (Bettez, 2015; Nicholls, 2019). The researcher comes from a conservative religious background and attended religious schools from ages 3 through 18 and, again, as a doctoral student. In addition, the researcher currently works at a conservative non-affirming religious secondary school. The researcher is a cis-gender heterosexual woman. Because of this background, the researcher attempts to enter this study with caution and respect, acknowledging the challenge of understanding the nuance of a phenomenon outside of one's own experience (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2010). In addition, the researcher will approach the study through a critical lens and engage in bracketing to reduce the oppressive impact of her own biases as a member of a racial, gender, and sexual majority, per the admonition of BrckaLorenz et al. (2021).

Significance of the Study

At the micro level, the researcher pursued this study to effect change within her sphere of influence at a non-affirming religious secondary school. Jesus identified two commandments as

essential, to love God and to love others (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Matthew 2:37,39). Yet, in personal interactions, LGBTQIA+ students have described being hurt and feeling rejected by the church and Christianity. This demonstrated a need for school administrators to engage in empathetic listening and collaborative policymaking. This research is significant because it will provide practical steps for school leaders—including the researcher—to affirm the intrinsic value of LGBTQIA+ students on their campuses and provide meaningful support for these students through their secondary school experiences. Extending to the macro level, this study offers a replicable pathway to engage sexual and gender minority students in appreciative inquiry action research to reduce oppression and improve student outcomes. It is necessary to broaden the perspectives of Christian school leaders, who may lack empathy due to little personal knowledge. Pew Research Center (2015) found that only 17% of white evangelical protestants, 21% of white mainline protestants, and 23% of Catholics reported knowing “a lot” (p. 15) when asked, “How many gays and lesbians do you know?” (p. 15). In contrast, this number grew to 40% of those unaffiliated with a religion (Pew Research Center, 2015). There is a clear need for practical resources for Christian school educators who create the school policies and procedures that will shape the experiences of the next generation of students. In addition, this study is intended to contribute to the literature on the impact of non-affirming religious secondary school experiences on LGBTQIA+ students and the best practices for student support within these environments.

Beyond the application in non-affirming religious secondary schools, this research offers insights into the fundamental needs of members of the LGBTQIA+ community and pathways to ensure those needs can be served in other institutions, such as non-religious schools or organizations. In addition, the recommendations may be considered for religious leaders in non-

school settings, particularly churches.

Assumptions of the Study

1. It was assumed that religious secondary schools have goals of helping students succeed academically and building and strengthening their students' Christian faith. Some adverse outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students may result from naiveté or ignorance on the part of the school and religious leaders whose interactions with members of the LGBTQIA+ community have been limited (Pew Research Center, 2015). Therefore, increasing research into this area and providing resources and best practices for schools and school leaders has the potential to improve outcomes for students at non-affirming religious secondary schools.
2. Similar to the research of Yuan (2016), it was assumed that there are ways that religious secondary schools can improve the experiences of their students without conceding their constitutional religious rights (U.S. Department of Education, 2021) or the constitutional or intrinsic rights of their students.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations refer to boundaries of the study intentionally set by the researcher. The following delimitations were established:

1. This qualitative study was limited to non-affirming religious secondary schools within the United States. The majority of students at non-affirming religious secondary schools attend schools based on the teachings of the Bible (IES & NCES, 2019b), and this research is limited only to religions with a foundation of biblical teachings.
2. In order to prevent the potential for further marginalization, the study limited student participants to those who were both legal adults and who had already graduated or

separated from the non-affirming religious secondary school they attended.

3. This study only examined the impact of non-affirming religious education on LGBTQIA+ students. It did not address issues related to the employment of LGBTQIA+ faculty or staff members or examine morality clauses as they extend to teachers or their contracts.
4. By selecting a qualitative phenomenological research approach to honor participants' perspectives and lived experiences, this study lacks the generalizability of quantitative research.

Limitations of the Study

This phenomenological qualitative study relied on interviews key stakeholders who had had close, personal experience (Guest et al., 2017) with LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming schools and who could describe it to the researcher without undue harm or discomfort (Moustakas, 1994). By limiting student participants to only LGBTQIA+ individuals over 18 who no longer attended their religious secondary school, this study risks the influence of hindsight bias. Participants may color their high school experience with what they have experienced since then. In addition, the researcher's positionality as a Christian cisgender straight woman interpreting data made up of the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ should be considered a mediating factor.

Definition of Terms

- *Ability/Abledness*: The skill or capacity to complete tasks; the tasks accomplished may be physical or cognitive (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; U.C. Davis, 2020). Ability or abledness are not necessarily consistent and may change based on circumstances or other factors (U.C. Davis, 2020). Ability and disability are not always visible to others (Forber-Pratt et

al., 2021).

- *Ableism*: Systemic discrimination against those who are differently abled (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *Allyship*: The process of advocating for positive change on behalf of those who are oppressed or who suffer discrimination (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *Asexual*: Those who describe themselves as not sexually attracted to others, though they may experience other forms of attraction (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *Bisexual*: Individuals who experience sexual attraction to more than one gender, typically to those of the same gender as themselves and another gender (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *Cisgender/cis*: Individuals who believe their gender identity aligns with their natal sex of male or female are described as *cisgender* or *cis* (Yarhouse & Sadusky, 2020).
- *Gay*: This term typically refers to men who are sexually attracted to men, though this term can include individuals who describe themselves as non-binary in terms of gender and are sexually attracted to men (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *Gender identity*: A person's perception of their own gender, which may or may not agree with the gender biologically assigned to them at birth (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *Gender minority*: This term includes individuals who identify as a gender other than the sex assigned to them at birth (U.C. Davis, 2020; Yarhouse & Sadusky, 2020).
- *GSA*: Gay-Straight Alliance. Gay-Straight Alliances are student-run organizations on school campuses, typically organized as after-school clubs, that provide a venue to discuss issues of gender and sexuality as well as safety and support for LGBTQIA+ students (Liboro et al., 2015).
- *Heteronormative*: This describes societal norms that give preference to those who

experience attraction to individuals of the opposite gender from their own, within a traditional gender expression of male and female (U.C. Davis, 2020).

- *Heterosexual*: Individuals who experience attraction to individuals of the opposite gender from their own, within a traditional gender expression of male and female (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *Homosexuality*: The Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality (1978) identified homosexuality as a sexual attraction to a member of the same gender. According to the task force, attraction, rather than behavior or choice, was the defining factor (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978). In the common vernacular, *homosexuality* may refer to attraction or action (Oxford University Press, n.d.).
- *Intersectionality*: A term to describe how an individual's social identities (including race, gender, sexual identity, abledness, etc.) impact social structures, perceptions, discrimination, oppression, and power imbalance (Duran et al., 2020).
- *Intersex*: A term used to describe someone with a non-male or non-female biological gender identity (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *Lesbian*: This term typically refers to women who are sexually attracted to women, though this term can include individuals who describe themselves as non-binary in terms of gender and are sexually attracted to women (U.C. Davis, 2020).
- *LGBTQIA+*: This inclusive acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (U.C. Davis, 2020). The plus sign indicates the understood presence and affirmation of other sexual and gender identities that are not listed (U.C. Davis, 2020). For the purposes of this research, LGBTQIA+ refers to individuals who identify as a sexual and/or gender minority.

- *LGBQ*: The acronym LGBQ is used to describe individuals whose sexual identity is not heterosexual. The acronym itself stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer (U.C. Davis, 2020). Some research has also used the term *sexual minority* interchangeably with *LGBQ* (Wolff et al., 2016). In addition, the acronym may be abbreviated to only LGB (Yuan, 2016).
- *Marginalization*: Blumenfeld (2006) describes marginalization as occurring when a group of people who share a social identity do not experience the privileges of the majority group. People are marginalized when they are socially, economically, and otherwise disadvantaged based on a shared identity factor (Blumenfeld, 2006). Blumenfeld (2006) noted that, in the United States, people who professed a religion other than Protestant Christianity had been marginalized throughout history.
- *Natal sex*: Reisner et al. (2014) defined natal sex as the gender an individual was assigned at birth based on visible genital features.
- *Non-affirming religious/Christian secondary schools*: This research extends Wolff et al.'s (2016) term to specifically describe independent, faith-based schools reaching students in grades 9-12 which express a faith-based belief that only heterosexual marriage is the morally acceptable expression of sexual acts and that gender identity should be expressed as either male or female, consistent with the sex identified at birth.
- *Non-affirming religious institutions*: Wolff et al. (2016) define non-affirming religious institutions as those that express a faith-based belief that only heterosexual marriage is the morally acceptable expression of sexual acts.
- *Outness*: Haug (2018) described outness as an individual's openness about their sexual identity. Outness is inherently complex as individuals can disclose their identity to some

but not others (Haug, 2018). In addition, outness can be empowering but may also be accompanied by social risk and negative repercussions (Haug, 2018).

- *Queer*: Although historically used as a slur to deride sexual minority individuals, some in the LGBTQIA+ community have worked to reclaim this word as one that describes individuals who do not conform to heteronormative gender or sexual attraction (U.C. Davis, 2020). E. Meyer and Stader (2009) used the term as one inclusive of both those with a firm grasp on their gender and/or sexual identity as well as those who were questioning or discovering their gender or sexual identity.
- *Sex*: E. Meyer and Quantz (2021) differentiate sex from gender, indicating that the legal category of a child at birth—usually associated with observable genitalia—is indicative of sex, while gender is expressive and a social construct.
- *Sexual orientation/Sexual identity*: Sexual orientation or sexual identity refers to an individual’s sexual preferences, behaviors, or natural attractions, typically in relation to the gender(s) the individual prefers (Matthews et al., 2014).
- *Sexual minority*: This term is used to describe individuals whose sexual identity is not heterosexual. Some research has also used the term sexual minority interchangeably with LGBTQ (Wolff et al., 2016).
- *Sodomy*: Because sodomy law was one of the primary methods of legally regulating homosexual behavior throughout U.S. history (Eskridge, 2008; Lugg, 2006), sodomy is defined here according to English and U.S. precedent from the 15th through 17th centuries. Eskridge (2008) noted that legal references to sodomy indicated “the penetration of a man’s penis inside the rectum of an animal, of a woman or girl, or of another man or boy” (p. 19). However, most laws did not explicitly define sodomy, and it

was most often prosecuted when there was evidence of accompanying assault (Eskridge, 2008).

- *Transgender/trans*: As a term, *transgender* refers to individuals who identify with a gender other than the male or female gender assigned to them at birth or a gender other than their biological gender (Buck, 2016). This is sometimes abbreviated *trans* (Yarhouse & Sadusky, 2020).

Chapter Summary

While non-affirming religious secondary schools only impact a small percentage of students in the United States (IES & NCES, 2019b), the number of LGBTQIA+ students who are statistically likely to attend these institutions numbers close to 100,000 (Green et al., 2019; IES & NCES, 2019a, 2019b). Polls indicate that individuals from younger generations are some of the most likely to identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Green et al., 2019; Jones, 2022). At the same time, increasing numbers of LGBTQIA+ students have described mistreatment at school (Avery, 2021; Soulfource, 2019). One explanation for this phenomenon is that school leaders affiliated with a non-affirming religion infrequently have personal contact or friendships with individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Pew Research Center, 2015), potentially leading to bias at these institutions or policies that fail to support students. Existing research into outcomes for students who identify as LGBTQIA+ in the United States and in other countries has revealed several themes that should be further explored: belonging and loneliness (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020), intersectionality (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021), well-being (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021)—including the impact of bullying and slurs on well-being, academic outcomes (Kilgo et al., 2019), and religious incongruence (Liboro et al., 2015; Wolff et al., 2016). In addition to the religious incongruence

experienced by LGBTQIA+ students, the biblical paradigm for relating to marginalized community members (Yuan, 2016) should be examined as it relates to the current stance of non-affirming Bible-based religions in the United States.

In response to this background information, in Chapter 1, the researcher proposed a qualitative phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) using appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020; Levinson et al., 2009) as frameworks to prevent the further marginalization of sexual and gender minority students throughout the study (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). The methodology developed was designed to engage students in identifying both problems and solutions (Freire, 1970/2020), honoring their lived experiences. Four research questions were proposed to identify the challenges and best practices to enable LGBTQIA+ students to achieve and measure their success and to provide school leaders at non-affirming Christian secondary schools with the strategies they can adopt to support LGBTQIA+ students on their campuses. In addition, the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions of the researcher were described. The following chapter will provide a robust exploration of the literature related to LGBTQIA+ students, the impact of non-affirming religion and non-affirming religious schools on these students, and the best practices to support LGBTQIA+ students, providing the foundational basis for this qualitative study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

We must learn to regard human beings less in terms of what they do and neglect to do and more in terms of what they suffer. The only fruitful relation to human beings...is love, that is, the will to enter into and keep community with them. God did not hold human beings in contempt but became human for their sake.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

In 2000, in discussing the plight of sexual minority youth in schools, Eisemann identified homophobia and the harassment of homosexual individuals as a national problem rather than a school problem. Since then, the plight of LGBTQIA+ individuals has gained additional attention (Avery, 2021; Green et al., 2019; Soulfource, 2019) as the population of gender and sexual minority individuals—particularly young people—increased (Jones, 2022). However, this problem was not unique to contemporary society (Gray, 2008). The United States can trace LGBTQIA+ individuals' challenges through its religious and legal history (Burg, 2014; Oaks, 1978). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that schools reflect the larger national issue (Eisemann, 2000). In particular, students at non-affirming religious schools have described harmful, discouraging interactions with peers and staff (Avery, 2021; Soulfource, 2019). This finding sharply contrasted with other research into the impact of religion. Generally, religion has been found to positively impact individuals' overall well-being, particularly for individuals who define their identity as religious (Greenfield & Marks, 2007). Yet, religion has become another tool to exclude gender and sexual minority youth (Levy & Harr, 2018). This study gathered information from what are often considered disparate spheres—religion and LGBTQIA+ support—in order to better serve gender and sexual minority youth in non-affirming religious secondary schools, in accordance with the Bible's value of compassion for the marginalized

(Yuan, 2016).

This literature review situated the study of gender and sexual minority students at the intersection of a theology of compassion for the marginalized (Yuan, 2016), ecological systems theory (EST; Bronfenbrenner, 1976) and a phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST; Spencer et al., 1997), critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020), and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Together, these frameworks supported a biblical investigation of existing literature regarding the challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly with regard to gender and sexual minority students at non-affirming religious secondary schools. Because research on this topic focused on this population was limited (Maher & Sever, 2007), the literature review included information from the many systems within the U.S. ecology. Themes of historical and legal power imbalance (Gross, 1991; Lugg, 2006; Silin, 2020), belonging and loneliness (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020), the complexity of identity and intersectionality (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020), well-being (Gonzalez & Deal, 2022; Myers et al., 2020; Sansone, 2019; Ullman, 2015; Weinstein, 2018), religious doctrine (Hill, 2016; *NIV Bible*, 1973/2011; Yuan, 2016) and incongruence (Exline et al., 2021) were revealed. Based on this broad review, best practices for supporting LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming secondary schools and the elements used to measure the success of this support were presented. Finally, critiques of the topic were summarized.

Research Frameworks, Theories, and Theology

Three research frameworks were integrated into this study of the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students during their time at non-affirming religious secondary schools: appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020), and Spencer's (1995) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST), based on

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory (EST; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). On the surface, critical theory and appreciative inquiry may appear epistemologically opposed because appreciative inquiry focuses on an optimistic outlook (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), while critical theory is fundamentally a "criticism of ideology" (Geuss, 1981, p. 3). However, both critical theory and appreciative inquiry reject a positivist epistemology and embrace the intricacies and ambiguity of the human experience (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Geuss, 1981). Using these theories together—in conjunction with PVEST and EST—ensures that the voices of the marginalized are not only elevated, but the complexity of their perspectives is honored (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Duncan & Ridley-Duff, 2014; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Spencer, 2021). Appreciative inquiry and critical theory provide methodological and interpretive practices that ensure a holistic view of both problems and solutions when studying complex human issues enmeshed within power imbalances (Duncan & Ridley-Duff, 2014; Grant & Humphries, 2006). Further, these frameworks provided not only research practices but indications of how to approach qualitative data analysis that resulted in actionable conclusions aligned with the diverse perspectives of research participants (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Freire, 1970/2020; Spencer, 2021). In addition to these research frameworks, Yuan's (2016) theology of compassion for the marginalized provided the theological basis for a study that centers the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming Christian secondary schools (see Figure 1). This theology of compassion for marginalized people and groups integrates biblical grounds for examining power imbalance through the lens of critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020) and social structures through EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and PVEST (Spencer, 1995).

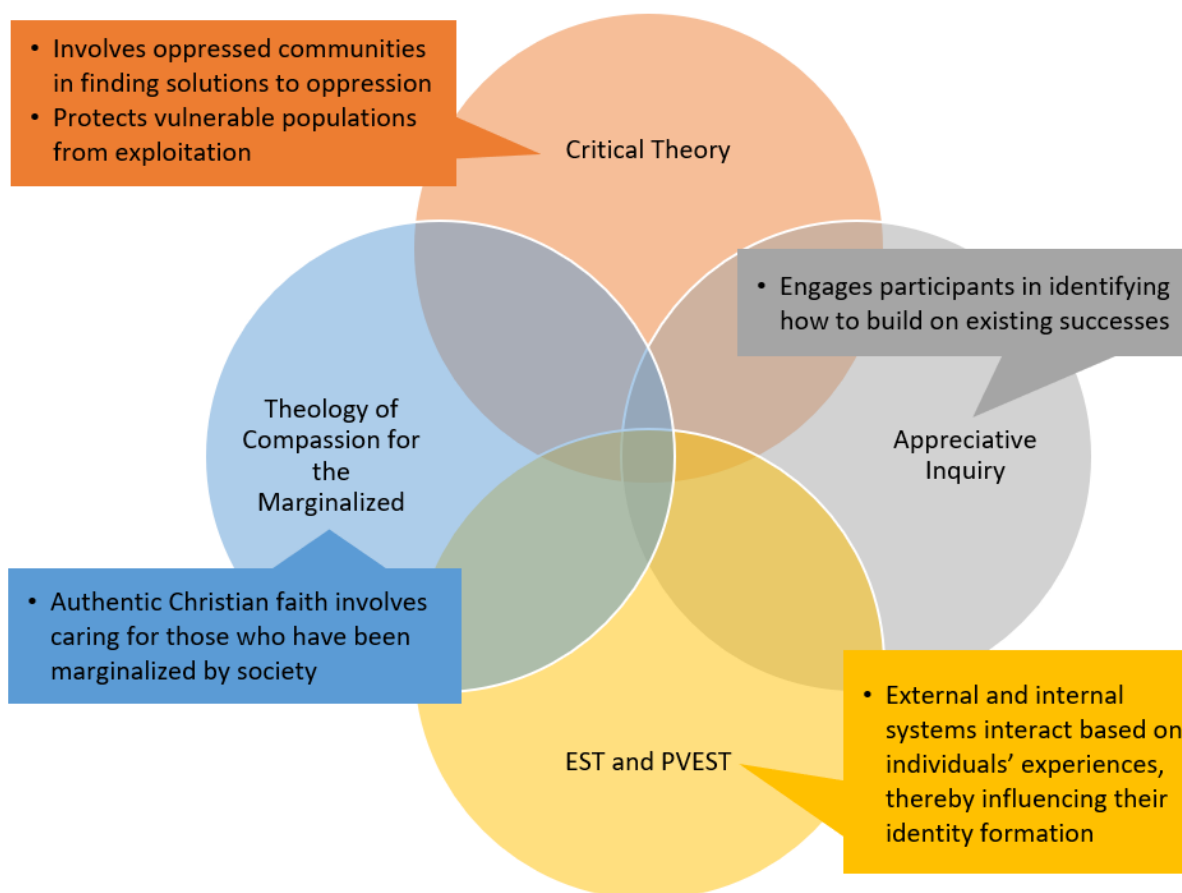
Appreciative Inquiry

A framework from action research is appropriate to this phenomenological study because action research is an inherently iterative process that allows for adjustments to methods and approaches as new information is discovered and integrated (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Without an appreciative inquiry approach, action research tends to repeat existing patterns rather than break those patterns to produce authentic change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). In addition, Wilson et al. (2011) found that appreciative inquiry could be a practical framework for research studies related to diversity work.

The need for a reflexive and responsive approach to action research was a key motivating factor in the development of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Originally,

Figure 1

Integration of Research Frameworks, Theories, and Theology



Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) proposed appreciative inquiry as an alternative to critical approaches to research, identifying appreciation as a way to value and affirm the rich complexities of experience in order to create and build new systems collaboratively. Thus, at a fundamental level, appreciative inquiry differed from positivist epistemological approaches to scientific research by claiming that scientists cannot fully comprehend or define the intricacies of the human condition (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This “generative” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 129) approach viewed scientific inquiry as a method to achieve social transformation by broadening awareness of possibilities. Cooperrider and Srivastava (1987) noted that theory should not only be used to launch scientific inquiry but also be a key research outcome that drives future investigation. Appreciative inquiry was intended to reveal the false dichotomy of theory versus practice, integrating the two (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Wilson et al., 2011). Redefining the use of theory was also essential, according to Cooperrider and Srivastava (1987), who noted that theory need not only describe observable phenomena but had value in its capacity to foster dialogue and involve stakeholders in the process of creating solutions to complex problems.

Ontologically based on social constructivism, appreciative inquiry emphasizes what works well rather than focusing on failures or shortcomings (Grant & Humphries, 2006). Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) observed that when action research was problem-focused, the resultant theories related more to the challenges than the desired outcome. A problem-focused approach to research rarely produces actionable solutions to the difficulties posed (Wilson et al., 2011). In fact, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) believed that problem-focused research failed to define or identify desired outcomes, leading to action research that could not break beyond single or double-loop learning outcomes (Jensen, 2005).

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) proposed appreciative inquiry as a 4-step process:

1. Seek sources of input and collect observable data to interpret
2. Identify and appreciate positive processes and outcomes, acknowledging inherent complexities
3. Engage participants in identifying the ideal future
4. Implement practical, novel approaches

Through this process, appreciative inquiry provides an alternative to a reductionist, postpositivist approach to research, instead enabling the construction of rich meaning from complex qualitative data (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

Wilson et al. (2011) identified several practical applications when conducting qualitative research with marginalized communities under the appreciative inquiry framework. Significantly, appreciative inquiry challenged research methods that focused on problems rather than solutions (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Wilson et al., 2011). Wilson et al. (2011) noted that by using optimistic language, research subjects were more likely to engage in robust conversation that produced possible solutions to social problems. In addition, an appreciative inquiry framework established a positive foundation for dialogue and allowed researchers the flexibility to request that participants further describe their experiences (Wilson et al., 2011). This framework influenced data analysis as well as data collection. Wilson et al. (2011) noted that in the first phase of coding, researchers using an appreciative inquiry framework should examine what dreams for a better future their participants have identified or alluded to. Further, throughout the data analysis process, codes must be filtered through the lens of what success looks like (Wilson et al., 2011). Overall, Wilson et al. (2011) argued that appreciative inquiry could be used as an effective framework in emancipatory research (Freire, 1970/2020).

Critics have raised concerns that appreciative inquiry's focus on finding what does work in existing policies and structures risks perpetuating harmful systems along with those that are good (Grant & Humphries, 2006). In this vein, Grant and Humphries (2006) noted that appreciative inquiry and critical theory may appear to be contradictory approaches to research because appreciative inquiry emphasizes building on the positive, while critical theory relies on deconstructing that which is negative or deleterious. However, appreciative inquiry and critical theory can be viewed as complementary approaches, both driven by a desire to see meaningful improvements that transform not only systems but also the lives of those who live within those systems (Grant & Humphries, 2006) and, as such, the approaches may be viewed as complementary. Duncan and Ridley-Duff (2014) identified appreciative inquiry as a research method that provided participants from marginalized communities with opportunities to define their identities for themselves and speak truth to those in positions of power. Wilson et al. (2011) found that when research was conducted using appreciative inquiry, participants could make their thoughts, feelings, and desired outcomes clear, thereby empowering participants in the research process. Because appreciative inquiry draws research subjects to share their narratives, it is a method that maximizes the rich detail and nuance of participants' lived experiences (Wilson et al., 2011). Lin et al. (2009) critiqued appreciative inquiry as a framework when approaching research related to diversity in education, warning that it could have a tendency to oversimplify and generalize the perspectives of participants with complex intersectional identities. To prevent the further marginalization of LGBTQIA+ participants, this study will also leverage critical theory and PVEST (Spencer, 1995) to honor the complexity of perspectives, voices, problems, and solutions. Although appreciative inquiry has been critiqued as overly optimistic, by providing a new lens through which to view existing structures and problems,

appreciative inquiry enables the deconstruction of that which hinders positive organizational development (Bushe & Kassam, 2005).

Critical Theory

Critical theory was an appropriate framework for a qualitative study in that it acknowledged the inherent subjectivity of knowledge acquisition (Freire, 1970/2020; Habermas, 1968/1971). A critical approach must go beyond raising awareness of oppression to engage the community in its own liberation from that oppression (Freire, 1970/2020; Geuss, 1981). Engaging participants in authentic dialogue and acknowledging bias rather than assuming it can be set aside are essential features of this approach (Freire, 1970/2020). Critical theory democratized the evaluation of social practices and policy to empower and legitimize authentic grassroots solutions (Levinson et al., 2009). Because of the power structures inherent in school systems—both between leaders and students and between members of the religious majority and a marginalized group, critical theory provides an avenue to protect potentially vulnerable participants from exploitation or further marginalization (Freire, 1970/2020; Habermas, 1968/1971). Further, critical theory seeks to honor the complexity inherent in social structures rather than taking a reductionist approach (Habermas, 1963/1973).

Critical theory has not frequently been paired with research into Christianity unless it was for the purpose of deconstructing how religion was used as a tool of oppression (Warkentin & Sawatsky, 2018). Warkentin and Sawatsky (2018) noted that Christianity was epistemologically positivist, built on the premise that there was a single, absolute truth; therefore, Christianity was ostensibly incompatible with the subjectivity of critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020; Habermas, 1968/1971). From this perspective, Christianity was the most significant prison or oppressor, limiting the ability of the oppressed to creatively free themselves from a paradigm in which a

single entity or system held ultimate authority (Freire, 1970/2020; Warkentin & Sawatsky, 2018). Critical theory, then, posed a fundamental threat to Christianity by pushing individuals to dismantle Christianity as an oppressive system (Shenvi & Sawyer, 2019). The Council of Seminary Presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention described critical theory as “incompatible with the Baptist Faith & Message” (Schroeder, 2020, par. 13). However, even Christian critics have identified some truths embedded in critical theory (Shenvi & Sawyer, 2019; Wingfield, 2021). For instance, Shenvi and Sawyer (2019) noted that cultural norms and values were often influenced by the hegemonic power of mass media, a phenomenon decried by Christians, and some Black pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention have advocated the use of Critical Race Theory as a tool in education about racism (Wingfield, 2021). In this vein, the Southern Baptist Convention (2019) indicated that “critical race theory and intersectionality should only be employed as analytical tools subordinate to Scripture” (par. 14). This study used critical theory in this manner, as a tool to understand and disrupt oppressive structures that exist at the intersection of religion and education, not as a worldview to challenge the authority of the biblical values asserted by non-affirming religious schools. In some ways, non-affirming Christian religion agrees with elements of critical theory. For instance, the Bible also calls for leaders to be humble in Luke 22:25-26 and regularly promotes emancipation and justice (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Luke 4:18; Isaiah 1:17, Psalm 9:7-10), both literally and figuratively, as an analogy for freedom from sin (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011).

Although critical queer theory might appear as the natural framework by which to approach a study of LGBTQIA+ youth, queer theory did not align with the setting of non-affirming religious secondary schools. Critical queer theory calls for researchers to set aside societal expectations of heteronormativity to examine gender and sexuality as social constructs

(Capper, 1998) and even to reinterpret biblical texts through this lens (Lowe, 2014). However, non-affirming religious schools (and non-affirming religions) explicitly espouse beliefs related to homosexuality and traditional gender norms that contradict queer theory's basic tenants (Capper, 1998). Therefore, grounding this study in critical queer theory would be disingenuous.

Ecological Systems Theory and a Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory

This study relies on Ecological Systems Theory (EST; Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and its later iteration, a Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer, 1995), as frameworks to examine how the environment of a non-affirming secondary school impacted LGBTQIA+ students. Fantus and Newman (2021) recommended using a systems view of school climate based on EST as a framework to organize school supports for LGBT students. Spencer et al. (1997) likewise found EST to be apt as a framework for phenomenological qualitative data collected from adolescents. Further, Spencer et al. (1997) adapted PVEST from EST to conduct research that empowered subjects—particularly adolescents, who have the capacity for self-awareness and who care deeply about their developing sense of identity, and minorities, whose experiences have traditionally been subsumed by the majority's narrative—with the ability to influence how their experiences are interpreted by researchers. This rationale was also used by Ullman (2015), who identified the PVEST framework as appropriate for research with same-sex attracted students at the secondary level.

In the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner (1975, 1976, 1977) advocated a research approach “investigating person-environment and environment-environment relations” (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, p. 5). Bronfenbrenner (1977) described this ecological systems approach as one that examined the reciprocal nature between human development and the environments and social structures through which one moves throughout their life. Within this research model,

Bronfenbrenner (1975) defined *ecology* as an investigation into human development that examined how the layers and facets of the subject's natural environment and the subjects' interactions with that environment impacted the subject's growth, particularly psychological growth. Bronfenbrenner (1975) posited that an ecological approach to the study of human development was most appropriate when researchers not only wanted to investigate outcomes but also hoped to catalyze change, quoting a mentor who told him, "if you want to understand something, try to change it" (Fenno Dearborn, n.d., as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1975). Because the present study sought to investigate the impact of a particular setting on individuals without applying a reductionist approach to the complexity of the LGBTQIA+ experience, the use of EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) was deemed appropriate.

Ecological Systems Theory describes the environments that impact an individual as "nested" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514) systems with both collective and independent impacts on the individual (See Figure 2). These systems that influence individuals are the (a) microsystem, (b) mesosystem, (c) exo-system, (d) macrosystem, and (e) chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986). At a foundational level is the microsystem, which contains one's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1977). A student's microsystems would include settings such as school and home and roles such as teacher, peers, and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1977). Bronfenbrenner (1976) identified two levels of systems within the domain of education that significantly impact students: (a) the immediate settings of learners, including their peers, teachers, school policies, etc., and (b) the connections between these settings. Accordingly, at the next level, Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1977) described mesosystems as the interactions of one's microsystems. Cultural setting powerfully impacts which microsystems significantly influence an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). As one advances through phases of

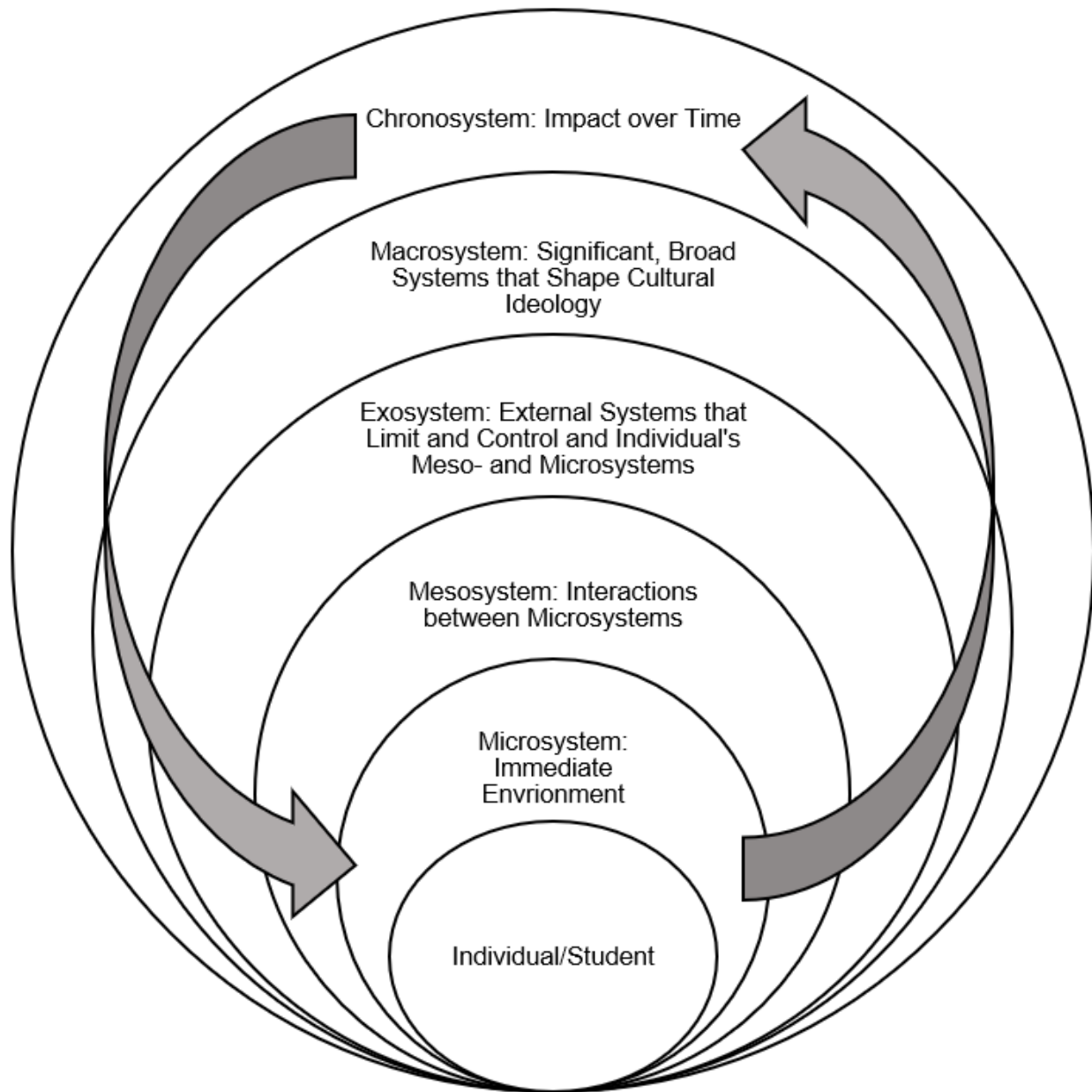
human development, each microsystem carries more or less influence than others (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Thus, the study of mesosystems investigates the impact of microsystems upon one another and how that interplay impacts the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In contrast, exo-systems are external systems that affect an individual but that the individual has little ability to impact (e.g., government agencies and media; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). To a degree, these exo-systems limit and control what occurs within the microsystems of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). At a broader level is the macrosystem, described as “the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515), which includes the political, economic, and educational systems that shape ideology and values. Inclusive of all these systems, the chronosystem indicates how systems and individuals change over time and as a result of significant events (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Bronfenbrenner (1986) defined simple chronosystems as normative and nonnormative, with normative events representing typical milestones individuals are expected to reach (e.g., graduating from secondary school). Nonnormative events were those that were unpredictable and which tended to have a destabilizing influence on an individual (e.g., being diagnosed with a life-changing illness; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Bronfenbrenner (1986) also recognized that the chronosystem included the development of larger social and cultural influences on the individual over time.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) EST recognized that a subjects’ environments and systems have a complex and reciprocal impact that cannot be reduced to the examination of any single variable. Instead, researchers must consider the interactions between systems when determining causality and recommending interventions (Bronfenbrenner, 1975, 1976, 1977). Bronfenbrenner (1975) emphasized that no single external factor or influence could claim sole responsibility for a developmental outcome. Instead, researchers must examine not only the factors as separate and

collective influences but also the effect of environmental elements on one another. When researching phenomena in the sphere of education, Bronfenbrenner (1976) proposed juxtaposing microsystems of the learner to examine their individual and collective influences.

Figure 2

Nested Depiction of EST



Note. This figure is adapted from Bronfenbrenner's descriptions of EST in 1977 and 1986.

Bronfenbrenner (1975) noted that systems impact individuals as well as other systems within EST.

Spencer's (1995) PVEST framework built on EST through self-organization theory in order to examine how systems influenced the overall development of an individual, their self-perception, and the shaping of their identity, rather than merely identifying how systems influenced individuals at a single point in their lives (Ozaki et al., 2020). Spencer et al. (1997) adapted a phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) to honor the perspectives and perceptions of subjects and their understanding of their experiences and personal value, particularly with regard to how these shaped their actions and behaviors.

Through the PVEST framework, Spencer (2021) offered key research elements to examine when working with minority populations. For instance, left unchecked, bias and discrimination can have an exacerbated effect over time, making the chronosystem a vital area to study when examining outcomes for minority groups (Spencer, 2021). Moreover, Spencer (2021) called for researchers to examine inequities and their impact to prevent the increased marginalization of minority communities, which may bear the brunt and resulting adverse outcomes of the trauma inflicted by prejudice. Prejudice and implicit bias are evident in the macrosystem of beliefs guiding society (Spencer, 2021), whether explicitly or implicitly. Beliefs both reinforce and are created by the exo-system of the court and legal system (Spencer, 2021), which often disproportionately regulate policies aimed at sexual and gender minority populations (Kreis, 2019). Unbalanced and unfair laws underpin the concept of privilege that guides interactions in the mesosystems, further influencing individuals' perceptions of their daily lived experiences within their microsystems (Spencer, 2021). Spencer (2021) warned that "normalized ecologies" (p. 571) reinforce the status quo, which may represent a toxic environment for many

minority ecological systems inhabitants.

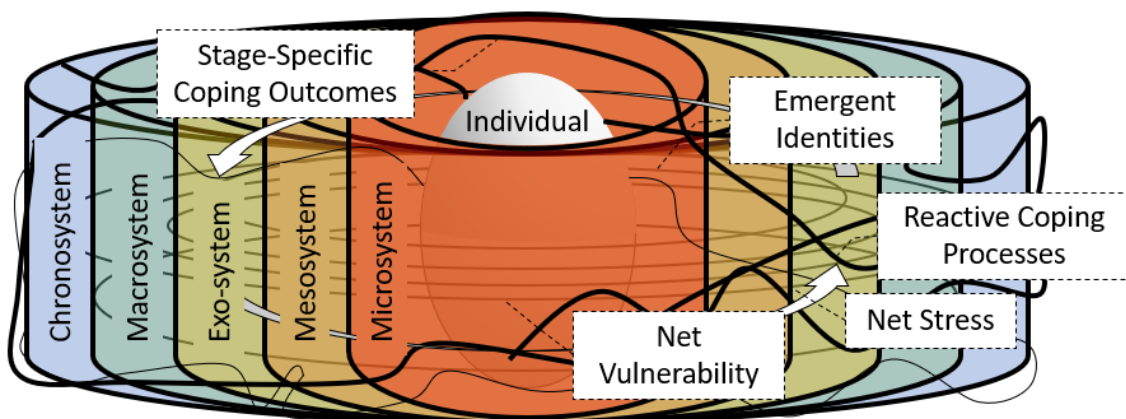
The PVEST was appropriate for research related to adolescence because, at that age, people develop a greater sense of self-perception and self-identity (Spencer et al., 1997). When used in tandem, EST examines cultural influences, while PVEST provides minority participants with agency over how their experiences are interpreted (Spencer et al., 1997). In addition, Spencer et al. (1997) noted that the reciprocal nature of systems, experiences, self-perception, and behaviors integral to EST provided a method through which to examine the chronic stress, coping skills, and societal reactions that minorities are likely to face. Because adolescence is a time when individuals often identify and codify their sexual and gender identity and when individuals are likely to face pressure from society to conform to social norms, the PVEST framework has also been identified as effective for research related to sexual and gender minority individuals who are school-aged (Rogers et al., 2022).

In creating the PVEST framework, Spencer (2021) sought to situate EST within the research tradition of phenomenology, honoring an individual's interpretation of their own lived experiences. Spencer et al.'s (1997) PVEST posited that the systems described in EST not only influenced individuals in a complex way that also impacted those systems and reinforced existing relationships but that these systems acted up on the self-esteem and perceptions of the individual (see Figure 3). Thus, the influences of the systems themselves upon the individual did not hold sole power over the individual's development; instead, how the individual perceived these systems and interpreted the phenomena they encountered shaped the individual's identity (Spencer et al., 1997). Spencer et al. (1997) noted that one way this has been known to manifest is "when cultural stereotypes become self-fulfilling prophecies" (p. 818) because the culture provides feedback that reinforces expected behaviors. Further complicating one's development

of self-identity, Spencer et al. (1997) indicated that the intersection of multiple identity factors—whether majority or minority—affected how others interacted with someone and demonstrated approval or disapproval of their attitudes and behaviors. The example provided by Spencer et al. (1997) involved society’s tacit approval of “daring, independent minded” (p. 818) behaviors from White men when these same behaviors were more likely to be derided as aggressive or frightening from Black men. Integrating phenomenological practices with EST was Spencer et al.’s (1997) attempt to honor the individual as an agent in their own development. This aligned with Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) assessment, which emphasized that a phenomenological analysis of data must determine whether participants would define terms similarly to the researcher and draw the same conclusions. This heuristic consensus with participants was necessary to establish validity within EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1976) and gained increased prominence in PVEST

Figure 3

Nested Depiction of EST and PVEST



Note. This figure was adapted from Bronfenbrenner’s description of EST and Spencer’s (2021) description of PVEST. This diagram represented the individual as an egg, nested in the organically developing layers of Bronfenbrenner’s systems, just as a bird’s nest gains and loses materials. Spencer’s PVEST was represented by vines—some larger and some smaller—that intersected with Bronfenbrenner’s systems, protecting or limiting the individual, depending on the situation of the egg/individual. The unpredictable paths of the vines demonstrated the complexity of both the ecology and the individual’s psyche. The arrows indicated that the systems of EST and factors of PVEST never ceased to interact with one another and upon the individual.

(Spencer et al., 1997).

The PVEST framework acknowledged the inherent vulnerability of the human condition (Spencer, 2021). In doing so, the PVEST framework prevents researchers from reducing minority experiences to their most simplistic form. Instead, it examines the coping mechanisms of research participants and how those coping mechanisms impact the very ecology of systems which bring about the need for these coping mechanisms (Spencer, 2021). In this way, PVEST provides a way for researchers to analyze variability in how participants describe their experiences in the levels of the EST model (Spencer, 2021). The PVEST model reveals how individuals cope with the challenges and stressors inherent in each level of EST using a 5-step recursive cycle (Spencer, 2021). The first factor is the individual's *net vulnerability level* (Spencer, 2021), which in earlier iterations of PVEST was referred to as the individual's *risk contributors* (Spencer et al., 1997). An individual's *net vulnerability level* consists of the environmental factors that impact their self-appraisal, for better or worse (Spencer, 2021; Spencer et al., 1997). This component acknowledges that each individual faces challenges but also has various resources. The interaction of these disadvantages and advantages—within or across the systems of EST—impacts one's self-image (Spencer, 2021; Spencer et al., 1997). The *net vulnerability level* includes someone's gender, race, upbringing, and other components impacting daily life (Spencer et al., 1997). The second factor is an individual's *net stress engagement level*, which discerns the risk factors that the individual encounters and must cope with from those simply present in their environment (Spencer, 2021; Spencer et al., 1997). The third factor is an individual's *reactive coping* mechanisms, representing an individual's attempt to respond creatively to an environmental problem (Spencer et al., 1997). When reactive coping mechanisms become engrained responses that impact how an individual views their identity,

they result in the fourth factor: *stable emergent identities* (Spencer, 2021; Spencer et al., 1997). The fifth factor, *life-stage-specific coping outcomes*, may be destructive or constructive, and these coping outcomes inform an individual's *net vulnerability*, completing the cycle (Spencer, 2021; Spencer et al., 1997).

This study will rely on the PVEST framework and its grounding in EST to examine the phenomenological experiences LGBTQIA+ students underwent at non-affirming religious secondary schools. Ozaki et al. (2020) and Fantus and Newman (2021) have used these frameworks to study a similar population and research area. Ozaki et al. (2020) used the PVEST framework in their qualitative study of the persistence of 66 community college students. Their findings indicated that the PVEST framework revealed connections between the participants' perceived identities and the systems in which the participants were immersed (Ozaki et al., 2020). Further, the PVEST framework allowed Ozaki et al. (2020) to see the reciprocal and reinforcing relationship between the outside input of participants' various microsystems and their self-perception. Ozaki et al. (2020) found EST particularly effective when studying the impact of a phenomenon on adolescents and young adults because EST provided a method of observing how different systems and microsystems simultaneously influenced student outcomes. Similarly, Fantus and Newman (2021) employed EST as a conceptual framework in their qualitative study of how school climate impacted LGBT youth. Rather than breaking down students' experiences into disparate, disconnected ideas, EST highlighted the intersection of systems and invited a nuanced interpretation of data (Fantus & Newman, 2021; Ozaki et al., 2020). Thus, these frameworks align with the purposes of this study and offer guidance for how to approach research focused on elevating the voices of a potentially marginalized population rather than imposing the researcher's view or distilling qualitative data into oversimplified platitudes.

Yuan's (2016) Theology of Compassion for the Marginalized

A study of non-affirming religious secondary schools must also contextualize research through a biblical framework. This study relies on Yuan's (2016) theology of compassion for the marginalized, which drew parallels between the Bible's descriptions of marginalized people and same-sex attracted people to establish a biblical foundation for treating LGB individuals with empathy and kindness. This approach was itself non-affirming in that it supported a traditional reading of passages related to homosexuality (e.g., *NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:9-11), defining homosexual acts as sinful, though it stopped short of classifying same-sex attraction as sinful (Yuan, 2016). Yet Yuan's (2016) theology of compassion for the marginalized noted that all humanity is sinful by nature and noted a biblical call to compassion. Yuan (2016) identified three primary figures—the sojourner, the widow, and the orphan—throughout the Bible that were used repeatedly to highlight the obligation of God's people to help and advocate for those in need.

Yuan's grouping of these key societal categories was not a new phenomenon; the Bible itself classified them together (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Zachariah 7:10 identified “the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner, [and] the poor” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011) as individuals to whom God's people should extend “justice...mercy and compassion” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Zach. 7:9). Gowan (1987) noted that the Bible—particularly the Old Testament—repeatedly defines a well-functioning and God-pleasing society as one that cares for these disenfranchised groups. In the Old Testament, the sojourner, or *gēr*, referred to those who temporarily dwelled in a land not their own (Gowan, 1987; Yuan, 2016). Sojourners were residents but not citizens and, thus, subject to laws without receiving legal protections (Yuan, 2016). Further, they were socially disadvantaged (Yuan, 2016). Yuan (2016) noted that sojourners were a susceptible class to

“marginalization and oppression” (p. 11). In the New Testament, the concept of the sojourner comes from the words *paroikos*, *parepidēmos*, and *xenos*, which aligned closely with the Old Testament *gēr* (Yuan, 2016). While in the Old Testament, the sojourner was most often someone that the nation of Israel was called to protect and seek justice on their behalf, New Testament authors frequently viewed early Christians as sojourners, whether in relation to their minority position—as Jews or Christians—in the Roman world or as temporary residents of earth who perceived heaven as their true residence and citizenship (Yuan, 2016). In both instances, the Bible challenged society’s tendency to reject or abuse sojourners, instead defending them on the premise that God treated Israel with compassion when they sojourned in Egypt, and God’s people should do likewise (Gowan, 1987). Yuan (2016) observed that in both the Old and New Testaments, fear was a distinguishing characteristic of the relationship between the sojourner and the majority or citizenry. The biblical solution was to treat sojourners as protected guests, honoring their humanity (Yuan, 2016).

Like sojourners, widows represented a class with few rights and needful of protection (Gowan, 1987; Yuan, 2016). Both Yuan (2016) and Gowan (1987) distinguished between the sojourner and the widow, noting that while many sojourners chose to live in a land other than their own, widows were victims of circumstances who did not choose their unfortunate societal role. Translated from *’almānā* in the Old Testament and *chēra* in the New Testament, in biblical times, the widow did not inherit her husband's wealth (Yuan, 2016). She was often reduced to the position of little more than a servant in the household after her husband’s death if no one advocated for her (Yuan, 2016). If staying in the household of her former husband was not an option, a widow might be left with no way to support herself, begging for sustenance (Yuan, 2016). The Old Testament consistently insisted that, to honor God, his people would care for

widows, both explicitly—as in Exodus 22:2 and Deuteronomy 10:18—and implicitly—in the story of Ruth (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Although the New Testament continued to advocate for the care and defense of widows, the apostle Paul qualified this command, insisting it only applied to “a true widow (*ontōs chēra*)” (Yuan, 2016, p. 15), who had only been married once, was old enough to be unlikely to find a new husband, and was known for her Christian deeds. While the first two criteria focused on the early Christian church’s financial support for those most in need, the third seemingly permitted the church to financially abandon those perceived as unfit to receive charity. Yuan (2016) did not address how this distinction would impact a theology of compassion for marginalized groups, instead focusing on the general principle that both the Old and New Testaments commanded God’s people—whether Jews or Christians—to care for this marginalized population.

The orphan was also representative of social and financial helplessness (Gowan, 1987; Yuan, 2016). In the Old Testament, the term for orphan, *yāttôm*, was most often linked with widows and a command to assist those in need, indicating a similarly marginalized social status for orphans (Yuan, 2016). Both widows and orphans had few rights and depended on others, typically a male relative, for provision and protection (Gowan, 1987; Yuan, 2016). Further, orphans could be legally victimized and maneuvered out of any inheritance because they had so little power (Yuan, 2016). In the New Testament, Christians were taught the importance of caring for orphans (*orphanos*) explicitly in the book of James and implicitly through the example of Jesus, who stated, “I will not leave you as orphans” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, John 14:18).

Yuan (2016) noted that the expression of authentic Christian faith would involve caring for the marginalized, as seen in the examples throughout scripture of the sojourner, widow, and orphan. A true love of God should inspire a love of others, particularly those characterized as

lesser, marginalized, or unloved by society (Mason, 2014; Yuan, 2016). Yuan (2016) substantiated this argument with Jesus' assertion that the "greatest commandment" (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Matthew 22:38) was to love God and love others "as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). Further, Yuan (2016) noted the parallel language in Leviticus 19:34, which was one of only two instances in the Old Testament in which God's people were called to love another "as yourself," and referred to caring for sojourners. Yuan (2016) also called attention to a theology of compassion for the marginalized as consistent with other stories in scripture, key among them the parable of the good Samaritan.

Yuan (2016) identified many parallels between the societal positions of sexual minority individuals and those of widows, orphans, and sojourners. Within their society, both groups were subject to alienation, vulnerability, disadvantages, oppression, and mistreatment (Yuan, 2016). In addition, Yuan (2016) noted that many LGB youth had been effectively orphaned by their parents after their parents rejected them and made them unwelcome in their homes after learning of their homosexuality. Yuan (2016) argued that theologically, LGB and same-sex attracted individuals represented the disenfranchised and marginalized groups of contemporary society in the United States and, as a result, deserve the compassion and love of those who ascribe to biblical values. By this rule, gender minority youth would engender the same protections (Mason, 2014) in Yuan's (2016) framework of compassion for the marginalized. Yuan's (2016) framework was based on a non-affirming position, which holds that homosexual acts are contrary to the Bible's moral teaching. However, Yuan (2016) reconciled this apparent contradiction by cataloging the central theme of scripture: God's grace and compassion on sinners, despite their unending proclivity toward sinful behavior. Yuan (2016) recounted both Old and New Testament examples of God's compassion for His people, even after their repeated

disobedience to His commands.

Summary of Theoretical Framework Integration

To determine and address the outcomes and impacts of educational institutions that espouse religious beliefs directed toward a marginalized population, theoretical frameworks that integrate societal institutions and systems with the complex nature of individual identity formation are necessary. Additionally, frameworks must address how religion fits into the interplay between society and the individual. Because this study focused on a population that has been marginalized, frameworks that protect participants from further oppression and provide participants with autonomy and a voice are also appropriate, particularly given the positionality of the researcher, who has been immersed in non-affirming secondary religious schools.

Integrating EST and PVEST, critical theory, appreciative inquiry, and a theology of compassion for the marginalized provides a cohesive path toward conducting this study while honoring the lived experiences and agency of LGBTQIA+ secondary students. Approaching appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) through the framework of critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020; Habermas, 1968/1971) provides a path to identifying oppressive structures with the intent of breaking those down for the purpose of “emancipation and transformation” (Grant & Humphries, 2006, p. 406). Thus, the complementary frameworks of appreciative inquiry and critical theory provide an appropriate structure for this qualitative phenomenological research into the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming religious secondary schools. Further, Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) depiction of the impact of social structures and their development over time in appreciative inquiry closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) chronosystem in EST. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) nests the individual within social structures and institutions that have a reciprocal impact on one another,

both within and between each system level and the individual. In conjunction with PVEST (Spencer, 1995), which demonstrates how the individual reacts and forms an identity related to the coping mechanisms—both healthy and unhealthy—that result from how they are situated within systems, EST provides a method to reveal systemic bias and repeated patterns of oppression.

These frameworks are joined with appreciative inquiry to ensure that this study results in clear guidance on how to improve the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming religious secondary schools. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) cautioned against scientific methods that used terminology related to systems to codify data into over-simplified categories, which might discourage researchers from integrating appreciative inquiry and EST or PVEST. However, like appreciative inquiry, EST and its PVEST iteration were established not as reductionist frameworks but as generative scientific approaches (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Spencer et al., 1997). Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) honors the complexity of social phenomena and attempts to effect change by identifying and leveraging what does work within an existing system. In addition, this study overlays Yuan's (2016) theology of compassion for the marginalized to support the biblical need for increased support for marginalized communities within Bible-based religious contexts.

Challenges to the LGBTQIA+ Community

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1976) and Spencer's (1997) PVEST indicate that individuals of any background will encounter both external and internal challenges that impact their identity formation. When studying challenges to LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming religious secondary schools, it is clear that the microsystems of school, friends, and family and mesosystem drivers, such as religion, will play a significant role in a student's risk

contributors and net vulnerability level (Spencer, 1997). In addition, students face indirect influences from the chronosystem and exo-system from the legacy of the treatment of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the United States and the legal regulations that have impacted and still impact this community (Gray, 2008; Oaks, 1978).

Historical and Legal Legacy

Even before the United States became a nation, the actions of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the early colonies were heavily influenced and regulated by religion. The Puritan influence dictated not only laws directed toward the LGBTQIA+ community in the colonies but the social and legal precedents established then still resonate in modern legal cases and social judgments in the modern day (Gray, 2008). Oaks (1978) cautioned that historical inquiry into the lives and stories of sexual minority individuals was challenging because their sexual identity was criminalized, and records of their lives were unlikely to be kept. Some of the most prolific historical documents are records of births and marriages, which did not include sexual minority relationships until late in the 20th century (Oaks, 1978). Instead, historians were more likely to find records of sexual or gender minority individuals in criminal records because private consensual homosexual acts were not named as a right in the United States until the 21st century (Oaks, 1978; *Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003). While this section explores LGBTQIA+ history through a legal and judicial lens—because at many points in the historical narrative of the United States it is one of the few records available—it must be acknowledged that the legal system’s record is incomplete and often provides a biased perspective. Nonetheless, a review of the early settler’s attitudes and perspectives toward sexual minority individuals informs a more comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and legal challenges that continue to shape policy and attitudes in the United States toward LGBTQIA+ people.

Puritan Colonies. Both the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colony kept extensive records indicating the presence and awareness of sexual minority individuals. Some of the earliest settlers in New England, the Puritans, based their laws and punishments on the regulations found in the Bible and, as a result, punished any sexual activity outside of marriage (E. S. Morgan, 1942; Oaks, 1978). Although the death penalty was prescribed for most sexual crimes, offenders were not executed as frequently as the law demanded (Oaks, 1978). For instance, early records of the Massachusetts Bay Colony noted that because an adulterer confessed to his crime, he was only held in the stocks and then released (Shurtleff, 1628-1641/1853). However, E. S. Morgan's (1942) research indicated that Puritan laws demanded harsher punishment for acts associated with homosexuality (e.g., "buggery and sodomy;" p. 603) than for acts regarded as heterosexual (e.g., "rape, adultery, and fornication;" p. 603). Yet in actual practice, young men accused of "beastly Sodomiticall [sic]" (Higginson, 1629/1908, p. 76) acts were not punished by death but instead returned to England (Shurtleff, 1628-1641/1853). Nor were the clear case of repeated homosexual acts between John Allexander and Thomas Roberts met with the death penalty (Shurtleff, 1633-1640/1968). Such records led Oaks (1978) to conclude that the Puritans in New England held homosexual acts as not significantly more offensive than heterosexual sins. In contrast, bestiality was consistently punished by death (Oaks, 1978; Shurtleff, 1628-1641/1853). Oaks (1978) found far fewer references to homosexual acts between women than between men in their early study of Puritan sexuality. In addition, acts between women were less likely to be referred to as *sodomy*. An account from Plymouth colony instead used the phrase "leude behavior each with other vpon a bed [sic]" (Shurtleff, 1633-1640/1968).

Although there were more records of crimes related to homosexual behavior recorded by

the Plymouth colony than any of the other early colonies, this may not indicate the presence of more or fewer sexual minority individuals in that colony, only that these acts were more frequently discovered and documented (Oaks, 1978). In addition, early records were inconsistent in their use of terminology (Shurtleff, 1628-1641/1853). Oaks (1978) noted that *sodomy* was frequently the term used for homosexual acts, but it was also used to refer to the molestation of a child of a different gender than the offender on at least one occasion and even to bestiality. In addition, *sodomy* was used to imply rape or attempted rape in some early records from the Plymouth colony (Shurtleff, 1633-1640/1968). Further complicating historical inquiry, later U.S. naval records used both *sodomy* and *buggery* to refer to homosexual acts (Burg, 2014), while the Puritans used *buggery* to refer to bestiality exclusively (Oaks, 1978; Shurtleff, 1628-1641/1853, 1633-1640/1968).

It should be noted that in instances in which young people were accused of engaging in homosexual acts with one another and in cases in which adults engaged in homosexual acts with one another, the punishment was rarely as harsh as the law demanded (Oaks, 1978; Shurtleff, 1628-1641/1853, 1633-1640/1968). Instead, the Puritans exercised judicial leniency, and the accused returned to their lives in society (Oaks, 1978). Before the United States had yet been formed, the Puritans had established a pattern that would characterize the relationship between the LGBTQIA+ community, the law, and the enforcement of law: A Bible-based judicial system could not permit open homosexuality, yet those tasked with enacting the law could rarely stomach the prescribed enforcement (Eskridge, 2008; Talley, 1996). Eskridge (2008), a historian who studied sodomy law throughout U.S. history, found that there was only one instance in which someone was given the death penalty in Virginia as a result of sodomy in the 17th century. Oaks (1978) noted that by the late 1600s, the Puritan colonies were less likely to document

crimes of a sexual nature, thereby leaving little record of the LGB community.

Sodomy Laws in the United States. This trend appeared to continue, according to historian Burg (2014), who found that John Adams removed the prohibition and punishment for sodomy when adapting the British Royal Navy's regulations for the navy of the colonies. Further, Burg (2014) found that both accusations of and trials for sodomy were rare and that naval officers were unlikely to punish the offense. Still, Burg (2014) observed that such accusations impinged on the character of those accused. As the original 13 states wrote laws and established punishments, nearly all prohibited sodomy (Eskridge, 2008). In addition—and consistent with the legacy of their Puritan forefathers—these early states almost universally did away with capital punishment as a legal consequence for sodomy (Eskridge, 2008). According to Eskridge (2008), the first record of a sodomy case in the U.S. was *Davis v. State* (1810). This case exemplifies the extent to which perspective's on sexuality were influenced by biblical principles. In rendering the judgment, the court record referenced biblical morality or ideas nine times, including the “fear of God” (*Davis v. State*, 1810, p. 154), the “peace of God” (*Davis v. State*, 1810, p. 154), and the “displeasure of Almighty God” (*Davis v. State*, 1810, p.154). The crime was perceived as an “instigation of the devil” (*Davis v. State*, 1810, p. 154) and was likened to Sodom, a city destroyed by God in the Bible for its sins, which were understood in this context to reference homosexuality. Although “rarely enforced...before 1880” (Eskridge, 2008, p. 21), sodomy laws remained legal precedent.

Lugg (2006) argued that sodomy laws functioned as a fear-mongering tactic to force gender and sexual minorities to hide their identities and, thereby, systematically reinforce gender and sexual norms. Lugg (2006) drew a parallel to Foucault's (1977) panopticon: “a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men”

(Foucault, 1977, p. 205). The panopticon was a design by which subjects were intimidated into self-regulation because they were unable to identify when—or even if—they were being observed by those in positions of power (Foucault, 1977). Lugg (2006) noted that the primary purpose of sodomy laws in the United States appeared to be to deter behavior rather than to punish it. Yet Mohr (1988) pointed out that deterring behavior was not the primary effect of unenforced sodomy laws, saying, “unenforced sodomy laws are the chief systematic way that society as a whole tells gays they are scum...their dignity is diminished by the law’s very existence” (p. 60).

It was not until 2003 that the Supreme Court recognized the right of same-gender couples to engage in sexual acts, aligning this right with the freedom and dignity of every individual (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003). Despite this ruling, some states still have laws to the contrary, which is not surprising as in 1986, the Supreme Court had declared that homosexual individuals had no constitutional right to engage in private consensual sexual acts (*Bowers v. Hardwick*, 1986). As late as 2014, the state of Louisiana voted not to decriminalize sexual acts among consenting adults of the same gender (Frizell, 2014). Texas, too, has state laws criminalizing sex between members of the same gender that few Texas politicians are willing to address, let alone repeal (McGaughy, 2022). Some support for these laws has referenced *Lawrence v. Texas*’s (2003) failure to protect minors engaged in consensual sexual acts with other minors of the same gender (Wardenski, 2005).

Wardenski (2005) argued that laws criminalizing LGBTQIA+ sexuality create and exacerbate societal stigma; therefore, the way the law views and protects this community has been reflected in the daily treatment of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Goodman’s (2001) legal analysis of South Africa’s unenforced sodomy laws further supported the detrimental impact of

such seemingly “harmless” (p. 648) statutes. Drawing a parallel to the United States, Goodman (2001) found that even unenforced sodomy laws in South Africa had a macro-level impact on society as well as a micro-level impact on the everyday interactions of individuals. After these laws were abolished, interviews with LG individuals revealed that they felt less stigmatized and more able to be themselves in public without fear of social reprisal (Goodman, 2001).

Marriage Rights. Like sexual acts, marriage rights have also been contested. The Oxford English Dictionary’s first found reference to homosexuality in 1891 (Oxford University Press, n.d.), one indication of society’s failure to distinguish between non-consensual assault and consensual sexual acts. Baia (2018) observed that “as recently as the nineteenth century, our culture had not conception of sexual orientation as a facet of one’s identity” (p. 1023). This assertion was affirmed by *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which noted that same-sex couples were forced or encouraged to hide their sexuality and relationships even in the 20th century. *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) determined that same-sex marriages must be recognized by all states. However, Baia (2018) critiqued so-called LGBTQIA+ societal gains that expect LGBTQIA+ individuals to conform to heteronormative practices in order to gain acceptance.

In *Baker v. Nelson* (1971), the Supreme Court defended heterosexual marriage to the exclusion of homosexual marriage based on the Bible’s description in Genesis of marriage being for the purpose of birthing and rearing children and the assumption that sex represents a “fundamental difference” (p. 315), unlike race. Just before the turn of the 21st century, the Supreme Court overruled State of Colorado’s amendment that prohibited laws established to protect sexual minority individuals (*Romer v. Evans*, 1996). Yet this legislation did not mark a consistent shift in U.S. law or precedent. Also in 1996, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was enacted with the intent to ensure that legal marriages were limited to heterosexual

relationships and that, even if one or more states legalize same-sex marriages, other states would not be required to provide legal recognition for those marriages in their own states. However, in 2013 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down DOMA, citing DOMA's intent to deny individuals their rights under the law rather than protect the rights and privileges granted to them by the states through the institution of marriage (*United States v. Windsor*, 2013).

Lesbian and Bisexual Distinctions from Gay History. Legal precedent in U.S. history has focused primarily on homosexuality as it relates to men. The history of those in the LGBTQIA+ community is not equally documented (Donoghue, 2007). The Oxford English Dictionary only recently corrected its entry to accurately date the word lesbian as being used to describe women who engage in sexual acts with members of the same gender to 1732, when William King included it in his poetry (Donoghue, 2007; Oxford University Press, n.d.). Prior to this rectification, the Oxford English Dictionary first attributed lesbian to Adolf Huxley's pejorative reference to "English sodomites and middle-aged lesbians" (as cited in Oxford University Press, n.d., definition A.2) in 1925. Further, Donoghue (2007) described bias within the LGB community, which, even as late as the 1990s, regarded bisexual individuals with suspicion and censure.

Gender Expression. It was not only sexual minority individuals who faced stigmatization throughout history; the gender minority community has also faced historical and legal challenges. An article in *The American School Board Journal* from 1946 revealed the explicit reinforcement of gender norms in society and, specifically, in the field of education (Leonard, 1946). Although the article called for more men to join the teaching profession—particularly at the elementary level—it eschewed candidates who might present as effeminate or unmarried (Leonard, 1946).

Laws regulating gender expression have primarily been related to cross-dressing (Eskridge, 1997). The city of St. Louis holds the distinction of passing the first law banning someone from wearing clothing different from one's natal gender identity (Eskridge, 1997). Statutes related to cross-dressing were posed as prohibitions on "impersonating a female" (*People v. Archibald*, 1968) and were primarily enacted at the level of city ordinances (Eskridge, 1997). However, after the Stonewall Riots, many convictions were overturned (Eskridge, 1997), as in the case of *Columbus v. Rogers* (1975). Rogers's conviction for "appear[ing] in public 'in a dress not belonging to his or her sex'" (*Columbus v. Rogers*, 1975, p. 162) was overturned by the Ohio Supreme Court because it could not be consistently interpreted by the average citizen because what constituted clothing as distinctly masculine or feminine changed based on style. This appeal that the law was overly vague and, therefore, unconstitutional was used successfully to overturn convictions for wearing clothing that did not align with one's natal sex in other cities across the United States (Eskridge, 1997).

Transgender individuals have also encountered legal hurdles related to changing their names (*Matter of Anonymous v. Weiner*, 1966; *Matter of Hartin v. Director of Bureau of Records and Statistics*, 1973) and obtaining legal recognition for marriages (*re Estate of Gardiner*, 2002). These challenges were often related to the sex on an individual's birth certificate, which was difficult because each state had its own policy regarding changing one's legal sex (Lambda Legal, 2018).

Similarly, states have set their own laws regarding the treatment and rights of gender minority students. Although *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020) established that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protected transgender individuals—and the Department of Education interpreted this to mean that Title IX would likewise protect transgender students (Office for

Civil Rights, Department of Education, 2021)—10 states filed a lawsuit claiming that the federal government had overreached its authority (*Tennessee v. U.S. Department of State*, 2018). The courts held that the federal government did not have the right to dictate this policy to the states; the 10 states which filed a lawsuit have not been required to implement policy protecting transgender students (Office for Civil Rights, Department of Education, 2021; *Tennessee v. U.S. Department of State*, 2018).

Under the administration of President Obama, the U.S. Department of Education had earlier attempted to establish protections and guidelines for transgender students (Lhamon et al., 2016), including the right to be called by their preferred names and pronouns, use locker rooms and bathrooms that align with their gender identity, among other rights. However, much of the Department of Education’s policy initiative was criticized and rendered unenforceable due to overreach (Marcus & Gore, 2018), and the policy was later rescinded (Lhamon et al., 2016).

Much of the legislation regarding the rights of transgender students has experienced a similar back-and-forth. In 2021, the Pennsylvania legislature passed H.B. 972, requiring students who participated on a sports team to join the team aligned with their sex rather than their gender identity. This was vetoed by Governor Wolf (2022). However, more than half of states have passed or proposed antitransgender legislation (Freedom for All Americans, 2022). In contrast, other states have passed laws that protected the rights of transgender students (An Act Relative to Gender Identity, 2012; Sex Equity in Education Act, 2014). For instance, in 2014, California passed the Sex Equity in Education Act, which provided students with the right to participate in activities and utilize services aligned with their gender identity rather than their natal sex. These laws—whether benefiting or detracting from the educational experiences of gender minority students—impacted the development of individual students’ identities as they navigate the

impact of the interaction between their microsystems and exo-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Public Perception and Law. The case of *One, Inc. v. Olesen* (1957) typified the reciprocal relationship between social perception and legality. In this case, postal employees deemed *One*, the first magazine openly focused on homosexual issues, pornographic and refused to distribute it. The case made its way to the Supreme Court, which described the story “Sappho Remembered” as “cheap pornography” (*One, Inc. v. Olesen*, 1957, p. 777). However, a modern reading revealed only suggestions of intimacy—the most explicit being a description of one woman’s fleeting touch of another woman’s face causing her to blush, two women’s knees touching, and the suggestion that two women were discovered together in a dorm room due to a sexual relationship, which was not described in any way (Dahr, 1954). The perceptions of the postal employees and of the Supreme Court, when compared with the contents of the issue, indicated that the problem was not related to material that was sexually explicit but material that treated homosexuality as a legitimate expression of attraction and mutual affection. In the year 2000, the Supreme Court further ruled against equal rights for sexual minority individuals in *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale* (2000), wherein it was determined that the Boy Scouts could prohibit gay members due to its definition of morality and its right to assert morality as an expressive organization, protected by the first amendment (U.S. Const. amend. I). In *One, Inc. v. Olesen* (1957), the Supreme Court noted that the government is periodically called upon to dictate and regulate issues of morality but that this is complicated by society’s changeable perception of moral norms. The Supreme Court has expressed different beliefs about whether the law should reflect the beliefs of society about morality (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) or lead social justice reform (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954).

Silin (2020) described the mid-20th century as “a time when homosexuality was equated

with pathology, loneliness, and isolation” (p. 56). Silin (2020) described the homophobia of the 20th century as linking homosexuality and pedophilia, leading to unfounded suspicion of gay teachers. Misconceptions about homosexuality were common; Johnson and Holmes (2019) related a Dear Abby letter in which a man posited that breastfeeding female babies caused lesbianism. Abby Van Buren accurately noted that if this theory had been true, the human race would have ceased to repopulate long before bottle feeding became common (Johnson & Holmes, 2019). Johnson and Holmes (2019) quantified the growing public awareness of LGBT issues and individuals by noting that in the few years prior to the Stonewall riots, they were only able to locate four letters to popular advice columnists Abby Van Buren (Dear Abby) and Ann Landers whereas between 1969 and 1975 more than 20 letters were published on this topic. Of note, while there was only a single letter published in the year prior to the Stonewall riot, six were published in 1970 (Johnson & Holmes, 2019), indicating that discussion of homosexuality had become more common in the mainstream media and conversation. However, the government’s employment ban on LGBTQ individuals in the mid-20th century, due to fears that they could be easily blackmailed if threatened with being outed, served to further stigmatize gender and sexual minority individuals (Johnson & Holmes, 2019).

Contemporary Legal Landscape. Signed into law by Richard Nixon, Title IX resulted from lawsuits into gender discrimination in hiring practices at colleges and universities coupled with a robust congressional investigation into educational prejudice and inequality (E. Meyer & Quantz, 2021). Title IX (1972) specifically applies to educational institutions that receive federal funding and protects against discrimination on the basis of sex. While Title IX offers protection against sex discrimination, it does little to advance gender equity without intentional, consistent accountability from the judicial and executive branches (E. Meyer & Quantz, 2021). The law

falls short in its defense of those with intersectional minority identities (E. Meyer & Quantz, 2021). The Civil Rights Act of 1964, also referred to as Title VII, prohibited employment discrimination based on several factors, including sex and religion. Title VII and Title IX are similar in their protections of individuals; however, each applies to a different sphere of life, with Title VII influencing employment law and Title IX impacting education. Still, rulings and precedents for Title VII are often used as guidance when courts interpret Title IX (Eisemann, 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, 2021).

Bostock v. Clayton County (2020) established a significant precedent identifying Title VII's protection of sex as explicitly inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity. However, it also asserted that the Religious Freedom Restoration act of 1993 may supersede Title VII protections based on sex (including gender identity or sexual orientation). Schools and other institutions of education may claim exemptions from non-discrimination policies if these policies violate their religious doctrine (Educational Institutions Controlled by Religious Organizations, 2022).

Cases Involving Religious Schools. More than 30 former students of non-affirming religious institutions of higher education have filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Education, claiming that providing these colleges and universities with federal funds violates the students' Title IX protections (*Hunter v. U.S. Dep't of Educ.*, 2021a). Most significantly, the lawsuit alleged:

The Department's inaction leaves students unprotected from the harms of conversion therapy, expulsion, denial of housing and healthcare, sexual and physical abuse and harassment, as well as the less visible, but no less damaging, consequences of institutionalized shame, fear, anxiety and loneliness (*Hunter v. U.S. Department of*

Education, 2021a, p. 2).

In October of 2021, the United States District Court in Oregon determined that three religious universities could intervene in the case in order to protect what they perceive as their own religious rights (*Hunter v. U.S. Department of Education*, 2021b). In the same vein, the Religious Exemption Accountability Project (REAP; 2022) launched six complaints against non-affirming religious institutions of higher education on behalf of current and former LGBTQ students.

Among the students' assertions of discrimination are claims of verbal harassment and slurs made by faculty and students, denial of LGBTQ-supportive organizations on campus, and required conversion therapy for LGB students (REAP, 2022). The Supreme Court has not definitively ruled whether the First Amendment right to religious expression supersedes or submits to Title IX or "the rights and dignity of gay persons" (*Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 2018). However, the court did indicate that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 may take precedence if an individual's free exercise of religion were to be impeded (*Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 2018). In *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2018), although the court ruled in favor of Masterpiece Cakeshop's baker's right to deny his wedding-specific services to a gay couple, this ruling was based on Colorado's failure to address his right to practice religion without discrimination rather than on a legal precedent. Thus, no precedent was established, and it is yet unclear to gender and sexual minority students at non-affirming religious institutions what rights they have to sexual and gender expression.

Federal funding has proved to be the lynchpin in arguments over protection for religious institutions versus protection for gender and sexual minority individuals. In *Carson v. Makin* (2020), the Supreme Court found that government funds could be used to pay tuition to Maine

private schools with religious affiliations, even when those schools explicitly adhered to non-affirming policies. In districts without public secondary schools, Maine provided tuition assistance for students to attend private secondary schools; however, until *Carson v. Makin* (2020), tuition could only be provided for non-sectarian schools. In 2022, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Fellowship of Christian Athletes could require members to agree with a traditional Christian understanding of gender and sexuality (*FCA v. SJUSD BOE*, 2022). In both cases, the decisions were rendered based on reasoning similar to that of *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2018): Government is prohibited from discrimination on the basis of religion.

Cases Involving Public Schools. E. Meyer and Quantz’s (2021) review of Title IX legal research showed that most scholarly research has focused on Title IX’s defense of cisgender female athletes. *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (1996) marked the first instance of a sexual minority student successfully winning a court case on the grounds of a violation of his 14th amendment right to “equal protection of the laws” (U.S. Const. amend. XIX, sec. 1). In addition, this case established school personnel could be held personally and financially liable for their failure to uphold legal and school policies against gender and sexual discrimination (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009). Plaintiff Nabozny’s case revolved around the failure of Principal Podlesny and the Ashland School District to protect him from slurs, bullying, and assault from his peers (*Nabozny v. Podlesny*, 1996). Despite repeatedly reporting the abuse to administrators, Nabozny’s concerns were dismissed and, at times, met with derision by school administrators (Logue & Buckel, 1997). In contrast, female students who reported harassment based on their gender and pregnant students who were verbally harassed with slurs linked to their sexuality, including “whore” (Logue & Buckel, 1997, p. 443) and “slut” (Logue & Buckel, 1997, p. 443), received support

from administrators, who quickly disciplined the offenders through suspensions and detentions.

Nabozny first encountered harassment after entering middle school, when he identified himself as gay and his classmates identified him as homosexual (Logue & Buckel, 1997). Slurs from peers included the term “faggot” (Logue & Buckel, 1997, p. 430), and physical assaults included being spit on, kicked, and hit. His first guidance counselor took Nabozny’s concerns about his treatment by peers seriously, spoke with the offending students and their parents, and assigned the students involved with detention. The abuse resumed at some point after this and after Nabozny received a new guidance counselor. Nabozny’s new counselor abdicated disciplinary responsibility to the principal, Podlesny (Logue & Buckel, 1997). Although Nabozny met with Principal Podlesny—disclosing his sexual identity in that meeting—any action taken by the principal against the offending students did not reduce the harassment Nabozny encountered. Instead, his bullies intensified their actions, reminding Nabozny of a time when his adult youth leader—who was jailed for his actions—committed sexual assault against Nabozny and acted out a “mock rape” in a classroom while classmates looked on (Logue & Buckel, 1997). Nabozny reported this assault to the principal immediately but was met with the comment, “boys will be boys” (Logue & Buckel, 1997, p. 431) and was told to expect situations such as this due to being an openly gay student. Despite repeated abuse through grades 7 and 8 that was regularly reported to the principal and counselor by both Nabozny and his parents, the offending students did not face disciplinary action by the school (Logue & Buckel, 1997). Nabozny was successful at a Catholic school, where he finished 8th grade (Logue & Buckel, 1997). Although he and his parents thought a religious school would be a viable option, none was available in their area, and he was required to return to the public school system (Logue & Buckel, 1997).

The problematic pattern Nobozney experienced at his public middle school repeated itself when Nobozny advanced to high school, where the verbal and physical abuse continued but was met with little or ineffective action by the school (Logue & Buckel, 1997). In one instance, students shoved Nobozny while in a restroom, and one student urinated on him. Although Nobozny reported the incident, the perpetrators did not face any consequences. Some teachers also perpetuated a hostile climate; one referred to Noboznov as a “fag” (Logue & Buckel, 1997, p. 435) and had him transferred out of his class because Nobozny was openly gay. As Nobozny and his classmates got older, the physical abuse intensified. In grade 10, Noboznov was kicked in the stomach by a group of male students in the school library for approximately 10 minutes. This caused internal bleeding that had to be surgically resolved. After this incident, the police liaison pressured Nobosny not to press charges because the school would discipline the students. However, the discipline did not escalate to suspensions for the students involved and did nothing to end the physical or verbal harassment that Nobosny regularly faced. After being informed of Nobosny’s encounters with violent and repeated bullying, Assistant Principal Blauert echoed the sentiments expressed by Principal Podlesny: Nobosny would have to endure situations such as these because he was gay (Logue & Buckel, 1997).

Like many gender and sexual minority students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021, Kilgo et al., 2019), Nobosny fell victim to adverse social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Logue & Buckel, 1997). The intensity of Nobosny’s situation and documentation of the ongoing harassment he faced in middle school and as a secondary student provide a clear causal link to Nobosny’s post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis, withdrawal from peers, depression, and multiple suicide attempts (Logue & Buckel, 1997). Furthermore, Nobosny eventually dropped out of high school to earn a GED because even

after leaving the school district where he was bullied, school busses and buildings triggered his PTSD to such a significant degree that he was unable to attend school regularly (Logue & Buckel, 1997).

Montgomery v. Independent School District (2000) displayed a distressingly similar pattern to *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (1996). Like Nabozny, Montgomery faced escalating harassment in his public school district, beginning with verbal harassment and increasing to include physical assault and mock rape. Montgomery's complaints to administrators were met with little action against the student aggressors, who received only verbal warnings that did nothing to alleviate Montgomery's hostile school environment. In addition, in both Nabozny and Montgomery's cases, one of the school's solutions was to remove them from classes, thereby denying victims their rights to education while protecting the rights of the perpetrators of harm. As a result, administrators in both cases were found to have exercised "deliberate indifference" (*Montgomery v. Independent School District*, 2000, p. 1095; *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, 1996, sec. IV).

In the case of *Flores v. Morgan Hill Unified School District* (2003), school administrators were found to have acted with "deliberate indifference" (p. 1132) when several sexual minority students reported instances of verbal and physical harassment. Despite six students reporting incidents of slurs on campus, including "faggot" (*Flores v. Morgan Hill Unified School District*, 2003, p. 1133) and "dyke" (p. 1133), students throwing items at sexual minority students, students physically assaulting sexual minority students, and students leaving pornographic material for sexual minority students to find, administrators regularly failed to conduct investigations into the offending conduct or discipline the offenders. In addition, at times, teachers and administrators reacted to the bullying and abuse by burdening the sexual minority

students with their solutions to the problem, including transferring one plaintiff to another school and telling one plaintiff to isolate herself from other students in the locker room to make her harassers more comfortable with the presence of a homosexual student (*Flores v. Morgan Hill Unified School District*, 2003). In other instances, staff witnessed the verbal harassment of sexual minority students but did nothing to intervene (*Flores v. Morgan Hill Unified School District*, 2003). Both *Flores v. Morgan Hill Unified School District* (2003) and *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (1996) have been identified as setting a clear precedent that “sexual orientation represents a protected class for equal protection purposes” (*Nguon v. Wolf*, 2007, p. 5).

Laws protect students’ right to exist on a school campus as well as to express themselves according to their constitutional rights (U.S. Const. amend. I). *Nguon v. Wolf* (2007) held that students had a first amendment right to express their sexuality on campus freely but that this was limited to expressions that did not interfere with the school's fundamental mission to educate pupils. Thus, because the students who brought the lawsuit were permitted to freely hold hands, hug, and briefly kiss—as were heterosexual couples—their rights were not violated by limiting the intensity of their physical displays of affection (*Nguon v. Wolf*, 2007). In addition, the court observed that—like their heterosexual peers—there were times that their sexual expression went unpunished and times that it received a warning or punishment. In one instance, the homosexual girls were found kissing alongside a heterosexual couple, and both couples received the same punishment (*Nguon v. Wolf*, 2007). Charlene—the name one of the students preferred to be used in court—indicated that the school had violated her first amendment right to privacy by disclosing her sexual identity to her mother after Charlene was suspended for French kissing her girlfriend on campus; however, the court found that because the school was required to notify parents of the reason for a suspension, and because there was appropriate cause for the

suspension, it was Charlene, and not the school, that caused the breach in privacy by failing to comply with repeated warnings about her displays of excessive affection on campus (*Nguon v. Wolf*, 2007). Advocates for LGBTQIA+ students have critiqued the court’s decision and the administrator, asserting that revealing a student’s sexual identity to their parents opened them to unnecessary risk (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009).

Ray v. Antioch Unified School District (2000) and *Montgomery v. Independent School District* (2000) provided the legal precedent for cases in which institutions that receive federal funding can be held liable for Title IX violations. *Ray v. Antioch Unified School District* (2000) further determined that, even if students were not physically prevented from access to school services, intimidation due to “severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive” (*Ray v. Antioch Unified School District*, 2000, p. 1168) sexual harassment—even between students of the same gender—constituted a denial of services.

Summary of the Historical and Legal Legacy. Gender and sexual minority students at non-affirming secondary schools find themselves in an area of legal ambiguity, at the crossroads of Civil Rights (Title IX, 1972) and religious freedom (U.S. Const. amend. I.). Baird’s (1844) history of the United States ties Protestant evangelical Christianity inextricably to the founding and subsequent success of the nation and its government. Despite the legal separation of church and state, many citizens nonetheless retain a sense of the United States as a fundamentally Christian nation (Brekus, 2018; Telhami & Rouse, 2022). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the history of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the United States has been shaped by Christianity’s influence (Brekus, 2018). The legal system has not yet established a precedent for how legal protections apply when issues of religious rights (U.S. Const. amend. I.) are at odds with the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals to express their sexual and gender identity, and only in

recent history have their been moves to deregulate private expression. The long history of laws in the United States prohibiting the public expression of non-conforming sexual or gender identity shaped societal norms and the majority's treatment and perceptions of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Wardenski, 2005). These complex interactions between microsystems, mesosystems, exo-systems, macrosystems, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1975) impact identity development and shape the vulnerability, coping strategies, and identities (Spencer, 1995) of gender and sexual minority youth who encounter multifaceted challenges that their sexual and gender majority peers do not face.

The Complexity of Identity and Intersectionality

Students who identify as LGBTQIA+ are not a homogenous group (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020); instead, different intersecting identities—including sexual orientation, gender identity, ableness, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and culture—impact a student's experiences, self-perception, and coping skills (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Fenaughty et al.; 2019; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Sansone, 2019)). Studies of school climate indicate that colleges and universities are often defined by normative whiteness, which can oppress and marginalize students of color (Duran et al., 2020).

The breadth of a student's sexual and gender identity disclosure may vary based on their identity within the LGBTQIA+ community, race, and the denomination of their educational institution (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). This degree of outness affects their experiences and outcomes (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Forber-Pratt et al. (2021) concluded that intersectionality was a critical aspect of identity and had a significant impact on students' experiences in a school setting. They posited that the identity others perceive most prominently in a student may have the most significant impact on that student's school experience (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). While

students may disclose their sexual and gender identity at their discretion, some other aspects of their identity are visible to their community regardless of their disclosure (Eisemann, 2000).

Race, culture, and abledness play a role in how others perceive sexual and gender minority individuals, adding to the complexity of understanding LGBTQIA+ students' educational experience (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). For instance, Feinstein et al. (2022) found that sexual minority non-white participants reported an increased perception of their burdensomeness and decreased belonging compared to sexual minority white participants. However, due to the small sample sizes of sub-groups, Feinstein et al. (2022) could not draw conclusions about the potentially compounded impact of race and gender identity. Kosciw et al. (2020) also found that students of color experienced increased instances of harassment and other victimization when compared to their white peers and that members of the LGBTQ community who were also people of color (POC) faced discrimination and victimization based on both their POC and LGBTQ identities. Fenaughty et al. (2019) determined that an intersecting socioeconomic identity could increase challenges for sexual and gender minority individuals. Fenaughty et al. (2019) found that poverty exacerbated the challenges posed to gender and sexual minority secondary students in New Zealand, demonstrating the detrimental impact of net stress (Spencer, 1997) on academic outcomes for students with intersectional identities. However, their examination of how ethnicity and race might reflect "additive models of minority stress" (Fenaughty, 2019, p. 1893) determined that an approach based on the sum impact of intersecting minority identities would oversimplify the relationship between intersectional identities.

Yet, intersecting minority identities did not consistently decrease student outcomes. Sansone (2019) found that intersecting identities—including abledness, race, ethnicity, and

socioeconomic status—had an insignificant impact on student achievement when compared to the effects of sexual identity, which consistently predicted lower academic outcomes. Further, I. H. Meyer (2010) noted that racial and ethnic minority individuals with intersecting identities as gender and/or sexual minority individuals did not exhibit higher rates of mental health disorders than those who only identify as a gender and/or sexual minority, indicating that, although intersectional minority identities compound an individual's stress, individuals with multiple minority identities have greater resilience and coping skills than others. I. H. Meyer's (2010) minority stress model pointed to internalized and external factors impacting gender and sexual minority individuals. I. H. Myer (2010) identified both individual and community coping skills as essential to building resilience in the face of societal prejudice for those with intersecting minority identities. Thus, although intersectional minority identities may pose a challenge to gender and sexual minority students, these individuals have developed resilience (I. H. Meyer, 2010) even when their school settings have proven unsupportive (Wolff et al., 2016).

Challenges to Health and Well-being

Bullying and Peer Victimization. How students are treated by other students has proven to impact their well-being and academic success (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). Unfortunately, Myers et al. (2020) and Campos (2017) found that students who identified as LGBTQ were at consistently higher risk of experiencing bullying at school than their gender and sexual majority peers. The highest risk of victimization was identified in the Western region of the United States (Myers et al., 2020). Gonzales and Deal (2022) found that transgender secondary students were more than twice as likely as their cisgender peers to report bullying in school or through electronic means. Similarly, Myers et al. (2020) and Fenaughty et al. (2019) found that transgender students were more likely to experience bullying and peer victimization at school

than cisgender students, even cisgender students who identified as a sexual minority. A quantitative study of 4,778 transgender students ages 10-18 in California found that one-third reported experiencing peer victimization, which was correlated with a decreased sense of belonging at school (Hatchel et al., 2019).

The GLSEN National School Climate Survey found that more than 90% of students reported hearing slurs related to sexual identity while at school, and 87.4% reported hearing slurs related to gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2020). In addition, more than 50% of students heard remarks such as these from teachers and staff (Kosciw et al., 2020). Eisemann (2000) noted that slurs related to gender and sexual identity were not always used toward students who identified as LGBTQIA+. This tendency of students to use such pejorative language indiscriminately as a general insult, in addition to using slurs to target LGBTQIA+ individuals, has complicated how school administrators may interpret a situation (Eisemann, 2000). E. Meyer and Stader (2009) noted that instances of bullying and slurs were often the result of a student's status as a sexual or gender minority. In addition, students faced bullying and slurs when their peers perceived them as a gender or sexual minority, even if this was not the case (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009). The ill-treatment of LGBTQIA+ secondary students was found to come not only from peers but also from teachers, administrators, and staff members in schools in the United States, Canada, and Australia (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009). Birkett et al. (2014) found that sexual minority students who reported peer victimization were likelier to demonstrate truancy and lower grades.

In addition, Kaczkowski et al. (2022) found that LGB students were more likely than their straight peers to be victims of violence in school. According to the GLSEN National School Climate Survey, safety due to their sexual orientation was a concern at school for 59.1% of LGBTQ students, with 32.7% of LGBTQ students reporting missing at least one school day in

the month the survey was administered due to this fear (Kosciw et al., 2020). Among participants aged 13-24, 32% had suffered physical harm, and 59% claimed to have experienced discrimination, both due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Green et al., 2022). These statistics were echoed in the GLSEN National School Climate Survey, which found that 25.7% of students experienced physical harassment due to their sexual orientation, and 22.2% experienced physical harassment as a result of their gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, only 56.6% of students who faced physical harm or verbal or physical harassment reported their circumstances to school employees, often fearing that intervention would make no difference or would make their situation worse (Kosciw et al., 2020). Substantiating this perception, the GLSEN survey noted that 60.5% of reported incidents received no action from the school to improve the LGBTQ student's situation (Kosciw et al., 2020).

The GLSEN National School Climate survey found that students in private religious schools "heard most types of homophobic remarks less frequently than those in public schools" (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 118). However, the word *gay* was used pejoratively in both religious and public schools with a similar frequency (Kosciw et al., 2020). Likewise, negative comments about transgender individuals were noted with similar frequency at religious and public schools (Kosciw et al., 2020). Peer victimization due to bullying or other harassment occurred at similar rates in public and private religious schools (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, students at religious schools were the most likely (83.5% perceived discrimination) to report institutional policies that were discriminatory toward LGBTQ students and the least likely to cite access to LGBTQ resources on campus (Kosciw et al., 2020). Similarly, Yuan (2016) found that students at religious universities often described a school climate that was unfriendly toward LGB students, even at schools known for having more progressive policies.

Mustanski et al. (2016) found that when LGBTQ youth left high school, they encountered less peer victimization, possibly because as students enter adulthood they gain more control over their educational and societal interactions. In addition, LGBTQ individuals who faced moderate to high levels of peer victimization had a high likelihood of negative psychological effects, even when those who briefly experienced high levels of victimization were able to proceed to less hostile environments (Mustanski et al., 2016).

Loneliness. In their examination of the effects of loneliness on sexual minority individuals, Gorczynski and Fasoli (2022) defined loneliness as occurring when a person's need for social connection is not met, either chronically or at a particular point in time. Yuan (2016) found that loneliness was common among LGB students at Christian universities. Because individuals who report feelings of loneliness are more prone to negative physical and mental health outcomes, findings that indicate members of the LGBTQIA+ community are more likely to report feelings of loneliness (Gorczynski & Fasoli, 2022) are concerning. In contrast, experiencing belonging was associated with positive outcomes for gender and sexual minority students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). In fact, Hatchel et al.'s (2019) study of transgender students found that transgender participants who experienced increased belonging in school also reported less peer victimization and negative mental health symptoms.

An absence of belonging was particularly complex for gender and sexual minority students in religious environments. Sexual identity itself is not visible to others without cues, statements, or actions by an individual (Eisemann, 2000), meaning that individuals must out themselves in order to experience belonging in the LGBTQIA+ community. In addition, Beck (2013) found that secondary students discussing LGBTQ issues in the classroom assumed that all

others in the room were heterosexual unless they explicitly indicated otherwise, indicating the pervasive nature of heteronormativity. This may pose a challenge for students at religious schools. A significantly smaller percentage of secondary students in religious schools were out to their classmates and teachers when compared to students at public schools (Stewart et al., 2015). Levy and Harr's (2018) study of sexual minority individuals raised in non-affirming faith traditions found that participants reported feelings of isolation from both their religious community, which rejected their sexual identity, and the LGBTQIA+ community, which their religion rejected. The result was that participants reported feeling isolated, scared, and like "they had nowhere to turn" (Levy & Harr, 2018, p. 199). Many participants kept their sexual identities secret from family and members of their religious community due to fear of rejection (Levy & Harr, 2018). In addition, some participants described the belief that their only way to experience an accepting community was to leave their religious community entirely (Levy & Harr, 2018). In contrast, Benson et al.'s (2018) qualitative study of transgender individuals with non-affirming religious backgrounds found that many found acceptance and a sense of belonging due to their relationship with God or belief in a higher power, even if this did not align with the beliefs of their faith tradition. Participants expressed a belief in God's plan for them and their acceptance as His child (Benson et al., 2018). Participants reconciled negative experiences with churches and/or religious people who rejected them by seeking out affirming religious communities or by focusing on the positive messages of love found in their religious tradition (Benson et al., 2018).

Although some gender and sexual minority students overcame a sense of loneliness in their religious environments (Benson et al., 2018), Levy and Harr (2018) did not arrive at this conclusion. In contrast, Duran et al. (2020) found that LGBTQ+ students may experience an increased sense of belonging and community in a study that was not set in a religious

environment. Research into secular universities showed that sexual and gender minority students who had peer support from the LGBTQ+ community were less likely to experience the repercussions of loneliness (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020). Bisexual students, in particular, reported an increased perception of belonging (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Research is inconsistent concerning subgroups of the LGBTQ+ community and to what degree they experience belonging in a college or university environment. Duran et al. (2020) found that students of color generally reported lower perceptions of belonging than their white counterparts, but there is a paucity of research examining the intersectional influences of race and sexual identity on college and university students' sense of belonging. The complexity of this issue is further exacerbated by the nuanced nature of belonging; for instance, in identifying as LGBTQ+, many students find community (Duran et al., 2020). Based on the vastly different findings of studies within religious environments (Levy & Harr, 2018; Stewart et al., 2015) and those set in learning institutions in secular environments (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020), it is clear that LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious schools may face increased hardships related to loneliness than their cisgender heterosexual peers.

Risky Behaviors. Researchers have found that sexual and gender minority youth were more likely to engage in risky behaviors (Doxbeck, 2020; Goldbach et al., 2017; Gonzalez & Deal, 2022; Quinn & Ertl, 2015). In a study of secondary students in 15 states, Gonzales and Deal (2022) reported that transgender participants were more than 3 times as likely as their cisgender peers to experience sexual violence, both within and outside of dating relationships. In addition, transgender participants engaged in risky sexual behaviors at higher rates. They were more likely to report being sexually active, and those who were sexually active were more likely to have more than 4 partners, engage in unprotected sex, and/or use substances before sex

(Gonzalez & Deal, 2022). Likewise, Quinn and Ertl (2015) found that sexual minority youth were more likely than sexual majority youth to have been forced or coerced into non-consensual sexual activity. This put them at increased risk of mental health consequences, such as emotional and psychological trauma (Quinn & Ertl, 2015), and adverse physical consequences, such as sexually transmitted infections.

Further posing a risk to physical well-being, Gonzalez and Deal (2022) noted that transgender youth in high school reported significantly higher rates of substance abuse than their cisgender peers. While only 3.2% of cisgender participants reported cocaine use, the number climbed to 28.8% among transgender participants. In addition, transgender participants reported using other substances: 32.4% used cigarettes, 33.8% had vaped, 38.8% used alcohol, 24.1% reported binge drinking, and 29.6% had used marijuana (Gonzalez & Deal, 2022). At a minimum, these rates were each at least 10% higher than those reported by cisgender participants. Compared to heterosexual students, LGB students reported higher use of emerging harmful substances, such as smokeless tobacco, synthetic marijuana, and e-cigarettes (Goldbach et al., 2017). In studies of college students, both Dagirmanjian et al. (2017) and Schauer et al. (2013) found that women sexual minority students were more likely to report instances of substance abuse when compared to sexual minority students of other genders and cisgender heterosexual students. Doxbeck's (2020) study of gender and sexual minority youth found that peer victimization in the form of bullying—particularly when it occurred online—was correlated with higher rates of e-cigarette use, indicating one possible reason for increased rates of substance abuse. In a study of more than 30,000 college students, both sexual and gender majority and minority students reported similar reasons for substance abuse (Dagirmanjian et al., 2017). However, regarding the abuse of pain medication in particular, LGB students were more

likely to attribute their misuse “to relieve anxiety, to enhance social situations, and to generally feel better” than their heterosexual peers (Dagirmanjian et al., 2017). Dagirmanjian et al. (2017) posited that this rationale could indicate that homosexual college students lacked essential support systems on their campuses. This may help provide context for Stewart et al.’s (2015) finding that gender and sexual minority students at religious schools reported higher instances of alcohol abuse than their counterparts at public schools (Stewart et al., 2015).

Mental Health and Suicidality. For most of U.S. history, sexual and gender minority individuals were regarded as mentally ill (Weinstein, 2018). The year 1972 marked a shift in how medical professionals—particularly psychologists—approached the treatment of LGB individuals as a direct result of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders’* (DSM) removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder (Weinstein, 2018; Yarhouse & Sadusky, 2020). It was not until 2012 that the DSM began referring to gender dysphoria in the context of stress caused by external or internal hardship when one’s gender identity did not align with their natal sex rather than as a mental disorder (National Institute of Corrections [NIC], 2012; Yarhouse & Sadusky, 2020). Mental health challenges for gender and sexual minority individuals are now understood to be compounded by the challenge of marginalization; mental health professionals do not regard homosexuality or transsexuality as mental illnesses themselves (Weinstein, 2018).

Sexual and gender minority individuals have reported high rates of mental health struggles (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Gnan et al., 2019; Kaczkowski et al., 2022). In a study of college students, LGBTQ university participants were found to have an increased risk of suicidality, mental health issues, and self-harm (Gnan et al., 2019). The highest risk factors were associated with university-aged youth who identified as a gender minority (rather than LGBQ;

Gnan et al., 2019). Gonzales and Deal's (2022) study of secondary students found that 59.3% of transgender participants reported feelings of hopelessness or sadness, compared with only 32.7% of cisgender participants. The increase in negative outcomes was echoed by higher rates of suicidal ideation, suicide plans, and suicide attempts, risk factors that were more than twice as high for transgender participants than their cisgender peers (Gonzales & Deal, 2022). These findings were echoed in a quantitative study of 4,778 transgender students ages 10-18 in California, in which almost half of the participants described instances of suicidal ideation and symptoms of depression (Hatchel et al., 2019). Feinstein et al.'s (2022) quantitative study of individuals ages 18-29 found that participants who identified as transgender or gender diverse viewed themselves as more burdensome to others than did cisgender participants. This trend is all the more concerning, as in 2020 suicide was the second leading cause of death for children aged 10-14 in the United States and the third leading cause of death for youth aged 15-24 in the United States (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control [NCIP], 2020).

Several other contributing factors appeared in the literature regarding gender and sexual minority youth, mental health, and suicide. Green et al. (2022) found that participants aged 13-24 who had experienced physical harm due to their LGBTQ identity were more likely to attempt suicide. In addition, youth who came out publicly before puberty and those who experienced a negative reaction when they first came out to others showed higher rates of suicidality, mental health issues, and self-harm (Gnan et al., 2019). Conversion therapy has been associated with higher rates of attempted suicide; however, other risk factors—such as discrimination due to gender or sexual identity—were more highly associated with increased suicide rates (Green et al., 2022). Among college students, a lack of university staff who were publicly out was associated with a higher risk of suicidality and mental health occurrences among university-aged

participants (Guan et al., 2019). However, Guan et al. (2019) were surprised by their findings that participants at universities where students and staff did not consistently provide verbal support for LGBTQ students did not demonstrate an increased risk of mental health issues, suicidality, or self-harm. Additionally, the breadth of how many members of the community to whom a participant was publicly out as an individual who identified as LGBTQ did not impact their risk factors (Guan et al., 2019).

Decreased Academic Achievement. Studies of LGBTQIA+ students at the secondary (Birkett et al., 2014; Fenaughty et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020) and university (Kilgo et al., 2019) levels have shown that this community demonstrates decreased academic achievement and attendance when compared to cisgender heterosexual students. Sansone (2019) reviewed data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 to identify academic outcomes for LGBT students. Quantitative analysis revealed that, although LGBT students did not demonstrate decreased cognitive function or potential (as demonstrated by scores on standardized tests, such as the PSAT and SAT), their academic achievements were lower than their cisgender heterosexual peers (Sansone, 2019). Students who self-identified as LGBT reported both lower GPAs and earning fewer academic credits (Sansone, 2019). In a study of secondary students in New Zealand, both gender and sexual minority students reported lower academic achievement than their gender and sexual majority peers, with gender minority students reporting the lowest achievement scores (Fenaughty et al., 2019). Student achievement levels reflected each group's intention of whether to pursue higher education (Fenaughty et al., 2019). Similarly, the GLSEN National Survey of School Climate revealed that gender and sexual minority students reported lower GPAs than their gender and sexual majority peers and were less likely to anticipate pursuing post-secondary education (Kosciw et al., 2020). This was consistent with Sansone's

(2019) finding that LGBT students were less likely to report a plan to attend college or university. In addition, gender-minority students were significantly less likely to graduate from high school compared to their gender-majority peers (Sansone, 2019). Birkett et al.'s (2014) quantitative study found that LGB and students uncertain of their sexual identity had higher instances of truancy than their heterosexual peers.

Fenaughty et al.'s (2019) study indicated the impact of mediating mesosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) on gender and sexual minority students. While a supportive family environment positively impacted academic achievement for heterosexual cisgender students, it did not have a significant impact on gender or sexual minority students' achievement (Fenaughty et al., 2019), indicating that the gender and sexual identity of an individual sway how the mesosystem negotiates the interplay between microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Spencer et al. (1997) found that stress related to peer groups in adolescence, even with a supportive family environment, could produce a negative attitude toward learning. Similarly, LGBTQ students who experienced discrimination due to their gender or sexual identity reported lower GPAs than their LGBTQ peers who had not suffered from discrimination (Kosciw et al., 2020). While sexual minority students were more likely to have lower grades than heterosexual students, Birkett et al. (2014) found that much of this impact—particularly for male students—was mediated by peer victimization, indicating that it was not sexual identity that lowered academic performance but sexual minority students' experiences and perceptions of safety in their school environment. In a study of same-sex attracted secondary students in Australia, Ullman (2015) found that participants' connection with their teachers and sense of self-esteem were the factors most strongly tied to participants' "academic self-concept" (p. 427). Although less strongly linked, interactions with peers and teachers—both perceptions of approval of same-sex attracted

students and disapproval in the form of homophobic harassment—influenced participants' academic self-efficacy (Ullman, 2015).

Not only may LGBQ+ students face hardships related to their academic experience, but they also may not benefit to the same extent as students who identify as members of the sexual majority. Kilgo et al. (2019) found that not all high-impact academic practices have a significantly positive impact on the academic development of LGBQ+ students. Only participating in undergraduate research was shown to have a significant impact on LGBQ+ students (Kilgo et al., 2019). Another important finding in their research was the strength of the environmental factor of instructor relations with students on academic development. Finally, Kilgo et al. (2019) found that environmental factors play a significant role in the academic development of LGBQ+ students, as does institutional control.

Unsupportive School Environments. The academic achievement of LGBTQIA+ students was impacted not only by how other students treated this population (Kosciw et al., 2020) but also by the academic institution's commitment to the well-being and success of sexual and gender minority students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). BrckaLorenz et al. described institutional commitment as including official policies, practices, and resources that support LGBTQ+ students and intentional opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to engage in activities that build a sense of belonging. Such practices may help mediate the harmful external factors LGBQ+ students face. Ullman's (2015) study of homosexual students in Australia revealed that unsupportive schools in which homophobic behaviors on the part of students and teachers went unchecked by school policies or discipline procedures produced the worst academic outcomes for same-sex attracted students. Ullman (2015) found that for same-sex-attracted students, academic self-efficacy was directly linked to their perception of school climate as it related to

school safety and the support of peers and teachers. Students who were LGBTQ and who perceived their school climate as tolerant had a more positive academic self-concept than those who perceived their school climate as homophobic (Ullman, 2015).

Scriptural Basis for Non-Affirming Biblical Doctrine

The Bible's doctrine of compassion for the marginalized (Yuan, 2016) has not been embraced by mainstream evangelicals in the United States to the degree that verses condemning homosexuality and transgenderism have been elevated by the American church (Gushee, 2015). Because denominations have established differing doctrines, this section describes the biblical foundation for non-affirming doctrine from the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Pew Research Center (2015) has indicated that the majority of the population in the U.S. who views homosexuality as in conflict with their religious beliefs ascribe to religions based on the Christian Bible.

The Bible has been interpreted to affirm only two sexes and to reject any attempt to alter one's natal sex. In Genesis 1:27, God's creation of human beings was described with the words, "male and female He created them" (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Mainstream evangelicals have understood this to mean that a biblical worldview includes only two distinct sexes and that any gender identity other than one's natal sex at birth is contrary to the Bible's teaching (Brownson, 2013; Gushee, 2015). The Bible also called for distinctions in how each gender presents itself publicly. In Deuteronomy 22:5, Moses prohibited wearing the clothing of the opposite gender: "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this" (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Even more liberal scholars who have rejected an interpretation of this passage as simply forbidding cross-dressing have indicated that it prohibits adopting the persona of the opposite gender (Vedeler, 2008). Similarly, in 1

Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul dictated that women should wear head coverings during prayer or prophecy while men should have their heads uncovered (Miller, 1999; *NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Further, Paul stated, “it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, 1 Corinth. 11:6), indicating the expectation of clear gender distinctions.

British theologian Hill (2016) described the “position the Christian church has held with almost total unanimity throughout the centuries—namely, that same-sex sexual expression was not God’s original creative intention for humanity” (p. 22). The justification for heteronormative sexual behavior within marriage is often based in Genesis 2:24 (Gushee, 2015), which described marriage as between a man and his wife (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Jesus echoed these words from Genesis in Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:7 (*NIV Bible*, 2011), and this account has been used by church leaders as Jesus’ tacit approval of only heteronormative marriage (Gushee, 2015). The apostle Paul quoted the same phrase in Ephesians 5:31 in a passage describing marriage between a man and a woman that reinforces traditional gender roles within marriage, at one point describing the wife’s submission to the husband (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Further, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 refer to sexual relationships between members of the same gender as prohibited under biblical law (Hill, 2016; *NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is also frequently used as a narrative that demonstrates God’s disapproval of homosexual behavior, as this was one of the reasons provided for the destruction of the cities (Hill, 2016; *NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Not all scholars agree that passages referencing homosexuality should be read literally (Gushee, 2015). For instance, Hedlund (2017) argued that *ἀρσενοκοίται* could be interpreted as having to do with the abuse of power inherent within same-sex sexual relationships of the time (Hedlund, 2017). However, other biblical scholars have rejected a contemporary interpretation of these passages

and maintained that the use of *ἀρσενοκοίται* was used as a general condemnation of homosexuality (DeYoung, 1992; Jepsen, 2006). Yet Hill (2016) affirmed that the early church believed that the Old Testament referred to homosexual acts as sinful and that this became part of mainstream Christian doctrine.

There are interpretations of the Bible that differ from this non-affirming stance. Moon (2014), for instance, asserted that there were six biblical interpretations of the Bible, ranging from homonegative to moderate to homopositive. Moon (2014) termed a phrase common to evangelical Christianity, “love the sinner, hate the sin” (p. 1218) as a homonegative interpretation. This dissertation does not seek to advocate an affirming or non-affirming doctrine but to outline the foundation of the non-affirming Christian position on sex, gender, and sexuality. Without this background, any study of non-affirming religious schools and the challenges faced by their gender and sexual minority students would be incomplete. A description of the biblical background, therefore, provides the context to understand the religious incongruence experienced by many gender and sexual minority individuals (Exline et al., 2021; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2020).

Religious Incongruence

Incongruence occurs when competing and contradictory identities intersect (Read & Eagle, 2011). Read and Eagle (2011) found that religious incongruence was common across societal groups, and it was particularly prevalent in gender and sexual minority individuals who came from a Bible-based faith tradition (Exline et al., 2021; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2020). However, religious incongruence was not a universal experience for sexual minority individuals (Yarhouse & Sadusky, 2022). Green et al. (2020) found that one of the highest risk factors associated with suicidality for LGBTQ youth aged 13-24 was when guardians used

religion to disparage the LGBTQ community.

Harsh or extreme religious messaging may serve as the root cause of religious trauma (Downie, 2022; Ellis et al., 2022). Religious trauma includes the manipulation based on fear or power inequity and has been connected with losing a sense of spiritual belonging (Ellis et al., 2022) and distressing or extreme religious situations (Downie, 2022). Further, theology that emphasizes damnation and the presentation of absolute or binary alternatives as limitations have been linked with religious trauma (Downie, 2022). Religious trauma has been known to elicit feelings of shame (Downie, 2022), mental health struggles, acting out with risky behaviors, and religious incongruence (Ellis et al., 2022).

Religious trauma and religious incongruence often followed LGBTQIA+ individuals into adulthood (Ellis et al., 2022), leading to a number of coping mechanisms to quell this dissonance (Exline et al., 2021; Levy & Harr, 2018; Wilcox, 2002). A qualitative study of bisexual and pansexual adults raised in religious environments revealed that participants experienced dissonance between their sexual identity and the beliefs espoused by their religion (Levy & Harr, 2018). Frequently, participants reported being told they were sinful and that they should reject their sexual attraction and pursue relationships exclusively with individuals of the opposite gender (Levy & Harr, 2018).

Having what they believed to be key aspects of their identities summarily dismissed inspired many participants to expand their coping mechanisms, both searching out external supports and summoning internal strength and resilience (Levy & Harr, 2018). Participants also expressed the importance of shifting from the self-criticism that was promoted by their religious experiences to self-acceptance, which was often coupled with an exit from the religious tradition of their upbringing (Levy & Harr, 2018). Similarly, a qualitative analysis of 72 interviews in the

1990s led Wilcox (2002) to argue that the rejection of gender and sexual minority individuals by organized religion forced these minority groups into individualized versions of spirituality. Exline et al. (2021) found that few transgender adults identified as religious, and many participants had left organized or formal religion. Fifty-four percent of the transgender participants who were or who had been affiliated with organized religion were made to feel unwelcome or rejected due to their gender identity (Exline et al., 2021). Exline et al. (2021) also found that participants with religious affiliations were likelier to report feeling spiritually conflicted or to report a religious struggle. Adults who believed that God was responsible for their gender identity were more likely to express feelings of religious discomfort (Exline et al., 2021). Transgender participants who expressed spiritual struggles were more likely to report internalized transphobia and a pessimistic future outlook and less likely to come out to others as transgender (Exline et al., 2021).

Comparing sexual minority individuals' experiences in affirming religious environments and non-affirming religious environments revealed some key differences (Hamblin & A. M. Gross, 2013). Hamblin and A. M. Gross (2013) found that sexual minority participants who attended non-affirming churches suffered from generalized anxiety disorders at higher rates than those who attended affirming churches. In addition, sexual minority participants attending non-affirming churches felt less support from their community than did those at affirming churches. However, there was no difference in reported rates of depression among sexual minority participants regardless of whether they attended affirming or non-affirming churches (Hamblin & A. M. Gross, 2013). Thus, while sexual minority individuals at affirming churches suffered fewer negative outcomes than did their sexual majority counterparts, they did not reap the same benefits. In contrast, seeking out affirming religious spaces provided solace for others. In Benson

et al.'s (2018) qualitative study of transgender individuals with non-affirming religious backgrounds, many participants reconciled negative experiences with churches and/or religious people who rejected them by seeking out affirming religious communities or by focusing on the positive messages of love found in their religious tradition (Benson et al., 2018). Participants often cited biblical passages that affirmed their worth as individuals and noted that Jesus had compassion and love for marginalized people (Benson et al., 2018).

Van Droogenbroeck and Spruyt's (2020) quantitative study of secondary students in Europe found that when students grounded their identity in Abrahamic religions (e.g., Christianity or Islam), they were more prone to heteronormative beliefs. In this way, Van Droogenbroeck and Spruyt (2020) found that religion and "anti-gay sentiment" (p. 243) had a reciprocal relationship for secondary students, perpetuating and exacerbating one another. Further, when students believed their peers desired their Abrahamic religious conformity, this peer pressure led to increased homophobia (Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2020). Yet within the sample of secondary students, Van Droogenbroeck and Spruyt (2020) found a range of homophobic sentiment. For instance, female youth and those with an educated parent expressed less homophobia, whereas male students and those who were more authoritarian expressed increased homophobia (Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2020).

Studies of gender and sexual minority students' experiences at non-affirming religious schools also indicate the presence of religious incongruence (Stewart et al., 2015; Taylor & Cuthbert, 2019; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2020). Anderson and Lough (2021) found that sexual and gender minority students who attended Christian homeschools often had unsupportive family members who used religion to express non-affirming beliefs. These students also exhibited high rates of self-harm, suicidality, and mental health issues (Anderson & Lough,

2021). Similarly, Stewart et al.'s (2015) study of U.S. students found that LGBT students at religious schools were more likely to report problems with alcohol abuse than LGBT students at public schools. However, Taylor and Cuthbert's (2019) qualitative study interviewing LGBTQ students in the United Kingdom who attended faith-based schools found that their experiences were highly nuanced rather than universally positive or negative. Taylor and Cuthbert (2019) posited that religious schools appeared no more problematic than non-religious schools and that religion had the potential to offer support systems for students struggling through hardship. They noted that homophobia and inequality were the issues that schools must seek to address, regardless of the institution's religious affiliation or lack thereof. In addition, Taylor and Cuthbert (2019) found that LGBT students of faith desired school environments where they could openly express their religious opinions.

Students from several Bible-based denominations exhibited different levels of religious incongruence (Wolff et al., 2016). Wolff et al. (2016) found that students who identified as Catholic reported fewer negative mental health symptoms or negative perceptions of their own sexual identity than students from other religious affiliations. Researchers theorized that this could be because Catholic universities rarely published policies explicitly forbidding students from participating in same-sex relationships (Wolff et al., 2016). This aligned with their finding that Mormon students experienced higher perceptions of religious incongruence with their faith since Mormon schools not only forbid same-sex relationships but the Mormon church itself excommunicates those in same-sex relationships, meaning they are not welcome to be church members (Wolff et al., 2016).

Religion has been used not only to limit sexual and gender expression but, at times, has been used to encourage gender and sexual minority individuals to change their identity (Green et

al., 2020). Conversion therapy has historically been a practice linked with religious pressure to reject one's LGBTQIA+ identity (Green et al., 2020). More than 75% of subjects aged 13-24 who were encouraged to participate in conversion therapy noted that their guardians expressed religious disapproval of their LGBTQ identity (Green et al., 2020). In their quantitative study of members of the LGBTQ community aged 13-24, Green et al. (2022) found that 35% of participants had a caregiver, guardian, or parent who advocated conversion to a non-LGBTQ identity. Although a study by Wolff et al. (2016) found that only 17% (p. 209) of participants reported that someone from the mental health field had attempted conversion therapy to change their sexual orientation, this number is still high given that it is now a practice condemned by the American Psychological Association. Green et al.'s (2020) analysis found that youth who underwent conversion therapy were almost twice as likely to have considered suicide or attempted suicide as those who did not participate in conversion therapy. Furthermore, Green et al. (2020) noted that participation in conversion therapy was the largest risk factor associated with multiple suicide attempts for LGBTQ subjects. Green et al. (2020) also found that those who participated in conversion therapy were more likely to have experienced discrimination, threats, and physical harm than those who had not undergone conversion therapy.

Summary. A critical approach (Freire, 1970/2020; Habermas, 1968/1971) provided a framework through which to interpret the systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) of oppression that challenge LGBTQIA+ individuals, which informed an investigation of this population's challenges in non-affirming secondary schools. The interplay between systems and their impact on the individual is summarized here to highlight how they are interconnected rather than by addressing each of Bronfenbrenner's (1986) systems or Spencer's (1997, 2021) elements of PVEST separately. Frameworks that address the complexity of intersectional identities (Forber-

Pratt et al., 2021) are necessary to avoid oversimplifying the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) chronosystem and macrosystems laid a foundation for understanding the historical impact of religion and law. The legal legacy founded in Puritan religious doctrine significantly shaped how gender and sexual minority individuals have been treated in the United States (Wardenski, 2005). The criminalization—even when enforcement was not prioritized—stigmatized gender and sexual minority citizens (Goodman, 2001; Lugg, 2006; Wardenski, 2005), impacting on a macro level how society would perceive and behave (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Viewed through the lens of critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020), this served as an oppressive panopticon (Foucault, 1977) to control and marginalize minority groups. Efforts to decriminalize LGBTQIA+ relationships (*United States v. Windsor*, 2013) and protect the rights of this population (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020) have been relatively recent in U.S. history but have not produced consistent progress toward equitable policies (Marcus & Gore, 2018). The United States has yet to determine how to navigate the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Civil Rights Act, 1964; Title IX, 1972) when they appear to conflict with the right to the free exercise of religion (U.S. Const. amend. I).

The widespread adoption of non-affirming religious and homophobic beliefs that resulted from the macrosystems and chronosystems directly acted on the net stress of LGBTQIA+ individuals—manifesting in religious incongruence (Exline et al., 2021; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2020)—and an indirectly impacted the population by creating unsupportive microsystems (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Green et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2020). The net stress (Spencer, 2021) of religious dissonance produced anxiety (Hamblin & A. M. Gross, 2013) and maladaptive coping processes, such as substance abuse (Stewart et al.,

2015), self-harm, and suicidality (Anderson & Lough, 2021). Religious incongruence also facilitated unsupportive family microsystems (Anderson & Lough, 2021; Levy & Harr, 2018), intensifying stress, resulting coping strategies, and solidifying the emerging identities of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Spencer, 1997, 2021). Many LGBTQIA+ individuals found adaptive coping mechanisms that enabled them to reconcile their faith with their gender or sexual minority identity or that helped them leave the religious tradition that harmed their net stress and emerging identity (Levy & Harr, 2018). Unsupportive schools (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021)—particularly those where bullying and peer victimization were rampant (*Nabozny v. Podlesny*, 1996)—further propagated loneliness, isolation (Hatchel et al., 2019), and maladaptive coping processes, such as risky behaviors (Gonzalez & Deal, 2022). These can manifest in lower academic performance (Sansone, 2019) and mental health struggles (Gnan et al., 2019), including suicidality (Green et al., 2022).

While understanding the oppressive structures (Freire, 1970/2020) and systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) that have both challenged and shaped the development of LGBTQIA+ individuals is essential to this study, it does not provide a sufficient foundation from which to launch effective action research based in appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). In order to effect change, an exploration of effective practices (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and systems that reinforce adaptive coping routines (Spencer, 1997) is necessary.

Best Practices for Serving LGBTQIA+ Students

Spencer (2021) noted that minority groups often have different experiences and, therefore, different needs than majority individuals. As a result, it is critical that researchers work with minority populations to understand their needs rather than assuming strategies that worked for other groups will be effective when applied to the minority population in question.

School Climate

In order to support LGBTQIA+ students, schools must create inclusive climates that promote belonging (Duran et al., 2020) and self-esteem (Ullman, 2015), as well as a sense of safety (Fantus & Newman, 2021) for all students. Belonging is commonly understood to include how someone perceives their own importance and feels they relate to, connect with, and matter to others in their environment (Duran et al., 2020). Gender and sexual minority secondary students who experienced a sense of belonging at school demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement (Fenaughty et al., 2019). In addition, school belonging moderated the negative impacts of peer victimization and bullying, particularly for sexual minority students (Fenaughty et al., 2019). Studies in higher education indicate that a greater sense of belonging or school connectedness is associated with improved student outcomes: academic success and persistence (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). Results of experiencing belonging often have a positive relationship with their school performance and academic persistence (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020). Further, Ullman (2015) found that schools should deliberately foster students' self-esteem, which bolstered same-sex attracted students' resilience against peer-victimization and bullying and showed signs of supporting increased academic performance. Interestingly, Stewart et al. (2015) found that sexual and gender minority students at religious schools perceived a greater sense of belonging than their peers at public schools; however, researchers did not find the results statistically significant.

Fantus and Newman (2021) specifically noted that teacher intervention when anti-LGBT bullying occurred in intermediate and secondary school classrooms was essential in creating a school climate of safety and inclusion. Furthermore, teachers themselves could foster a supportive climate by avoiding homophobic and transphobic language (Fantus & Newman, 2021).

However, Fantus and Newman (2021) indicated that change must occur at both the institutional and classroom level to have a meaningful impact on school climate and student outcomes, meaning that widespread legal and policy change is needed to provide a framework and system of general LGBT support within which individuals at schools can make tangible improvements that directly impact students.

School Policies and Support Systems

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2022) recommended the following practices to promote improved health and wellness outcomes for LGBTQ youth: safe spaces on campus where students could receive support from school employees, professional development for employees on creating safe school environments for students of all sexual and gender identities, policies to protect gender and sexual minority students from harassment, access to health services—including mental and physical sexual health, and extending access to programs outside of the school setting that provide psychological and social support for LGBTQ students. In 2020, 96.7% of public schools reported policies prohibiting harassment, and approximately 80% of schools reported having safe places on campus and/or professional development for staff (CDC, 2022). Other recommended practices were not implemented as often in the schools surveyed, with only 43.7% of schools hosting a GSA or similar club (CDC, 2022). In addition, less than 3% of schools offered sexual health services (CDC, 2022).

Fields and Wotipka (2022) theorized that even when secondary schools had not enacted LGBT-friendly policies or practices, state laws provided an indicator of how well LGBT students would fair in schools. They conducted regression models using data from the Center for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) and an analysis of LGBT-inclusive laws by state. Because the YRBSS only identified sexual orientation and not gender

minority status, outcomes were only identified for LGB students. Fields and Wotipka (2022) found that in states with laws designed to protect LGBT citizens, the adverse school outcomes that have been seen in LGB students were mitigated. Although outcomes for sexual minority students were lower than those of their straight peers, LGB students were less likely to be victims of cyber bullying or on-campus bullying, less likely to miss school, and reported higher grades than did their LGB peers in states without LGBT-inclusive laws (Fields & Wotipka, 2022). Discouragingly, when Fenaughty et al. (2019) investigated the impact of supportive school structures on sexual and gender minority secondary students, they found that although sexual minority students reported higher academic achievement when supportive structures were in place, gender minority students did not report the same gains (Fenaughty et al., 2019).

Kaczkowski et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study of more than 75,000 students using the Youth Risk Behavior Survey and the School Health Profiles in order to measure the impact of school factors supportive of LGBTQ students. Kaczkowski et al. (2022) looked into the effects of GSAs, safe spaces on campus, policies prohibiting harassment due to gender or sexual identity, professional development for school employees, health services available on campus—including social-emotional and psychological services, and LGBTQ-inclusive curricula. While all were found to have positive outcomes for LGB students, Kaczkowski et al. (2022) noted that schools that implemented more than one practice had the best results. In addition, when schools implemented all practices to support their gender and sexual minority students, gender and sexual majority students reported the best social and health outcomes.

Boyland et al. (2018) advocated for GSAs on middle school campuses because the presence of these alliances at schools was shown to reduce the use of homophobic language on campus and help make LGBTQ students feel safer and more likely to advocate for their needs.

Because participation in GSAs resulted in “less negative perceptions of sexual identity, less difficulty with one’s sexual orientation, and less religious incongruence” (p. 209), Wolff et al. (2016) believed they may hold potential positive results for sexual minority students at NARAU. Kaczowski et al. (2022) reported lower rates of substance abuse and other sexually risky behaviors by sexual and gender minority students at schools with Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). Sexual and gender minority students at schools with GSAs also reported lower rates of victimization from peers (Kaczowski et al., 2022). Not all research advocated the use of GSAs on school campuses. Even when GSAs or other support groups were available on a student’s campus, Eisemann (2000) noted that sexual minority students might not attend due to fears of increased bullying or fear of outing themselves to individuals unaware of their sexual identity. Thus, while well-intended, support groups could also further LGBTQIA+ individuals’ persecution at their schools (Eisemann, 2000) if other supportive policies were not enacted.

At the institutional level, Fantus and Newman (2021) and Boyland et al. (2018) identified a need for policies that explicitly protected middle and secondary school LGBT students and for visible indicators that the school environment supports LGBT students, such as signs for safe spaces on campus (Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020). Policy reform was particularly important in supporting LGBT students with disabilities (J. J. Morgan et al., 2011). Gender and sexual minority students at schools with anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies that expressly prohibited discrimination based on LGBT identity reported lower instances of the use of slurs related to gender and sexual identity and fewer instances of harassment, bullying, and assault due to their gender or sexual minority status (Kosciw et al., 2020). Enumerating protected classes and consistently enforcing school policy make the school’s values clear to both students and faculty (Boyland et al., 2018). Still, for these values to pervade school culture, they must be regularly

communicated by school leaders to faculty and students (Boyland et al., 2018).

Boyland et al. (2018) proposed additional school policy reforms to support gender and sexual minority students at intermediate schools. For instance, Boyland et al. (2018) expressed that schools should honor the preferred names and pronouns of gender minority students and honor students' privacy when they did not wish to inform their parents of this decision. In addition, a key strategy when transforming schools involved examining existing policies to ferret out policies and traditions that discriminate against gender and sexual minority students (Boyland et al., 2018). School leaders must protect students' privacy throughout the reform process, whether amidst discipline procedures related to homophobic peer victimization or while keeping records of name preferences (Boyland et al., 2018). Students must have a process by which to report incidents of bullying and peer victimization anonymously to school leaders (Boyland et al., 2018). Students are more likely to report peer victimization when they can do so anonymously (Boyland et al., 2018). Further, Boyland et al. (2018) indicated that schools should be mindful that their curriculum is inclusive of LGBTQ role models. However, shifting school culture requires more than just policy reform; students and faculty should engage in regular anti-bullying and intervention training (Boyland et al., 2018; J. J. Morgan et al., 2011).

When faculty were perceived as supportive, LGBTQ students gained measurable benefits in school (Kosciw et al., 2020). The GLSEN National School Climate Survey reported that students who could identify 11 or more supportive school employees reported higher GPAs, were more likely to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities, and felt safer in their school environment, resulting in fewer fear-based absences (Kosciw et al., 2020). These students also reported a greater sense of belonging at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). Additional research must be conducted to ensure these benefits impact all LGBTQIA+ students. Fenaughty et al.

(2019) investigated the impact of supportive school structures on sexual and gender-minority secondary students. Although sexual minority students reported higher academic achievement when supportive structures were in place, gender minority students did not report the same gains (Fenaughty et al., 2019). To this end, Gay-Milliken and DiScala (2020) recommended surveying students to ensure students had a voice in creating a safe and supportive school environment.

Religious Institutions and Doctrinal Position

As has been noted, there is a paucity of research into best practices that serve LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious institutions in the U.S. (Stewart, 2015). However, some research (Falconer & Taylor, 2017; Green et al., 2020; Taylor & Cuthbert, 2019) has been conducted that provided indicators of best practices regarding religion to support LGBTQIA+ students in schools. In addition, in 1978, the Presbyterian Church established a task force that engaged church members—including sexual minority members—to recommend an approach to church doctrine that supported gender and sexual minority congregants (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978). Because those recommendations included marginalized congregants—a best practice to reduce oppression (Freire, 1970/2020)—they are summarized here.

Some recommendations provided for religious contexts were predictable: Green et al. (2020) identified conversion therapy as a practice to be avoided. However, other suggestions were more nuanced. Falconer and Taylor (2017) cautioned against the false dichotomy of university students having to choose between a queer identity and a religious identity. This qualitative study of religious university students in the United Kingdom noted that queer religious students felt they faced judgment from religious peers due to their queer identity and simultaneous judgment from the LGBTQ community for adhering to “a backwards regressive

religious homophobia” (Falconer & Taylor, 2017, p. 785). Therefore, it was essential to establish paths for students to integrate their LGBTQIA+ identities with their religious beliefs (Falconer & Taylor, 2017). In a more comprehensive recommendation, Taylor and Cuthbert (2019) recommended deconstructing heteronormative policies at schools to make all students comfortable in their study of faith-based schools in the United Kingdom.

Complete rejection of heteronormativity is unlikely in a non-affirming religious context (Capper, 1998); therefore, additional recommendations are integrated from the 1978 Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality, which sought to incorporate supportive practices with existing doctrine and suggest doctrinal reforms consistent with the Bible. The first practice recommended was repentance. The Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality (1978) noted that

...if such ministry and mission of our church is to be effective, the heterosexual majority within the church must acknowledge and minister to the particular condition of sin that has caused our denomination to mimic society’s posture of contempt toward homosexual persons rather than extend toward them God’s grace, love, compassion, and justice. That condition is seen in the exaggerated, irrational, dishonest, and virulent dimensions of our fear of homosexuality and homosexual persons, often called “homophobia.”...The church must confess its homophobia and be healed of it so that homosexual persons may be approached with grace rather than guilt, with love rather than hate, with compassion rather than fear, and with justice rather than oppression. (p. 4)

This aligns with a theology that prioritizes compassion for marginalized sexual and gender minority groups (Mason, 2014; Yuan, 2016).

The Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality (1978) also recommended that

homosexual individuals be considered as church members and be eligible for ordination, asserting that sexual orientation was not a measure of spiritual maturity and that factors other than sexual orientation should carry more weight. However, the task force did indicate that some homosexual individuals might choose celibacy as an indicator of their faith, while others might not see same-sex relationships as contrary to the Bible's teachings. In religious schools, this recommendation would apply to hiring LGBTQIA+ teachers and staff and was aligned with recommendations that faculty should be perceived as supportive (Kosciw et al., 2020). Yuan (2016) and Hill (2016) are examples of openly gay ministers in non-affirming religious traditions.

Regarding the impact of doctrine that was focused on justifying a non-affirming stance, the Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality (1978) noted that homosexuality was only rarely mentioned in the Bible and was not mentioned by either Jesus or any of the prophets. The Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality (1978) determined that only three passages from the Bible were relevant "as the church today seeks God's attitude toward consensual homosexual relationships" (p. 2). In the context of rejecting the practices embraced by their captors in Egypt, Leviticus 18 warned the Israelites against many sexual behaviors, including sex with animals, sex with close relations, sex with in-laws, sex between two men, and sex with a woman who is menstruating (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). Leviticus 20 again identified these prohibitions with their corresponding punishments, ranging from curses only God could enact to exile to death (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). The punishment for cursing a parent, engaging in adultery, engaging in sex between men, engaging in sex with (most) close relations, engaging in unmarried sex with (most) in-laws, and engaging in sex with an animal was death (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Leviticus 20). The sexual practices listed were described as unholy, while God's

people were called to be holy and set apart (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Leviticus 20:26). Like Leviticus 18, Leviticus 20 (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011) contextualized the list of prohibited sexual behaviors by associating them with the practices of the enemies of God. Similarly, Romans 1-3 (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011) pointed to idol worship—an act of rejecting God—as the reason “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity” (Romans 1:24) and to “shameful lusts” (Romans 1:26), such as women engaging in sexual acts with other women and men engaging in sexual acts with other men. In examining these, the Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality (1978) determined that both the passages in Leviticus and those in Romans dealt with the choice of men and women to deliberately engage in sinful behaviors rather than focusing on an innate attraction to a member of the same gender leading to a consensual, loving same-sex sexual relationship, noting, “Neither Paul nor the priests of Jerusalem understood that homosexual relationships could be based in an orientation of self perceived [sic] as constitutive of one’s nature; both assumed such relationships to arise from perverse and willful violations of ‘nature’” (p. 2-3). The task force also stated that arguments against consensual homosexual relationships based on the inability of couples to procreate defied the example of Christ, who remained unmarried and demonstrated love for his disciples and humankind through brotherly love and sacrifice. In cases where doctrine is subject to interpretation, this task force recommended erring on the side of promoting inclusivity and belonging.

Summary of Best Practices for Non-Affirming Religious Secondary Schools

1. Religious schools must “begin with a posture of compassion” (Yuan, 2016, p. 101) toward sexual and gender minority students.
2. Schools and teachers (Fantus & Newman, 2021) must create inclusive climates (Yuan, 2016) for LGBTQIA+ students that promote belonging (Duran et al., 2020)

- and self-esteem (Ullman, 2015) as well as a sense of safety (Fantus & Newman, 2021). This may involve professional development for employees on creating safe school environments for students of all sexual and gender identities (CDC, 2022), sensitivity training (Yuan, 2016), and/or establishing GSAs (Boyland et al., 2018; Kaczkowski et al., 2022; Wolff et al., 2016; Yuan, 2016).
3. Schools must establish safe spaces on campus where LGBTQIA+ students can receive non-judgmental support from school employees (CDC, 2022; Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020).
 4. Schools must craft and implement policies to protect gender and sexual minority students from harassment (CDC, 2022; Fantus & Newman, 2021; Kosciw et al., 2020; Yuan, 2016). These should be regularly communicated to stakeholders and consistently enforced (Boyland et al., 2018; Yuan, 2016). They may include policies such as a commitment to use students' preferred pronouns or protecting students' privacy (Boyland et al., 2018).
 5. Schools should extend access to programs beyond the school setting to provide psychological and social support for LGBTQ students (CDC, 2022).
 6. Schools should review existing curriculum and revise it to ensure that it includes LGBTQIA+ history, important figures, and ideas (Kaczkowski et al., 2022).
 7. Schools should not force students to choose between faith and their LGBTQIA+ identity (Falconer & Taylor, 2017).
 8. Schools should repent of the sin of not extending grace and love to LGBTQIA+ students (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978).
 9. Schools should include LGBTQIA+ individuals in positions of leadership (Task

Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978).

10. With regard to religious doctrine, schools should avoid an overemphasis on divisive passages regarding sexuality and gender (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978).

Measures of Success

This literature review has produced several indicators of success that non-affirming religious secondary schools could expect after implementing the best practices described in the previous section.

1. **Belonging:** Gender and sexual minority students who experienced belonging would perceive their own importance and feel they related to, connected with, and mattered to others in their school microsystem (Duran et al., 2020; Spencer, 2021). In this context, a student's self-reported perception of their interactions with others and connection to others at their school is a measure of their sense of belonging (Duran et al., 2020). Belonging was not only shown to be an outcome (Kosciw et al., 2020) of following best practices in schools but a catalyst for additional success factors (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021).
2. **Academic success:** Academic success measures were based on to what extent LGBTQIA+ students achieved their potential (Fenaughty et al., 2019; Sansone, 2019).
3. This included the correlation between grades and scores on standardized tests (Sansone, 2019), as well as in post-secondary academic pursuits (Fenaughty et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020), the number of credits earned (Sansone, 2019), and truancy rates (Birkett et al., 2014; Kilgo et al., 2019).
4. **Congruous Integration of Faith and Identity:** Gender and sexual minority students

- who had harmoniously integrated faith—whether affirming (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978) or non-affirming (Hill, 2016; Yuan, 2016)—with their LGBTQIA+ identity would uphold the value of every LGBTQIA+ individual as loved and created by God as well as worthy of the respect and compassion of others (Hill, 2016; Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978; Yuan, 2016).
5. **Social-Emotional Health:** The social-emotional health of LGBTQIA+ students was found to be measurable in the quality of relationships that this population formed with other students and with teachers. Healthy relationships were free of bullying and slurs, and individuals in healthy relationships intervened when they witnessed the victimization of others due to their sexual or gender identity (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009).
 6. **Psychological/Mental Health:** Sexual and gender minority students who demonstrated psychological and mental health would show decreased instances of self-harm, depression, and suicidality (Gnan et al., 2019).
 7. **Access to Resources:** At successful non-affirming religious schools, LGBTQIA+ students would have access to resources (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021) that supported their physical and mental health (CDC, 2022), clear knowledge of safe places and persons on campus (CDC, 2022), and procedures to follow to anonymously report problems on campus (Boyland, 2018). These resources would provide them with agency to become positive agents of change on their campuses who were able to advocate for their needs and the needs of others (Boyland et al., 2018).

More research would be needed to conclude whether engaging in fewer risky behaviors would be an anticipated outcome of implementing best practices in non-affirming religious schools

because many of the correlations identified by researchers were not directly related to school microsystems (Gonzalez & Deal, 2022; Quinn & Ertl, 2015).

Critiques of Topic

Critics of efforts to support the LGBTQIA+ community have accused society of pandering to “expressive individualism” (Trueman, 2020, p. 265). They have charged gender and sexual minority individuals with seeking out oppressive forces as a way to validate feelings of hardship or discontent and blame them on an external force or villain (Shrier, 2020; Trueman, 2020). Trueman (2020) argued that contemporary society was consumed with identifying sources of oppression and that oppression was perceived in any assertion of absolute reality rather than in the individual’s perception of truth. In this way, Trueman (2020) claimed that epistemology was understood fundamentally differently than in any previous era of human history. Within this construct, interactions between individuals were essentially political rather than personal, driven by economic principles. In this, Trueman (2020) perceived a weakness in critical theory: rarely did people fully understand the source of their own oppression, and even more rarely did they identify the means to end that oppression. Coupled with the doubt that oppression of the LGBTQIA+ community was legitimate, this argument sought to delegitimize efforts to identify ways that society—and, specifically, the Christian community—could support gender and sexual minority individuals.

Further, critics have expressed doubt about the authenticity of some gender minority individuals’ identities. In 2018, Littman conducted a mixed-methods survey of 256 parents of transgender adolescents who the research characterized as having “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” (p. 2). This diagnosis was applied to youth whose parents did not observe any or who observed minimal qualities described by the DSM-5 as indicators of gender dysphoria in children

(Littman, 2018). Instead, the parents described children—primarily adolescent natal girls—who experienced trauma, psychological or social difficulties, or peer group pressure that led the children to decide that “transitioning would solve their problems in social, academic, occupational or mental health areas” (Littman, 2018, p.15). Littman (2018) theorized that this phenomenon was evidence of a maladaptive coping mechanism to avoid powerful emotions. A journalist for the *Wall Street Journal*, Shrier (2020) conducted interviews with parents who believed their gender minority children were victims of rapid-onset gender dysphoria rather than being transgender. Because Shrier (2020) believed that adolescents were largely incapable of accurately assessing their gender identities, Shrier deliberately referred to transgender adolescents by their natal pronouns (though transgender adults were referred to by their gender identities). Although transgender adults were respected for their decisions based on longstanding knowledge of their gender identities, Shrier (2020) compared gender dysphoria in adolescent girls to a “craze” (p. xxv) akin to eating disorders or the Salem witch trials. Shrier’s (2020) investigation followed in the footsteps of Littman’s (2018) and relied primarily on data collected from parents rather than gender minority youth themselves. Shrier’s (2020) primary concern was that medical professionals were too quick to affirm medically affirming care through hormone therapy and surgeries rather than providing adolescents with the time needed to fully investigate and understand their sexual and gender identities. Shrier (2020) explicitly warned against educating students about gender identity, claiming that it was more likely to be instructive rather than descriptive and would be “contagious” (p. 213), similar to the way that eating disorders had been known to spread among adolescents. Notably, both Shrier (2020) and Littman (2018) limited their studies to parents of children with rapid-onset gender dysphoria. Their critiques were not directed toward children who expressed consistent dissonance with their natal gender

from an early age (Littman, 2018; Shrier, 2020). However, doubt and mistrust of transgender individuals—and of the LGBTQIA+ community—posed a challenge to any research involving gender and sexual minority students.

Exacerbating this problem, existing research has been limited (Maher & Sever, 2007; Simons, 2018; Stewart, 2015). Studies of sexual minority students significantly outnumbered studies of gender minority students, leading to concerns about the validity of researchers' conclusions about this group (Hatchel, 2019). In addition, studies that included both sexual minority and gender minority students often had a smaller sample of gender minority students (Sansone, 2019). Studies of the intersectional identities of gender and sexual minority youth have struggled to recruit large enough sample sizes of participants to validate significant claims (Fenaughty et al., 2019; Hatchel et al., 2019). Adding religion to the investigation of LGBTQIA+ individuals' intersectional identities not only reduced the number of studies to reference (Maher & Sever, 2007) but also introduced a variable that has produced unclear and inconsistent impacts on well-being in the past (Greenfield & Marks, 2007).

Critics described a belief that adolescents perceived success as complete affirmation of their gender or sexual identity, including medical support (Littman, 2018; Shrier, 2020). However, these supports are not primarily those provided by schools but by medical and mental health professionals. Therefore, more information is needed from sexual and gender minority students about what supports will help them succeed and how they define success.

Chapter Summary

Approaching this study using the frameworks of EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), PVEST (Spencer, 1995), critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020; Habermas, 1968/1971), appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), and a biblical theology of compassion for the marginalized

(Yuan, 2016) allowed the research and literature review to honor the complexity of the lived experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community in the United States from a posture of humility rather than oppression (Freire, 1970/2020; *NIV Bible*, 1973/2011). The literature review explored the interplay between Bronfenbrenner's (1995) systems and the development of individual identity in the face of external and internal challenges (Spencer, 1995) that have been posed throughout U.S. history (Oaks, 1978), particularly through the legal and educational spheres. Historical oppression of gender and sexual minority individuals served to regulate the behaviors of the LGBTQIA+ community (Lugg, 2006) and bias society at large (Gross, 1991), effecting pressure to abide by heteronormative social expectations (Baia, 2018) and leading to the mistreatment of LGBTQIA+ individuals (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021, Kilgo et al., 2019; E. Meyer & Stader, 2009).

While the challenges of the historical and legal power imbalance within the U.S., loneliness (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020), the complexity of identity and intersectionality (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021), well-being (Gonzalez & Deal, 2022; Myers et al., 2020; Sansone, 2019; Ullman, 2015; Weinstein, 2018), religious doctrine (Hill, 2016; *NIV Bible*, 1973/2011; Yuan, 2016) and incongruence (Exline et al., 2021) were significant, the literature review revealed that implementing the best practices of improving school climate (Duran et al., 2020; Fantus & Newman, 2021; Ullman, 2015), and increasing school policies and support systems aimed at LGBTQIA+ students (CDC, 2022; Kaczowski et al., 2022) offered improved outcomes for LGBTQIA+ individuals. These practices could be integrated within religious institutions by including gender and sexual minority community members in the reform process (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978) and approaching any change through the lens of biblical grace, love, and compassion (Mason, 2014; Yuan, 2016). Overall, nine best practices

were enumerated in order to bring about the measures of success of belonging (Kosciw et al., 2020), academic success (Fenaughty et al., 2019; Sansone, 2019), the congruous integration of faith and identity (Hill, 2016; Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978; Yuan, 2016), social-emotional health (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009), psychological/mental health (Gnan et al., 2019), and access to resources (Boyland et al., 2018).

Overall, the literature review revealed the complexity of LGBTQIA+ students' experiences within non-affirming secondary schools, affirming the need for additional, non-oppressive research to support this marginalized population. Therefore, the research methods described in Chapter 3 were designed to provide participants with agency and voice to effect change and improve outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious schools.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter describes the research methods used to determine the best practices for supporting LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious secondary schools. In this study, the reciprocal nature of experiences, self-perception, and resultant behaviors and outcomes was explored by investigating the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming religious secondary schools through phenomenological methods and the qualitative tradition. This approach emphasized the complex nature of self-identity and the influence of both the external factors present in educational environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) as well as the internal coping mechanisms and strengths (Spencer, 2021; Spencer et al., 1997) of the participants. Further demonstrating the alignment between the research frameworks selected and the research traditions and methods employed, a qualitative approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and the PVEST framework (Spencer, 2021) were identified as appropriate for studies that answer why and how questions. In this chapter, the qualitative research approach and the specific phenomenological methods will be described, including the strengths and weaknesses of each. In addition, the research design will be described. The study's intent to honor the dignity and privacy of every participant will be explained in the purposive sampling of the target population and description of the protection of human subjects. In addition, the IRB approval process will be described. Data collection procedures will be outlined in conjunction with the interview protocol. The researcher's personal bias will also be described. The chapter will end by explaining how the data will be analyzed and presented. The methods described in this chapter are presented in the past tense—with the approval of the researcher's dissertation committee—to provide grammatical consistency; however, the research will not be conducted until the internal review board has approved it.

Re-Statement of Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?

RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?

RQ3 - How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure LGBTQIA+ students' success?

RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders at non-affirming secondary schools recommend to leaders within these institutions to support LGBTQIA+ students?

Nature of the Study

This study used research questions containing *how* and *what*, indicating that a qualitative approach was appropriate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative approach implied that open-ended questions would be used in the research process and that researchers would interpret data inductively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patten & Newhart, 2018). This approach acknowledged the positionality of the researcher, who constructed meaning—situated within the context of the “historical and cultural norms” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8) implicit in the systems that surround LGBTQIA+ individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1977)—based on their observations of the research participants during interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

When the purpose of research is exploratory rather than intended to establish the relationship between operationalized variables, a qualitative approach is justified (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, Edmondson and McManus (2007) identified qualitative research as

appropriate to nascent areas of study, being exploratory and iterative in nature. They noted that quantitative research was ill-suited for studying theory that was not yet well-established, as it was likely to lead to a failure to address the complexity of issues and a lack of validity and reliability (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Although researchers have identified many significant issues facing LGBTQIA+ students in secondary schools (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021) and explored the impact of religious schooling on LGBTQIA+ students in higher education (Wolff et al., 2016; Yuan, 2016), because little research exists in connecting the two areas of study (Stewart, 2015), a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study.

Befitting emerging areas of research, conclusions from qualitative research are flexible (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2010) and likely to inspire additional areas of inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research methods were born out of a social constructivist paradigm in which knowledge was co-created from people's perceptions of experiences and phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Grounded in the inherent subjectivity of interpretation, qualitative research has come to acknowledge the relativistic nature of epistemology (Breuer & Roth, 2003). Within the qualitative paradigm, reflexivity, therefore, is an ethical necessity as the researcher acknowledges their own biases and assumptions as inescapable influences (Mosselson, 2010) and considers the inherent power imbalance in any relationship between multiple parties (Mason-Bish, 2019).

Further, qualitative inquiry was appropriate to this study because a goal of the research was to "hear silenced voices" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). Spencer (2021) identified qualitative research as particularly important when studying minority populations because it allowed researchers to identify the unique experiences of individuals. Spencer (2021) warned that quantitative research all too often assumed equity between minority and majority groups,

which resulted in minimizing and misattributing causal relationships.

While qualitative research illuminated complexities and highlighted the uniqueness of each individual's experiences, it was a paradigm ill-suited for studies seeking to demonstrate relationships between variables or generate generalizable data based on large population samples (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pajo, 2018). Instead, it was selected because its strengths, weaknesses, and assumptions aligned with the goals of the research and with the research frameworks.

Qualitative Research Definition

Qualitative research designs attempt to honor the inherent complexity of human problems and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Unlike quantitative research, which tests hypotheses by measuring the impact on variables, qualitative research relies on the input of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Patten and Newhart (2018) distinguished qualitative research as that which "collects data that will be analyzed as words" (p. 159). Although rigorous, qualitative research procedures are often flexible, shifting according to the emergent needs of the participants and the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative data is gathered from authentic settings, and the researcher serves as a critical tool in the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 1913/1983). Creswell and Poth (2018) described qualitative research as both interpretive and transformative.

Qualitative Research Assumptions

Creswell and Poth (2018) identified four philosophical assumptions that underlie any research tradition: ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions, axiological assumptions, and methodological assumptions. Ontologically, qualitative research assumes that reality is based on empirical perception (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, qualitative researchers often describe differing perspectives and contrasting realities, explaining what the

differences in perceptions reveal rather than reducing them to a single, uniform depiction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers gather data directly from participants and rely on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is subjective and dependent on personal experience and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This constructivist approach is at odds with a postpositive approach common in quantitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because of this belief that knowledge is co-created, the biases of the researcher are explicitly declared in qualitative research, revealing the axiological assumption that researchers cannot entirely remove themselves from their interpretation of data and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The methodological assumptions of qualitative researchers follow these philosophical assumptions. Qualitative research methods rely on observations conducted in a natural setting, research designs that organically mature over the course of the research process, and inductive logic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Research

A key strength of qualitative research is its capacity to reveal the complexity of the problems, issues, and phenomena being studied (Edmonson & McManus, 2007). Qualitative research is a useful approach when investigating nascent areas of study and seeking to generate new theories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Its flexible methods allow researchers to integrate the input and needs of participants into data collection procedures, which helps to prevent the exploitation of participants and to reduce the power imbalance between researchers and participants (Spencer, 2021). This makes qualitative research an effective approach for those seeking to elevate the voices of marginalized populations and good for minority populations (Edmonson & McManus, 2007). However, qualitative research is not equally suited to all research questions or areas of study. It cannot be used to prove or disprove a theory, and its

conclusions and findings are not generalizable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection in Qualitative Research

Qualitative studies have several common characteristics (Creswell, 2012). First, qualitative research uses purposive sampling to identify participants who can reveal to researchers key characteristics of the phenomenon of study (Creswell, 2012). Second, qualitative research involves the use of researcher-created instruments—typically in the form of interview protocols—for data collection and open-ended questions (Creswell, 2012). Lastly, qualitative procedures are conducted with respect to the ethical considerations that accompany research in which the researcher interacts personally with research participants, ensuring the confidentiality of data and the respectful treatment of participants (Creswell, 2012).

Methodology

Phenomenological research seeks to understand a phenomenon by investigating the common experiences of those who have experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to van Manen (2017), phenomenological inquiry could be distinguished from other qualitative approaches by the questions posed—focused on experiences themselves, whether the study followed in the traditions of previous phenomenological work, and if the findings presented “originary and existentially compelling” (p. 779) insights rather than merely parroting the words of participants. Van Manen (2017) warned that phenomenological research ran the risk of transforming into psychology when researchers focused primarily on the perceptions of participants instead of on how these perceptions informed an understanding of the experience itself. Therefore, it is essential to follow proven phenomenological methods to ensure a study’s validity.

Structured Process of Phenomenology

Within the structure of the phenomenological tradition, researchers must remain receptive and flexible to the needs of participants and responsive to the direction the data leads (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and to emergent methods that arise over the course of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2017). Moustakas (1994) divided phenomenological methods into three broad phases: (a) planning the research, (b) conducting research and gathering data, and (c) interpreting the data.

Planning the Research. The initial planning phase began with the development of research questions that attempted to distill a phenomenon into its essential components for the purpose of understanding it more deeply in its fullness and complexity (Moustakas, 1994). Questions developed using phenomenological methods should explore both the personal and societal implications of a given phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) noted that focused research questions were essential in order to ensure the study revealed meaningful and significant data. This was particularly important in action research, in which the researcher interacts with participants during interviews, thereby becoming an instrument of data collection (Burke, 1982). Planning the research using clear, proven methods kept the researcher on track and reduced the impact of the researcher's bias.

Both before and throughout the research process, the researcher must engage in bracketing to reduce or eliminate the subjectivity inherent to a methodology that positions the researcher centrally in the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bracketing involves identifying and deliberately setting aside personal biases and assumptions that would taint or inhibit unbiased data collection (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1913/1983) described this as “exercis[ing] phenomenological epoché” (p. 61). Although hermeneutic phenomenology has indicated that complete objectivity is impossible for researchers to achieve (Moustakas, 1994),

by acknowledging their own positionality, the researcher could better mitigate the impact of their own biases.

Before recruiting participants—referred to by Moustakas (1994) as “co-researchers” (Ethical Principles, Chapter 6) to indicate their agency and power over the direction of the study—the researcher must design recruitment scripts, informed consent procedures, and confidentiality measures to protect subjects. It had to be clear to both the researcher and the participants that their safety, dignity, and well-being were central to the study and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any negative repercussions.

Preparing to conduct research also involved delving into the available literature already published on the topic of study and on the population (Moustakas, 1994). This involved not only examining the conclusions of prior research but an examination of previous research methods that would inform the current study (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure that the research covered sufficient breadth for the topic of study, Moustakas (1994) recommended using a variety of databases and sources.

The literature review and overarching research question(s) guided the development of interview questions, designed to elicit rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994). When combined with bracketing, crafting interview questions in advance allowed the researcher to prevent inappropriate personal feelings or perceptions from biasing the content or structure of questions (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Selecting a semi-structured interview process guaranteed that all participants would be asked questions designed to align with the research questions (Pajo, 2018) while still offering the flexibility necessary in qualitative research studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2017).

Conducting Research and Gathering Data. Phenomenological research has relied on

interviews as the primary means of collecting data (Moustakas, 1994). Participant selection must be limited to individuals who both experienced the phenomenon and who were able to describe it to the researcher without undue harm or discomfort (Moustakas, 1994). During the interview, the burden of creating a safe, comfortable environment for participants fell to the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). This involved not only the physical setting but the interviewer's tone and the order of the questions, designed to draw the participant out (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, semi-structured interviews provided the researcher with the flexibility to rephrase questions, clarify, and ask for elaboration (Patten & Newhart, 2018), in-keeping with the responsive nature of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2017).

Interpreting the Data. After data is collected, the researcher must analyze its meaning (Moustakas, 1994). In presenting qualitative phenomenology as a legitimate form of scientific study, Husserl (1913/1983) articulated a phenomenological process of inquiry that began with the researcher immersing themselves in qualitative data and engaging in reflection that brought forth the “essence” (p. 151) of the phenomenon itself. The scientific legitimacy of phenomenology was, therefore, dependent on the conclusions of the researcher to “conform faithfully” (Husserl, 1913/1983, p. 151) to the data itself. Moustakas (1994) indicated that in order to interpret interview data, it must first be transcribed and read over, giving equal weight to responses to each question. The researcher could then organize the data into clusters of meaning which were grouped into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Common or poignant themes helped the researcher identify critical facets of the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, data must be validated in order to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations and conclusions (Moustakas, 1994).

Appropriateness of Phenomenology

Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicated that qualitative phenomenological research was appropriate when investigating the perceptions of participants about their experience with a given phenomenon in order to fully understand that phenomenon. Because the purpose of the present study was to explore the lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming religious secondary schools, a phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate. Further, phenomenological inquiry acknowledged both the objectivity of *what* participants experienced and the inherent subjectivity of *how* they interpreted those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), providing research methods designed to reveal the rich complexity of the human experience. This aligned phenomenology with appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), critical theory (Habermas, 1963/1973), and EST and PVEST (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Spencer et al., 1997), frameworks designed to uncover the depth and expanse of phenomena. A phenomenological approach was particularly important to this study, which acknowledged that individuals were situated within interconnected systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Spencer et al., 1997) that impacted their perceptions of their experiences and themselves. Heidegger's (1962) description of the influence of "historicality" on an individual aligned with EST and PVEST, which situated individuals within the influence of historical, social, and emotional systems, systems which strongly influenced an individual's understanding of the phenomena they encountered. In addition, a phenomenological approach aligned with the study's use of critical theory (Freire, 1970/2020). Phenomenological research methods were designed to empower participants, providing them with the opportunity to direct the area of inquiry (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2010; Mason-Bish, 2019).

Strengths and Weaknesses

Phenomenology empowered participants (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2010; Mason-Bish, 2019)

and provided an interpretive, constructivist approach that honored the participants' perceptions of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology have been identified as both a strength and a challenge to researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although phenomenology's constructivist orientation provided a research structure designed to identify the "essence" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 80) of a phenomenon, it has also been criticized as possibly overly interpretive and subject to the unacknowledged biases of the researcher. However, Eatough and Smith (2017) noted that not all bias prejudiced researchers in a manner that would compromise their research. This further emphasized the importance of bracketing throughout the research process, because through the process of the research itself, additional preconceptions on the part of the researcher could be uncovered (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Creswell and Poth (2018) described a facet of this phenomenon, noting that because the researcher was directly involved in the process of data collection, interacting personally with participants themselves, the researcher was more likely to be influenced by the deep learning that occurs during phenomenological studies.

Phenomenology provided researchers with the flexibility to identify some data as more significant than others, but this, too, pointed to a need for effective bracketing so that the researcher's own perceptions did not skew the interpretation of data (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Conversely, researchers may miss the importance of critical data (Eatough & Smith, 2017). In addition, the flexibility of phenomenological methods can be perceived as a strength or a weakness. By allowing researchers to iteratively explore and adjust their methods to meet the needs of the research and the participants, participants may have more agency in the research process (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2010; Mason-Bish, 2019); however, adjustments to research methods should not be made capriciously (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to the challenges

of the methodology itself, following the prescribed research methods may be challenging. For instance, identifying individuals who experienced the phenomenon and who are willing to act as participants may be difficult (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Design

The design of a research study indicates the form of inquiry that will guide the methods and overall approach of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and the faithful execution of a respected research design lends credibility to a study (Harwell, 2011). To have integrity, the research questions should influence the research design, and the methods, procedures, and epistemological underpinnings must be philosophically consistent (Harwell, 2011). The research design selected for this study was phenomenological, situated within the qualitative tradition (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Unit of Analysis. This study focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming religious secondary schools in order to evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive student outcomes. Therefore, it was essential to engage participants with first hand experience at non-affirming religious secondary schools who identified as LGBTQIA+ or who had close knowledge of these individuals. The unit of analysis was one key stakeholder from a non-affirming religious secondary school in the U.S. with personal knowledge of the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students

Population. The target population consisted of key stakeholders from non-affirming secondary schools who identified as members of or who had close ties to the LGBTQIA+ community. Based on the data available from 2015, it was estimated by the researcher that the number of students at that time who were enrolled in non-affirming religious secondary schools

and who also identified as LGBTQIA+ was approximately 97,000 students (Green et al., 2019; IES & NCES, 2019a, 2019b). Since that time, this population has increased in size (Jones, 2022).

Because LGBTQIA+ individuals have been historically marginalized (Wardenski, 2005) and have faced challenges within non-affirming religious environments (Soulforce, 2019), identifying a sampling frame (Creswell, 2012) and recruiting participants from this population was anticipated to pose challenges. In addition, the researcher did not want to engage in the exploitative use of safe spaces that LGBTQIA+ students had created on the internet. For instance, a search of Facebook groups using the search terms “LGBTQ,” “Christian,” and “high school” revealed a single Facebook support group comprised of 176 members. A search of Facebook groups using the terms “LGBTQ Christian school” revealed another support group created by LGBTQ alumni from a non-affirming secondary school on the other side of the U.S. This group had only 11 members. These groups were private, and as the researcher worked for a non-affirming religious school, they were reluctant to pursue these avenues. However, at least two non-affirming religious high schools within the U.S. had publicly-available testimonials by LGBTQIA+ alumni. More than 20 first and last names were listed, in addition to some anonymous posts. Because the named individuals were bold enough to publicly reveal identifying information, they will be contacted via social media (LinkedIn or Facebook) and invited to participate in the research study.

Social media recruitment was also used to further increase the number of participants. Sibona and Walczak (2012) found social media recruitment to be an effective method when using purposive sampling, and Martinez et al. (2014) noted that social media could be a successful method of recruiting populations that were otherwise challenging to engage, particularly populations at risk of exploitation. Recruiting on social media also allows the

researcher to broaden their recruitment beyond their own personal network. In addition, it allows members of a marginalized population to view the criteria for inclusion and decide for themselves if participation in the study is of interest to them and in their best interest. The intent of the researcher in using social media recruitment is twofold: (a) to increase the sample size and (b) to reduce the chances of further marginalizing or exploiting the LGBTQIA+ community.

Sample Size. Qualitative studies do not require a large portion of the target population to participate in the study to ensure its validity (Patten & Newhart, 2018). In keeping with the recommendation of Creswell and Creswell (2018), the study seeks to gain the participation of no fewer than three subjects. However, to enable the researcher to reach saturation (Charmaz, 2006), the aim is to engage 15 participants, in keeping with the findings of Sim et al. (2018), which indicated saturation was most often reached after 12 to 15 interviews. Kindsiko and Poltimäe (2019) likewise noted that saturation is often reported by researchers with 20 or fewer participants. Hennink et al. (2017) differentiated between the point at which researchers reached saturation of codes rather than saturation of meaning, finding that while code saturation was often reached after only nine interviews, meaning saturation was more likely to be reached after between 16 and 25 interviews. Because the sampling frame to contact participants is small and the researcher anticipates challenges in recruitment, the researcher targeted 15 participant interviews, in keeping with Sim et al.'s (2015) guidelines. Creswell (2012) indicated that qualitative researchers should not attempt to recruit more research participants than needed because this would encumber the qualitative research process, which was already labor-intensive and time consuming.

Purposive Sampling. Purposive sampling was used in this qualitative research because the goal was not to draw generalizable conclusions but to uncover the complex reality of the

lived experience of participants related to the phenomenon of study (Creswell, 2012). Further, purposive sampling enabled researchers to gain insights from marginalized individuals whose positions might not otherwise have a platform (Creswell, 2012). This study employed purposive sampling to strategically select participants based on criteria relevant to the study (Sibona & Walczak, 2012), relying on publicly available records of LGBTQIA+ students who attended Christian secondary schools and social media recruitment to avoid the possibility of exploiting LGBTQIA+ individuals during the study.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected based on whether they attended non-affirming religious secondary schools in the U.S. and identified as LGBTQIA+. Individuals who were publicly out and who publicly identified themselves as individuals from the study's population or who viewed the public social media recruiting post on a social media platform and self-selected into the study. No participant was coerced to join the study. If willing participants who met the criteria for inclusion exceeded those needed for the study, participation was determined by the criteria for exclusion and for maximum variation.

Sampling Frame. A study's target population, also referred to as a sampling frame, consists of a publicly available list of members of the population (Creswell, 2012). At least two non-affirming religious high schools within the U.S. had publicly-available testimonials by LGBTQIA+ alumni. Between these sites, more than 20 first and last names were listed, in addition to the graduation year of the individual. Because the named individuals were courageous enough to publicly reveal identifying information, they were contacted via social media (LinkedIn or Facebook), based on their name, graduation year, and state, and invited to participate in the research study (see Appendix C). In addition, the researcher posted an

invitation to participate in the study on social media platforms (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter; see Appendix D), thus broadening the sampling frame beyond 20 possible participants. This enabled the researcher to reach more individuals who met the purposive sampling criteria.

Criteria for Inclusion. The criteria for inclusion limited participants to those who attended a non-affirming religious secondary school for a minimum of one full school year and who self-identified as LGBTQIA+. Because of the potential difficulty in engaging broad participation due to the nature of the study—given that LGBTQIA+ individuals may have ambivalent feelings about revisiting experiences at non-affirming religious schools—this study extended to non-affirming religious secondary schools within the United States. These criteria are summarized below:

1. Individuals who attended a non-affirming religious secondary school within the United States for at least one year.
2. Individuals who self-identify as LGBTQIA+.

Criteria for Exclusion. This study excluded participants under the age of 18 and those currently enrolled in a non-affirming secondary school, thus, mitigating the potential for harm to subjects. An additional criterion for exclusion limited participants to only those who had graduated from high school within the past 25 years. Further, individuals who were not available to participate between January of 2023 and April of 2023, those who were not willing to take part in Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>) interviews audio-recorded using otter.ai (<https://otter.ai>), and those who elected not to agree with the informed consent document were not eligible to take part in the study. These criteria are summarized below:

1. Individuals under the age of 18.
2. Individuals who currently attend a non-affirming religious secondary school.

3. Individuals who graduated from or left their non-affirming religious secondary school more than 25 years ago.
4. Individuals who were not available for interviews between January 2023 and April 2023.
5. Individuals who chose not to participate in audio-recorded interviews.
6. Individuals who did not sign the informed consent document.

Criteria for Maximum Variation. When possible, the research limited participants based on maximum variation. Patten and Newhart (2018) described maximum variation sampling strategies as those that ensured diversity within the study's participants. Ideally, research participants represented demographic diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identity, and religious affiliation (affirming, non-affirming, or not religious) in order to address the issue of intersectionality (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021) identified in the literature review. In addition, when possible participants represented the range of sexual and gender identities represented by the LGBTQIA+ acronym. Donoghue (2007) noted that to conflate the experiences of different sexual minority groups was to lose sight the unique challenges each group has faced. The criteria for maximum variation are summarized below:

1. Gender and sexual identity diversity.
2. Racial and ethnic diversity.
3. Religious diversity.

Protection of Human Subjects

Throughout the study, care was taken to adhere to Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology's Institutional Review Board's (IRB) protections for human subjects and the inherent dignity of the participants (Pepperdine University, 2022). IRBs monitor

the protection of human subjects and ethical considerations with regard to how research is conducted (Creswell, 2012). The purpose of Pepperdine University's IBR is to ensure the ethical and legal compliance of all research studies in its purview (Pepperdine University, 2022).

Pepperdine University's IRB is guided by the principles outlined in the Belmont Report (Pepperdine, 2018). The Belmont Report established that research studies should abide by ethical principles, including (a) respect for and protection of the agency of participants, (b) a commitment to serve the best interests of participants while minimizing or eliminating the potential harm of participating in the research, and (c) adherence to the principle of justice, ensuring that the research does not exploit or take advantage of participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

A key component of protecting human subjects was obtaining informed consent prior to their participation in the study (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Informed consent required subjects were aware of the purpose of the research, procedures or methods in which they would be involved, and the benefits or risks to them as a participant (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). In addition, participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). This information was communicated in language that the participants could easily and thoroughly comprehend (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

This study met the requirements to protect human subjects by ensuring informed consent

(see Appendix B) from each participant and maintaining strict confidentiality with regard to the identifying information of participants (Pepperdine University, 2018). Study participants were first contacted using a recruitment script (see Appendix C and Appendix D). The study minimized potential risks to subjects by limiting participants to only those over the age of 18 who were no longer students at the non-affirming religious institution they attended, eliminating the possibility of negative academic or disciplinary repercussions from an institution and, conversely, eliminating the chance that subjects could feel pressured to participate by their institution. There were no direct benefits to participants by agreeing to be part of the research study. The benefits to society may include better understanding of the impact non-affirming religious secondary schools have on LGBTQIA+ students. Religious schools and parents selecting schools for their children may benefit from the recommendations of participants and/or the conclusions of the research. This research presented possible risk of emotional and/or psychological distress to participants because the interview included questions about participants' experiences as an LGBTQIA+ student at the time when they attended a non-affirming religious secondary school. However, participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time.

To obtain IRB approval, the researcher began by determining the type of review that would be needed, given the nature of the study, its methods, and its population. The dissertation committee determined this study met the qualifications for exempt review. This study did not involve participants under the age of 18, present more than a minimal risk to participants, or involve a protected group (Pepperdine University, 2022). In addition, all identifying information from participants remained confidential.

The researcher also obtained CITI Program certification in the protection of human

subjects. After receiving approval from their dissertation committee, the researcher then submitted required forms and documentation—including a thorough description of the study's purpose, population, research methods and procedures, recruitment script, informed consent documentation, and interview protocols—to the IRB. IRB approval was obtained prior to the collection of any data.

Confidentiality and Security of Data

Maintaining the confidentiality of participants is an essential ethical consideration in studies featuring human subjects (Creswell, 2012; Patten & Newhart, 2018). To ensure the confidentiality of all participants, the principal investigator was the sole individual aware of each participant's identity. The principal investigator set appointments and communicated with participants using the principal investigator's Pepperdine email account, and email addresses used to obtain informed consent were collected via a Google form accessible only to the principal investigator; interview dates and times were not be connected to the informed consent Google form. The correlation between the real identity of each participant and the individual's numerical pseudonym was stored in a single paper document in a locked file cabinet with a key accessible only to the principal investigator. Informed consent documents were collected digitally, printed, and stored in the same locked cabinet as the master list of participants. In addition, the researcher used a Pepperdine Zoom account to prevent outside organizations from having access to meetings or participant attendance data. Interview audio recordings were only labeled with numeric pseudonyms, in keeping with Patten and Newhart's (2018) recommendations for ensuring the confidentiality of participants' data. Transcriptions of the interviews were deidentified to ensure that the qualitative data analyzed was anonymized. Data viewed by members of the dissertation committee and peer reviewers was identified only by

numeric pseudonyms, and shared using Pepperdine University's password-protected email. After transcription was complete, the otter.ai interview recordings were destroyed. At the completion of the study, the master list of participants and pseudonyms was destroyed, and three years after the completion of the study, the informed consent documentation will be destroyed.

Data Collection

Research in the qualitative tradition using phenomenological methods often relies on interviews as the instrument for data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews involve interpersonal data collection, and are epistemologically constructivist in nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018), befitting the frameworks guiding this study. To recruit participants for the interviews, a sampling frame was generated using non-anonymous, publicly available testimonials by alumni from non-affirming religious secondary schools. Following IRB approval, participants were contacted using a social media platform or publicly-available email, based on the sampling frame. In this initial contact, participants were informed of the research purpose, process, and their rights. Participants who agreed to participate in the research study were booked for interviews between February of 2023 and April of 2023. Prior to the interview, participants signed the informed consent document (see Appendix B).

The researcher opened their Pepperdine Zoom room five minutes prior to the scheduled start time, and started the otter.ai recording. The Zoom room was protected by a waiting room to ensure that the interview was private and that the participant's identity remained confidential. A secondary audio recording was captured on the researcher's phone; however, this recording was immediately deleted after confirming that the otter.ai recording had saved and was audible. During a Zoom interview, a semi-structured interview protocol was used to ask participants about their lived experiences as LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming religious secondary

schools. Before initiating questioning, the researcher reviewed the informed consent document with the participant and reminded the participant of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, the researcher described how the semi-structured interview process would work, noting that in addition to the questions the participant was sent in advance, the researcher may ask related follow-up questions to clarify meaning or illuminate critical information. The researcher also recorded field notes following each interview to supplement the audio recording and subsequent transcription of the interview.

Interview Techniques

Patten and Newhart (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018) provided best practices for conducting interviews. These practices were implemented in the interview process. The researcher began the interview protocol with conversation designed to build rapport with the participant (Patten & Newhart, 2018). To this end, the researcher started each interview by explaining the research purpose and the goal of elevating the perspectives of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that when the researcher shares personal stories with participants, they can feel more comfortable and it can level the power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee; however, this may also skew the participant's perceptions of their own experiences, thereby reducing the accuracy of the data collected. To prevent biasing participants, the researcher did not share personal information with participants until after the interview questions had concluded. In a semi-structured interview, having standard questions that all participants were asked provided a consistent instrument for data collection (Creswell, 2012). Unless a participant preempted a question by answering it as part of their response to an earlier question, all questions were asked of all participants, and follow-up questions were asked as needed. It was critical that participants felt comfortable and safe during the interview

(Creswell, 2012). The researcher acknowledged responses with affirmative nods and other non-evaluative responses as well as allowed participants to finish their thoughts before proceeding (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). By holding interviews over Zoom, participants could select a space that met their physical and emotional needs for safety and comfort. The researcher was also sensitive to facial and vocal cues from participants that indicated their emotional state during the interview (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Patten & Newhart, 2018). The qualitative interview protocol closed with opportunities for participants to ask questions and with the researcher thanking the participant for their time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the interview, the researcher recorded any relevant field notes regarding their perceptions of the interview conditions or content (Creswell, 2012).

Interview Protocol

A clear and structured interview protocol was an essential instrument in qualitative data collection (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). An interview protocol provided necessary structure to ensure consistent data collection while providing the researcher with the flexibility needed to appropriately respond to the needs of participants (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The following interview protocol was used to introduce the semi-structured interview process:

- Welcome and thank the participant.
- Review the informed consent document.
- Explain the researcher's desire to elevate LGBTQIA+ voices in non-affirming religious spaces.
- Use the following ice-breaker questions: What year did you graduate or leave the school? And what have you been doing since then?
- Ask the interview questions (detailed below).

- Before ending the Zoom interview, thank the participant for their time and answer any questions they may have.
- Record field notes and check to ensure the otter.ai recording is saved according to the numerical pseudonym assigned to the participant and that it is audible. If so, delete the back-up audio recording.

Interview Questions

Think back on your years at your high school.

IQ1. Is there a situation or incident that stands out as your most difficult experience? Please describe that incident.

- Were there any other incidents that come to mind?
- How did the incident(s) influence your health and your emotional and physical well-being?
- What other impact did it have on you?

IQ2. How did you deal with the impact?

- What resources were available to you?
- From whom did you seek help and advice?

IQ3. How did these incidents and situations affect your perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?

IQ4. How did you deal with these perceptions and changes to your perception of religion?

- What resources were available to you?
- From whom did you seek help and advice?

IQ5. Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students encountered at your high school.

- How did the experiences influence their health and well-being?
- What other impacts do you think they had?

IQ6. How did they deal with these issues?

- What resources were available to them?
- From whom did they seek help and advice?

IQ7. What was your expectation of your experience and what would a great high school experience have looked like?

IQ8. How would that have manifested itself over time?

IQ9. If you could go back to high school and start over, what would you do differently?

IQ10. What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?

Relationship Between Research Questions and Interview Questions. Interviews are beneficial in qualitative research because they allow the researcher to investigate information that arises during the research process more fully (Creswell, 2012), something the researcher believed was important given the lack of research into best practices serving LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming religious secondary schools (Maher & Sever, 2007; Simons et al., 2018). However, a potential weakness of using interviews was their potential inconsistency in the administration of procedures and in eliciting the data relevant to the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). For example, the research may be less valid if participants are biased by the questions or if participants cannot accurately recollect events (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was mitigated through the thoughtful construction of questions and the peer review of questions (Creswell, 2012).

This study followed the suggested best practices of Creswell and Poth (2018), Creswell

and Creswell (2018), Castillo-Montoya (2016), and Patten and Newhart (2018) in developing interview questions and protocols. Valid interview questions were based on the research questions, but when adapting these into the interview questions, researchers must adjust the language, structure, and order to ensure that participants' responses provide pertinent information regarding the phenomenon they experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Castillo-Montoya (2016) suggested that interview questions should be ordered to ensure that the researcher builds rapport with participants over the course of the interview. Developing a table to show the relationship between research questions and interview questions ensured a strong correlation between the two sets of questions and helped the research to identify areas that were not represented or underrepresented in the interview questions or—conversely—areas that are overrepresented in the interview questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). These interview questions should be open-ended and few in number (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); this study limited the number of interview questions to 10 primary questions, supplemented with probing questions that ensured responses were rich with relevant data. When using a semi-structured interview process, interviewers generally identify questions and their anticipated order in advance, but have the flexibility to make adjustments during the interview process (Patten & Newhart, 2018). This strengthens the validity of the questions, which can be reviewed in advance and pilot tested to ensure clarity and eliminate bias (Patten & Newhart, 2018). In this study, all interview questions were reviewed by three peer reviewers with experience in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion research, and revised based on feedback. Following this, questions were reviewed by an expert panel and revised again. Finally, questions were pilot tested.

Validity of the Study. The validity of qualitative studies can be measured by their ability to reveal the truth about a phenomenon or experience (Hayashi et al., 2019). This definition is

complicated, given the constructivist paradigm of qualitative research (Hayashi et al., 2019). During the interview process, knowledge is generated in the conversation between researcher and participant, relying on the perceptions of the participant and the interpretation of the researcher (Hayashi et al., 2019). Thorough and thoughtful research procedures are, therefore, necessary (Hayashi et al., 2019) to ensure that the research outcomes and conclusions focus on the truth of the phenomenon itself instead of biased perceptions or jaded interpretations (van Manen, 2017). Hayashi et al. (2019) suggested that researchers use more than one method of establishing validity in a qualitative study. In this study, the instrument was assessed for its *prima-facie* validity, by peer reviewers, and by a panel of experts.

Prima-facie and Construct Validity. Face validity, or *prima-facie* validity, is established by judging whether the instrument—both as a whole and in terms of its individual questions—will produce pertinent, significant, and reasonable data (Connell et al., 2018) related to what it is intended to measure (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The researcher crafted the interview questions to align with the research questions and the literature review, which ensured that the questions probed the *a priori* topics of significance. By comparing the interview questions to the concepts identified in the literature review, the researcher was able to ensure construct validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Table 1 displayed the correlation between the research questions and the original interview questions, as developed by the researcher. By reviewing the alignment between the research questions and the interview questions, the researcher established a baseline of the face validity of the instrument.

Peer-review Content Validity. Content validity can be assessed by peer reviewers (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) identified content validity as a measure of whether the

Table 1*Prima-facie Validity*

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?	IQ1. What unique challenges did you face as a gender or sexual minority at a non-affirming religious secondary school? IQ2. How did these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your academic success? IQ3. How did these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your perception of the religion of your school? IQ4. How did these challenges impact your health and well-being?
RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?	IQ5. What did you do in school to overcome challenges as an LGBTQIA+ student? IQ6. What did the school or others do to help support you in overcoming challenges?
RQ3 - How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure their success?	IQ7. How would you define success for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools? IQ10. How did you track and measure your success as a student when you were in school? IQ11. Reflecting back on your time at a non-affirming secondary school, how would you measure your success as a student now? (if differently)
RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders recommend to leaders within these institutions to support this population?	IQ8. What recommendations would you give to school employees (administrators, teachers, etc.) to ensure LGBTQIA+ students achieve your definition of success? IQ9. What recommendations would you give to students to ensure LGBTQIA+ students achieve your definition of success?

Note. The table identifies four research questions and corresponding interview questions as developed by the researcher.

instrument's questions covered the breadth and depth of the issue being studied to an appropriate degree, given what is known of that topic. Therefore, it is important that peer reviewers be familiar with the area of study. The interview questions (see Table 1) for this study were

evaluated by three peer reviewers who all had work experience and doctoral coursework pertaining to DEI. Peer reviewers were asked to provide feedback indicating that the researcher should retain the question in its existing form, remove the question, or revise the question (see Appendix E). For all questions, all reviewers agreed that the proposed interview questions were needed. Both IQ4 and IQ11 were revised for clarity based on the peer review feedback (see Table 2).

Expert Review Validity. To further establish the study's validity, the interview questions were reviewed by the three dissertation committee members. Like the peer reviewers, the expert reviewers were provided with a table demonstrating the intentional alignment between the research questions and interview questions. Feedback was used to revise and edit the interview questions (see Table 3).

Reliability of the study. Qualitative and quantitative research rely on different epistemological, philosophical, and ontological assumptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); therefore, qualitative reliability is fundamentally different than quantitative validity. Whereas quantitative validity assesses the consistency of an instrument (Patten & Newhart, 2018), qualitative validity is related to the replicability of the research, particularly with regard to the research methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To test the reliability of the research instrument, the researcher piloted the interview questions with three tangentially qualified individuals, and made adjustments based on their feedback and based on how well their responses corresponded to the research questions. Tangentially qualified individuals were used rather than individuals from the target population because the sampling frame was small.

Table 2*Peer Review and Content Validity Revisions*

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?	IQ1. What unique challenges did you face as a gender or sexual minority at a non-affirming religious secondary school? IQ2. How did these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your academic success? IQ3. How did these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your perception of the religion of your school? IQ4. How did these challenges impact your physical, mental, and/or emotional health and well-being?
RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?	IQ5. What did you do in school to overcome challenges as an LGBTQIA+ student? IQ6. What did the school or others do to help support you in overcoming challenges?
RQ3 - How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools track and measure their success?	IQ7. How would you define success for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools? IQ10. How did you track and measure your success as a student when you were in school? IQ11. Reflecting back on your time at a non-affirming secondary school, would you now measure your success any differently than you did at the time?
RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders recommend to leaders within these institutions to support this population?	IQ8. What recommendations would you give to school employees (administrators, teachers, etc.) to ensure LGBTQIA+ students achieve your definition of success? IQ9. What recommendations would you give to students to ensure LGBTQIA+ students achieve your definition of success?

Note. The table identifies four research questions and corresponding interview questions with revisions based on feedback from peer-reviewers. These and subsequent changes were made to questions within the interview protocol.

Table 3*Expert Review Validity Revisions*

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions
RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?	<p>IQ1. Think back on your years at your high school. Is there a situation or incident that stands out as your most difficult experience? Please describe that incident.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were there any other incidents that come to mind? • How did the incident(s) influence your health and your emotional and physical well-being? • What other impact did it have on you? <p>IQ3. How did these incidents and situations affect your perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?</p> <p>IQ5. Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students encountered at your high school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the experiences influence their health and well-being? • What other impacts do you think they had?
RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?	<p>IQ2. How did you deal with the impact?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to you? • From whom did you seek help and advice? <p>IQ4. How did you deal with these perceptions and changes to your perception of religion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to you? • From whom did you seek help and advice? <p>IQ6. How did they deal with these issues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice?
RQ3 - How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure their success?	<p>IQ7. What was your expectation of your experience and what would a great high school experience have looked like?</p> <p>IQ8. How would that have manifested itself over time?</p>
RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders recommend to leaders within these institutions to support this population?	<p>IQ9. If you could go back to high school and start over, what would you do differently?</p> <p>IQ10. What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?</p>

Note. The table identifies four research questions and corresponding interview questions with revisions based on feedback from the expert reviewers (Dissertation Committee members). Subsequent changes were made to the order and phrasing of questions within the interview protocol.

Statement of Personal Bias

Patten and Newhart (2018) identified the need for researchers to acknowledge their preconceptions and biases to themselves before and throughout the research process. Often referred to in phenomenological research as *bracketing*, engaging in this practice not only declared the relevant personal and social experiences of the researcher but enabled the researcher to deliberately set aside these biases in order to approach their study with appropriate objectivity (Bettez, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 1913/1983). However, because researchers themselves are a key instrument of data collection, some degree of subjectivity is unavoidable (Bettez, 2015; Nicholls, 2019).

The researcher comes from a conservative religious background and attended religious schools from ages 3 through 18 and again as a doctoral student. In addition, the researcher currently works at a conservative religious secondary school. The researcher is a cis-gender heterosexual woman. Because of this background, the researcher attempted to enter this study with caution and respect, acknowledging the challenge of understanding the nuance of a phenomenon outside of one's own experience (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2010). In addition, the researcher approached the study through a critical lens and engaged in bracketing to reduce the oppressive impact of her own biases as a member of a racial, gender, and sexual majority (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021).

Bracketing and Epoché

Early in the research process, the researcher must set aside personal biases and assumptions that would taint or inhibit their unbiased data collection (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1913/1983) described this as employing “phenomenological ἐποχή” (p. 60) or “exercis[ing] phenomenological epoché” (p. 61). This process was designed to prevent researchers from

making judgements about data based on their own presuppositions (Husserl, 1913/1983; Moustakas, 1994). Regardless of previous experience or assumptions, by deliberately engaging in *epoché* prior to—and throughout—the research process, the researcher was able to focus their attention on the phenomenon through the eyes of participants, thereby bringing about a more accurate and full understanding of the phenomenon (Mustakas, 1994). Mustakas (1994) acknowledged that fully bracketing one’s own opinions and experiences was rare, if not impossible, but that the goal of exercising *epoché* was not to create a false sense of objectivity but to “let go of our prejudices” (The Epoche Process, Chapter 5). Yarhouse and Sadusky (2022) offered this advice to mental health professionals supporting transgender individuals, which was appropriate to this researcher: “Our ethical obligation is to work actively to eliminate or significantly reduce the effects that biases can have on our work and to foster deep respect for the cultural and individual variables at play” (p. 9). Although this study relied on many of the transcendental phenomenological methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018) described by Moustakas (1994), elements of hermeneutic phenomenology, which focused on the lived experiences of individuals within a context (Lavery, 2003), were also essential. This study relied on an assumption of hermeneutic phenomenology to acknowledge the limitations of bracketing, understanding that the researcher’s bias would shape their interpretation, but also understanding that by interacting with data the researcher themselves would also be shaped and influenced (Lavery, 2003).

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using otter.ai from the audio recordings. These transcripts—and the researcher's field notes, when relevant—were analyzed as the source of qualitative data. This section describes the data analysis methods that were used.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis occurred using the four-phase hermeneutical phenomenological process proposed by Fuster Guillen (2019). Before engaging in data analysis, the researcher engaged in bracketing by articulating elements of positionality and potential bias (Bettez, 2015; Nicholls, 2019). The ecological systems and internal structures that influenced research participants (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Spencer et al., 1997) were no less impactful for the researcher (Fuster Guillen, 2019). Therefore, the researcher examined how their own beliefs, attitudes, and experiences might shape their interactions with participants and interpretation of the data (Fuster Guillen, 2019). This reflexivity was essential in the first phase, in which the researcher clarified “attitudes, values, beliefs, feelings, conjectures, interest, etc., in relation to the research” (Fuster Guillen, 2019, p. 223). Awareness of bias may help increase the objectivity of qualitative data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 1913/1983) and help the researcher understand how this bias will affect the interpretation of data throughout the analysis process (Laverty, 2003). In this study, the researcher sought to use deliberate reflection to reduce imposing their own beliefs on participants or on the interpretation of data (Bettez, 2015; Nicholls, 2019).

Phase two of data analysis began with reading the transcripts multiple times to ensure accurate understanding (Fuster Guillen, 2019). This was consistent with Ozaki et al.’s (2020) qualitative study utilizing Spencer et al.’s (1997) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). Gaining an understanding of general meaning is a standard first step in a phenomenological approach to qualitative data analysis (Hycner, 1985).

In the third phase of data analysis, the researcher read through the transcribed responses to each interview question multiple times. Multiple readings of the text helped establish codes and themes (Fuster Guillen, 2019), and the researcher—figuratively—stepped back frequently to

revisit how individual statements relate to the whole, in keeping with the hermeneutic circle (Laverty, 2003). Gibson and Brown (2009) described codes as categories that encompassed similarities found in the data. Throughout this process, the researcher kept a detailed code book (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Ritchie and Spencer (2002) suggested that researchers develop an *a priori* framework through which the research data could be indexed. Consistent with Ozaki et al.'s (2020) analysis methods, *a priori* categories were developed based on a review of the literature and the PVEST framework. The following *a priori* codes surfaced in the literature review:

1. Belonging and loneliness
2. Religious incongruence
3. Complexity of identity/intersectionality
4. Challenges to health and well-being

These *a priori* codes were set aside in the initial data analysis process, in keeping with the phenomenological practice of bracketing preconceptions and biases (Moustakas, 1994). By reading over the interview transcripts repeatedly, the researcher generated emergent—also known as empirical (Gibson & Brown, 2009)—codes, which were evaluated based on their relevance to the research questions and the whole of the phenomenon. The researcher first identified significant words and grouped related words into phrases before identifying which words or phrases were significant to the research and deserving of named codes (Syed & Nelson, 2015). In this phase, each code may contain multiple sub-codes, and codes may be grouped into broad themes, which indicated either the presence of significant similarities, the absence of differences, or the presence of significant relationships (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Gibson and Brown (2009) indicated that researchers should consider data worthy of a code if it appears

multiple times or if it was emphasized by the participant(s). The researcher further analyzed these codes to group common codes into themes and eliminate redundancies (Hycner, 1985; Ozaki et al., 2020). The researcher then engaged in an iterative process of identifying and finalizing codes and themes, revisiting the literature and interview data repeatedly throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hycner, 1985). Creswell (2012) noted that 25 to 30 codes was a practicable number of codes in a qualitative study. Ozaki et al. (2020) found that some themes emerged connected with their research questions while others were tied to the PVEST framework; this study anticipated similar findings. Five to seven themes are typical in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2012). In narrowing codes and themes to those most significant, Fuster Guillen (2019) indicated that researchers must examine both what the whole of each participant's response indicated about the reality of the phenomenon itself as well as what individual words and phrases revealed about the lived experience.

In the fourth and final phase, the researcher must unite disparate themes into a cohesive whole through which individual themes and codes can be more fully understood (Fuster Guillen, 2019; Laverly, 2003; Ozaki et al., 2020). This descriptive data analysis demonstrated how each interview question related to *a priori* and emergent themes and codes. The researcher's conclusions must be both descriptive as well as meaningful, indicative of the richness of qualitative research, which reveals both what and how individuals experienced a phenomenon (Fuster Guillen, 2019). This is particularly appropriate for a study of religious schools, acknowledging the complexity of the physical, scientific, social, emotional, and spiritual aspects of every individual.

Interrater Reliability

In qualitative studies, interrater reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) or intercoder

agreement (Creswell & Poth, 2018) refers to the consistency of coding across multiple researchers. The analysis of codes and themes is reliable if multiple coders agree with the codes and themes as well as with the correlation of data with those codes and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, reliability does not indicate that independent researchers would consistently produce identical results; rather, “establishing reliability is a process and not a product” (Syed & Nelson, 2015, p. 377). Syed and Nelson (2015) recommended that a lead coder establish the initial code book based on the data. The data and codes would then be shared with a reliability coder, and discrepancies would be resolved based on the consensus of an additional coder (Syed & Nelson, 2015). This study established interrater reliability using these methods. The initial code book and data were shared with a graduate student for independent validation (Hycner, 1985). The codes with *a priori* and emergent meaning that were consistent (Creswell & Poth, 2018) between the researcher and fellow graduate student were further analyzed. Data and codes—and, therefore, units of meaning—were allocated to their respective research question by the interview question connected with that data (see Table 2; Hycner, 1985). This allowed researchers to find commonalities and identify themes related to each research question.

Four-Step Process.

- Step One: Establishing Baseline Codes and Themes – The researcher transcribed three interviews and followed the data analysis process outlined above, including multiple readings of the transcripts and identifying *a priori* and emergent codes. Codes and themes were described in the code book, and the transcripts were annotated to indicate the words and phrases that corresponded with each code.
- Step Two: Interrater Review – The researcher shared the three deidentified interview

transcripts and the descriptive codebook with three peer researchers. These peer researchers validated the codes by agreeing with the researcher or provided discussion-based feedback indicating suggested changes. When the three researchers could not achieve consensus, a member of the dissertation committee provided direction. The codebook and annotations of the researcher were revised based on this feedback.

- **Step Three: Coding Remaining Interviews** – The researcher transcribed the remaining 12 interviews and annotated and coded them using the revised codebook. In keeping with the iterative nature of qualitative research, the codebook and initial themes were revised based on emergent codes.
- **Step Four: Interrater Review** – The researcher shared the revised codebook and the remaining deidentified interview transcripts with the peer researchers who reviewed the initial three interview transcripts. Through consensus, this resulted in the finalized themes and codes..

Data Presentation

Chapter 4 of this dissertation will describe the findings of the study, organized by interview question. This data will be represented in narrative form and visually using tables and graphs (Creswell, 2012). Codes and themes will be described, and quotations from participants will be used to elucidate their meaning (Creswell, 2012). Chapter 5 of the dissertation will provide the interpretation of findings, note limitations, identify conclusions, and propose recommendations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the methods for this qualitative phenomenological investigation into the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals during their time at non-affirming religious

secondary schools. The purpose of the study and the guiding research questions were restated in order to demonstrate their alignment with the selection of a qualitative approach to the research. The use of phenomenological methods was shown to align with the frameworks guiding the research, and the specific methods, the guiding assumptions, and the strengths and weaknesses of phenomenology were described. An account of the research design included information about the participants and population and the use of purposive sampling. Further, how the study would protect its participants, in accordance with Pepperdine University's IRB policies and procedures was explained. In addition, chapter 3 described the data collection procedures, including the interview protocol. The researcher also described their positionality and personal bias before outlining the data analysis procedures. The chapter concluded with a brief description of how the methods described would inform chapters 4 and 5 of the dissertation.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Know thy impact.

—John Hattie, *Know Thy Impact: Visible Learning in Theory and Practice*

The Trevor Project has estimated that approximately 10.5% of young people between the ages of 13 and 18 identified as LGBTQ (Green et al., 2019). This population faces significant hardships, such as a high likelihood of peer victimization (Gonzalez & Deal, 2022; Hatchel et al., 2019; Myers, 2020) and loneliness (Gorczynski & Fasoli, 2022; Yuan, 2016). As a result, it is hardly surprising that sexual and gender minority individuals have experienced higher than average mental health struggles (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Gnan et al., 2019; Kaczowski et al., 2022), including suicidality and self-harm (Gnan et al., 2019). Such hardships may be exacerbated by how an LGBTQIA+ student is treated at their school (*Hunter v. U.S. Dep't of Educ.*, 2021a; *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, 1996), yet gender and sexual minority students at non-affirming secondary schools have found their right to a discrimination-free environment (Title IX, 1972) contested by the rights of non-affirming schools to exercise religious freedom (U.S. Const. amend. I.). Many LGBTQIA+ students have come forward in recent years to describe how non-affirming religious education impacted them negatively (*Alford v. Whitefield Academy*, 2020; Avery, 2021; *Hunter v. U.S. Dep't of Educ.*, 2021b; Soulfource, 2019). However, little research has explored the impact of non-affirming religious secondary education on this population (Maher & Sever, 2007; Simons et al., 2018).

This study focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming religious secondary schools to evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive student outcomes. To ascertain the best practices for supporting LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious secondary schools, the following research questions (RQ)

were addressed in this study:

RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?

RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?

RQ3 - How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure LGBTQIA+ students' success?

RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders at non-affirming secondary schools recommend to leaders within these institutions to support LGBTQIA+ students?

The preceding research questions drove the researcher's development of interview questions. These interview questions underwent interrater and expert review, which resulted in the following 10 interview questions (see Table 4), which focused on the experience of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools.

Table 4

Interview Questions for LGBTQIA+ Students and Teachers of LGBTQIA+ Students

	Questions for Students	Adapted Questions for Teachers
IQ1.	<p>Think back on your years at your high school. Is there a situation or incident that stands out as your most difficult experience? Please describe that incident. Were there any other incidents that come to mind?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the incident(s) influence your health and your emotional and physical well-being? • What other impact did it have on you? 	<p>Think back to your years teaching high school. Is there a situation or incident that stands out the most difficult experience for your LGBTQIA+ student(s)? Please describe that incident. Were there any other incidents that come to mind?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the incident(s) influence your LGBTQIA+ student(s) health and emotional and physical well-being? • What other impact did it have on your LGBTQIA+ student(s)?

	Questions for Students	Adapted Questions for Teachers
IQ2.	How did you deal with the impact? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to you? • From whom did you seek help and advice? 	How did LGBTQIA+ students deal with the impact? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice?
IQ3.	How did these incidents and situations affect your perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?	How did these incidents and situations affect their perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?
IQ4.	How did you deal with these perceptions and changes to your perception of religion? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to you? • From whom did you seek help and advice? 	How did they deal with these perceptions and changes to their perception of religion? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice?
IQ5.	Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students encountered at your high school. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the experiences influence their health and well-being? • What other impacts do you think they had? 	Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students encountered at your high school. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the experiences influence their health and well-being? • What other impacts do you think they had?
IQ6.	How did they deal with these issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice? 	How did they deal with these issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice?
IQ7.	What was your expectation of your experience and what would a great high school experience have looked like?	What would a great high school experience have looked like for LGBTQIA+ students?
IQ8.	How would that have manifested itself over time?	How would that have manifested itself for these students over time?
IQ9.	If you could go back to high school and start over, what would you do differently?	If your LGBTQIA+ students could go back to high school and start over, what would you recommend they do differently?
IQ10.	What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?	What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?

Participants responded to these research questions with data relevant to the research questions, leading to an understanding of the challenges LGBTQIA+ students face at non-affirming religious secondary schools, how students can overcome these challenges and find success, and how leaders of these institutions can better support their sexual and gender minority

students. Because interviews were conducted over Zoom, participants were able to select locations that they found safe and comfortable. However, the interview questions did ask students to revisit experiences that were likely to elicit an emotional response. While no participant appeared distressed during the interview, emotions such as anger and sadness were present at times as they discussed their experiences and the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students with which they were familiar. The researcher used audio recordings and field notes to ensure the accuracy of data, and reviewed otter.ai transcripts for accuracy following each interview, in addition to deidentifying the data. Data analysis revealed significant themes and codes that appeared in the responses of participants. Chapter 4 describes the participants and data collection, data analysis, and interrater review process. Further, this chapter provides visualizations of data and samples of responses corresponding to substantive themes and codes.

Participants

Recruitment began with purposive sampling of LGBTQIA+ students who publicly shared testimonies about their experiences at non-affirming Christian secondary schools. Initial emails were sent to approximately 20 students from the sampling frame, and resulted in one individual who agreed to participate; however, this individual did not respond to interview requests. In addition, the researcher used social media recruitment, posting an invitation to participate on Facebook and LinkedIn. The initial Facebook post was reposted by several individuals, as was the LinkedIn post. LinkedIn analytics revealed that the LinkedIn post was viewed by more than 2,000 individuals and shared by 15 individuals. Combined, the initial social media recruitment posts resulted in four interviews with LGBTQIA+ participants who had attended non-affirming secondary schools.

Rationale for Secondary Participants

Due to the small number of participants, a secondary group of study participants and sampling method were approved by the dissertation chair. According to Guest et al. (2017), “Including the most knowledgeable individuals in a qualitative study is essential, but it is often not enough to fully understand the social, cultural, and contextual complexities associated with a research question, particularly if it's on the complicated end of the spectrum.” Therefore, Guest et al. (2017) recommended identifying a secondary group of participants with an alternate perspective on the topic being studied. These participants should have close, personal experience related to the research field (Guest et al., 2017). Further, Guest et al. (2017) noted that when research is intended to result in policy changes, it is appropriate to include the participants who will be directly impacted by policy changes.

In order to fully explore the impact of non-affirming secondary schools on LGBTQIA+ students, teachers were selected as a second group of relevant participants, given the relationships that teachers develop with students and the impact that policy changes would have on teachers. This followed the methodology of Harris et al. (2022), a study which explored the impact of schools in England on LGBT+ students by interviewing students and teachers.

The researcher then contacted teachers at non-affirming secondary schools, using purposive sampling of “Christian high school teacher” and “high school teacher Christian school” on LinkedIn. The researcher reviewed school websites of the schools before contacting teachers from these schools to verify their non-affirming position. Statements that established their religious position were found in either the school or denomination’s statement of faith or in their hiring documentation. Only teachers from non-affirming schools were contacted via the teacher recruitment script. Initially, this resulted in two interviews. The researcher employed snowball sampling of participants, requesting that they share the recruiting information with

individuals who met the criteria for inclusion, which resulted in two additional interviews with teachers.

Finalized Participants

Posting via LinkedIn, snowball sampling, and contacting additional teachers from the sampling frame produced three additional interviews. In total, the 12 participants consisted of seven participants who identified as LGBTQIA+ who attended non-affirming secondary schools and five participants who served as teachers at non-affirming secondary schools.

Descriptions of school experiences indicated that all participants spoke about bible-based non-affirming schools representing no fewer than three Christian denominations. Participants spoke about the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools in the states of California, Ohio, and Wisconsin. While the criteria for inclusion indicated that students had to have attended a non-affirming secondary school within the past 25 years, the student participants graduated from high school between 2009-2015. Similarly, teachers had to have taught at a non-affirming secondary school within the past 25 years.

As described in Chapter 3, the researchers aimed to engage 15 participants, in keeping with the findings of Sim et al. (2018), which indicated saturation was most often reached after 12 to 15 interviews. However, after consulting with the dissertation chair, it was determined that 12 was a sufficient sample due to the saturation of themes, the range proposed by Sim et al. (2018), and the vulnerability of the target population.

Due to the small number of participants, criteria for maximum variation were not used to narrow participants to a select group. Participants did not display significant ethnic or racial diversity. Most LGBTQIA+ participants described their gender identity as either male or female; two participants expressed that they used the pronouns associated with their natal sex as well as

“they” pronouns. However, in the research, unless gender was important to the data, participants were referred to as “they” in the written research to provide anonymity whenever possible. Participants from the LGBTQIA+ community described their sexual identities in the following terms: queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual. Teachers were both male and female and spoke about the experiences of both sexual and gender minority students in their classes and at their schools. Like the research indicating that approximately half of Christians reported having close friends or family members who represented a sexual minority (Pew Research Center, 2015), several teachers mentioned close and/or familial relationships with a gender or sexual minority individual, indicating that the teachers who participated in the research were representative of the Christian population.

Data Collection

The researcher received IRB approval on March 1, 2023, and began contacting participants using the recruitment script for LGBTQIA+ individuals who attended non-affirming secondary schools via email (Appendix C) and social media (Appendix D). Informed consent was obtained digitally prior to each interview, and participants were instructed to retain a PDF copy of their informed consent for their records. Participants were provided with several suggested dates and times for their interview, and the researcher accommodated the schedules of participants when scheduling Zoom interviews. Each Zoom interview was recorded and transcribed using otter.ai, and the researcher reviewed each transcription for accuracy and to deidentify the personal information pertaining to the participant. Interviews were conducted between March 3rd and March 31st of 2023 (see Table 5). To begin each interview, the researcher verbally reviewed the informed consent, reminding participants that they had the right to withdraw or ask questions about the research. Many of the LGBTQIA+ participants had

questions about the goal of the research, which the researcher described as elevating the voices of LGBTQIA+ in non-affirming spaces and making changes within non-affirming secondary schools to better support this community. This process ranged from 1-5 minutes before the interview questions began. Interview lengths ranged from 15-47 minutes, with the average interview lasting 27 minutes. All but two interviews ranged from 25-32 minutes. Interview lengths varied primarily based on the number of experiences shared by participants and the level of detail they provided.

Table 5

Dates of Participant Interviews

Participant	Type	Interview Date
P1	LGBTQIA+ Student	03.04.23
P2	LGBTQIA+ Student	03.10.23
P3	LGBTQIA+ Student	03.12.23
P4	LGBTQIA+ Student	03.13.23
P5	LGBTQIA+ Student	03.14.23
P6	Teacher	03.21.23
P7	Teacher	03.23.23
P8	Teacher	03.24.23
P9	Teacher	03.24.23
P10	Teacher	03.28.23
P11	LGBTQIA+ Student	03.29.23
P12	LGBTQIA+ Student	03.31.23

Data Analysis

This phenomenological used focused interview questions to elicit data relevant to the research questions (Moustakas, 1994). In keeping with phenomenological tradition, this study relied on interviews as a data source (Moustakas, 1994), and coding was conducted using

deidentified transcripts of participant interviews. Data analysis occurred using the four-phase hermeneutical phenomenological process proposed by Fuster Guillen (2019).

- Phase 1: Prior and during data analysis, the researcher engaged in bracketing to set aside assumptions and biases that would taint the research with subjective opinion (Husserl, 1913/1983; Moustakas, 1994).
- Phase 2: Before coding, the researcher read over interview transcriptions multiple times (Fuster Guillen, 2019). This ensured an understanding of each participant's general meaning (Hycner, 1985) and how each narrative developed.
- Phase 3: The researcher read through the transcribed responses to each interview question multiple times, identifying emergent codes and themes that signified significance and that appeared in the transcripts of multiple participants. This iterative process involved eliminating redundant codes and grouping them into meaningful themes.
- Phase 4: Finally, the researcher united themes into a meaningful whole through which the individual themes and codes could be used to more fully understand the experiences of participants and illuminate the research questions (Fuster Guillen, 2019; Laverty, 2003; Ozaki et al., 2020).

Inter-Rater Review

The code book and interview transcripts were shared with three doctoral students from Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology. All three students had experience with qualitative research and the coding methods being used in this study. The doctoral students confirmed the appropriateness and definitions of codes as well as the link between the data itself and the codes and themes. In the initial review, the raters noted several

instances where data could be linked with existing codes. However, the inter-raters did not recommend changes to the code book.

Data Display

In this study, the data has been organized by research question and corresponding interview question. The frequency of each theme has been displayed graphically in a data table, and the meaning of themes has been described with the assistance of quotations from participants. Because these quotations represent excerpts from unscripted interviews, grammatical and syntactical anomalies were present. The selections recorded in the presentation of data preserved these irregularities—common in spoken conversation—in order to preserve the accuracy and integrity of the data. To ensure the anonymity of participants, each participant was given a numerical pseudonym produced by a random number generator (see Table 6). These

Table 6

Numerical Pseudonyms of Participants

LGBTQIA+ Student Participants	Teacher Participants
5533	6029
5538	6172
5559	6576
5705	6771
5753	6940
5883	
5993	

pseudonyms were only connected with the deidentified transcripts, ensuring that the dates of interviews were stored separately from the numerical pseudonyms used to organize transcripts.

Research Question 1

The first research question related to the challenges that LGBTQIA+ students faced while attending non-affirming secondary schools. Three of the interview questions related to this research question (see Table 7). The researcher analyzed participants' responses to these

Table 7

RQ1 and Corresponding IQs

RQ Text	IQ Text for Students	Adapted IQ Text for Teachers
RQ1. What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?	<p>IQ1. Think back on your years at your high school. Is there a situation or incident that stands out as your most difficult experience? Please describe that incident.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were there any other incidents that come to mind? • How did the incident(s) influence your health and your emotional and physical well-being? • What other impact did it have on you? <p>IQ3. How did these incidents and situations affect your perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?</p> <p>IQ5. Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students encountered at your high school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the experiences influence their health and well-being? • What other impacts do you think they had? 	<p>IQ1. Think back to your years teaching high school. Is there a situation or incident that stands out the most difficult experience for your LGBTQIA+ student(s)? Please describe that incident.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were there any other incidents that come to mind? • How did the incident(s) influence your LGBTQIA+ student(s) health and emotional and physical well-being? • What other impact did it have on your LGBTQIA+ student(s)? <p>IQ3. How did these incidents and situations affect their perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?</p> <p>IQ5. Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students encountered at your high school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the experiences influence their health and well-being? • What other impacts do you think they had?

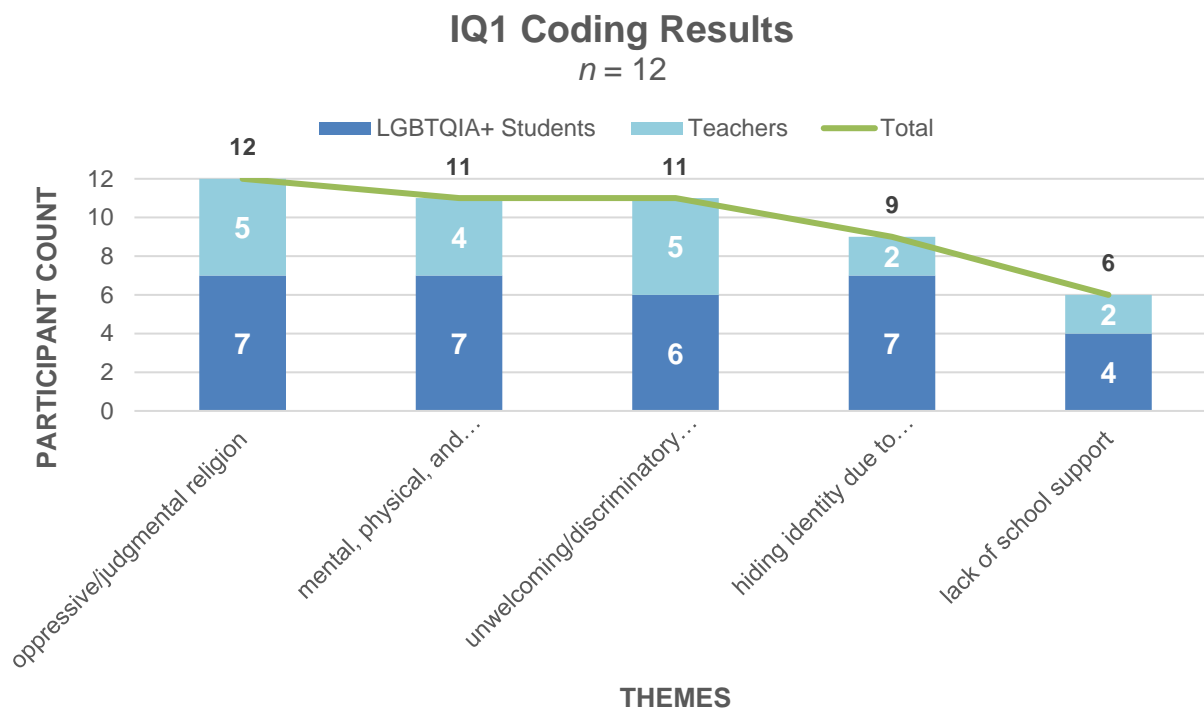
interview questions, identifying common codes and themes of significance.

Eleven themes were identified as related to RQ1 (see Figure #). Themes were deemed

significant when multiple participants' responses to an interview question could be categorized under that theme. The following themes met this criterion: (a) oppressive/judgmental religion, (b) mental, physical, and emotional toll, (c) unwelcoming/discriminatory school climate, (d) hiding identity due to fear and repression, (e) lack of school support, (f) positive outlook, (g) rejecting religion, (h) losing faith in the school's portrayal of God, (i) embracing false identity, (j) rarity and hardship of outness, and (k) roots of religious trauma.

Interview Question 1

The following interview question was asked of student participants: "Think back on your years at your high school. Is there a situation or incident that stands out as your most difficult experience? Please describe that incident. Were there any other incidents that come to mind?" Probing questions for students were, "How did the incident(s) influence your health and your emotional and physical well-being?" and "What other impact did it have on you?" Teacher participants were asked, "Think back to your years teaching high school. Is there a situation or incident that stands out the most difficult experience for your LGBTQIA+ student(s)? Please describe that incident. Were there any other incidents that come to mind?" Probing questions for teachers were, "How did the incident(s) influence your LGBTQIA+ student(s) health and emotional and physical well-being?" and "What other impact did it have on your LGBTQIA+ student(s)?" The "it" from this question referenced the difficult situation that LGBTQIA+ students faced at their non-affirming secondary school. Five themes emerged from the responses to IQ1: (a) oppressive/judgmental religion, (b) mental, physical, and emotional toll, (c) unwelcoming/discriminatory school climate, (d) hiding identity due to fear and repression, and (e) lack of religious/school support. The frequency of these themes is displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4*Themes Related to IQ1*

Theme: Oppressive/Judgmental Religion. In total, all 12 participants (100%) noted that religion was a challenge to LGBTQIA+ students, defining religion as oppressive and judgmental. Participant 5993 summarized this idea, saying, “they teach that all anything LGBTQ related is wrong. You’re going to hell if you’re gay, basically.” Participants 5883 and 6172 also referenced students being explicitly told the LGBTQIA+ community would go to “hell.” In addition, participants 5883, 5533, and 5559 described experiences in the school’s chapel service wherein speakers expressed anti-gay messages. Participant 5883 used the words “harsh” and “homophobic” to describe these messages. Participant 5559 stated, “there would be chapel speakers that would come and would speak down on being gay, LGBT, anything.” Participant 5533 noted that negative chapel experiences were a regular occurrence, remembering, “The speaker had some homophobic teachings, which I don’t remember exactly, but they weren’t

anything I hadn't been taught before at [school]. What I do remember clearly is my bible teacher's reaction. My bible teacher, [teacher], said to the class in response to his sermon, 'If you believe that gay people can be clergy, leaders in the church, you are not Christians, you are not following the Bible, you are not saved.'" Participant 5538 also described Bible curriculum that was opposed to homosexuality. Participant 5705 described a teacher who wanted to report the participant for suggesting that outreach to the homosexual community should focus on God's love rather than "pushing them away." Likewise, one teacher reported religious pressure from their school, saying, "I always felt that I had to make sure that they [LGBTQIA+ students] knew that I was not kind of on their side." Another teacher shared the contrast between Christian teachings and practice, saying, "Christianity is supposed to be something where you are embraced and loved. And they [LGBTQIA+ students] felt instantly shunned and outsiders, othered."

Theme: Mental, Physical, and Emotional Toll. In total, 11 participants (92%) described the negative mental, physical, and/or emotional toll that attending a non-affirming secondary school had on LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of seven students (100%) and four teachers (80%). Participant 6172 explained the mental and emotional toll on students, saying they felt "shunned and outsiders, othered." Participant 5533 stated, "a lot of mental health struggles...have come out of those experiences." Participants provided examples of the mental and emotional struggles they faced, such as "stress," "anxiety and depression," "PTSD," and "self-loathing." Three participants indicated that these struggles were long-lasting or still present. Participant 5533 shared, "it's been a long struggle, and it's still I'm still in process with all of it," and Participant 5538 stated, "I think I still carry a lot of that with me to the point where I don't feel like I can express myself." Participant 5753 shared that they

experienced nightmares related to their experiences as an LGBTQIA+ student at a non-affirming school. Participant 5993 stated, “almost every facet of my life I was influenced.” Participant 5559 posited, “it might have long term ramifications that I’m not fully aware of.” The mental and emotional impact was described with words and phrases, such as “sadness,” “guilt and shame,” “stress,” “feeling shunned and unloved,” and “a lot of confusion.” Student participants also used words such as, “stressed,” “self-loathing,” “scared,” and “hurt.” One participant recalled an attempted suicide by a fellow LGBTQIA+ student from their school, and shared that they too had experienced thoughts of suicide. Another student shared, “I had a physical reaction to homophobia. So I remember I felt like very hot during that...sermon or whatever you want to call it.” Three students indicated that they did not appear to have physical problems as a result of their experiences, while other participants did have physical symptoms. While participant 5883 did not believe there had been a physical impact on them, Participant 5559 was less certain, stating, “maybe I have certain tendencies now, or, you know, the word would be like trauma, right, that has led to maybe some unhealthy habits.” Another participant stated, “I drank a lot.” Participant 5538 described feeling “physically ill” when confronted by Christianity. One participant described developing an eating disorder. One teacher described the toll on students’ mental and physical well-being as “detrimental.”

Theme: Unwelcoming/Discriminatory School Climate. In total, 11 participants (91.7%) described school climate as a challenge to LGBTQIA+ students, describing it as unwelcome and discriminatory. This theme was found in the responses of six students (86%) and five teachers (100%). One teacher participant stated that their school’s silence on LGBTQIA+ issues raised by students “can seem like almost aggression.” Another teacher described the climate as a “tense atmosphere” with “trauma that is surrounding them that puts them on edge,

and it's not a welcoming or loving place, for them to come to school, knowing what they're walking into and the attitudes and thoughts and beliefs of some people on the campus.”

Participant 5705 related, “it [homosexuality] was openly discussed in such a homophobic way.”

Participant 5883 described, “he [school employee] used particularly harsh language, particularly homophobic language. Like, awful, truly awful.” Participant 5883 also described a climate of

“microaggressions” and bullying,” which was echoed by participant 5993, who shared that

homosexuality was “only talked about in the context of ... an insult, like you're gay, like, as an insult.” Likewise, participant 5559 shared, “the hardest part was definitely being teased.” One

teacher described an instance in which “someone had written a slur on the wall. And I remember seeing that and they [two students who identified as homosexual] just kind of like well, yeah, this

is what we deal with.” Another teacher noted that students perceived the school climate as

unsafe, describing that students thought that a GSA might be “a trap. And that hit me the hardest thing, because they feel so unsafe, they they—being homosexual people for want of a better

word—do not feel safe at the school I work at and that makes me very sad.” Two (17%)

participants—one student and one teacher—addressed racism or racist incidents at their non-

affirming school. One student described a “long history of failing to protect students of color on

their campuses.” A teacher shared that after the murder of George Floyd, students came forward

to share negative experiences related to racism and the treatment of LGBTQIA+ students.

Theme: Hiding Identity as Due to Fear and Repression. In total, 9 participants (75%) described LGBTQIA+ students hiding their identity as a result of fear and repression. This theme was found in the responses of seven students (100%) and two teachers (40%). Some students felt that not being out to themselves offered them protection. Participant 5753 noted, “I made it out unscathed because I like didn't know this about myself.” Likewise, Participant 5533 stated, “I felt

like I dodged a bullet by being so closeted to myself...I just saw it as its, it was so unacceptable.” Responses indicated that the school parameters required hiding one’s identity, and several students described the rarity of students being out at their non-affirming secondary school because it was unacceptable to the school. Participant 5538 described the fear-based atmosphere, saying, “it...felt very witch hunt in terms of pulling people out to identify and make them not feel welcome.” Participant 5753 described hiding their identity from a teacher by espousing opinions about sexuality and gender that posed a “moral dilemma,” as these ideas contradicted their own beliefs and personal identity. Participant 5538, asserted, “There was only one out person.” One teacher noted, “they can’t be who they really want to be at school.” Participant 5993 simply stated, “it wasn’t a thing, that you could do.” For another student, described hiding his identity based on the fear of how other students treated him. He described how, because other students would call him “gay,” he dated girls in order to shield himself from scrutiny.

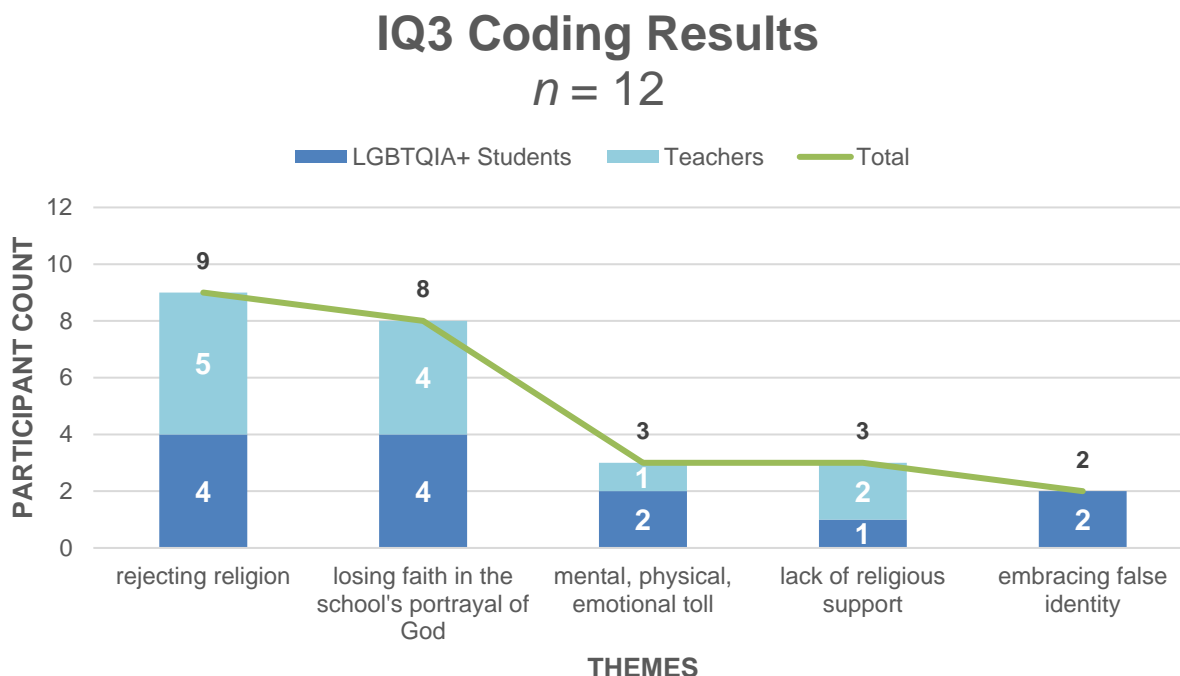
Theme: Lack of School Support. In total, 6 participants (50%) described a lack of school support for LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of four students (57%) and two teachers (40%). Student participants pointed to a lack of support. Participant 5533 noted an occasion when they reported to the principal that a teacher caused their friend to cry by sharing comments they viewed as homophobic, but the principal defended the teacher rather than providing assistance. This led to the participant feeling as though when future problems occurred at their non-affirming secondary school, they had no one to whom they could turn. A teacher described an LGBTQIA+ student sharing a similar experience with them: “She said, ‘I went looking for help. But all the person did was pray for me.’” Three teachers noted that not all teachers were safe for students to have conversations with about their experiences as LGBTQIA+ students, and one teacher confessed that they had had an interaction with an

LGBTQIA+ student that made the student feel “like you're [teacher] attacking me [student].”

This was particularly hard for students who also lacked outside support. Participant 5705 believed that a lack of support network contributed to mental and emotional hardship, saying, “I couldn't talk to my family, I couldn't talk to friends.” In contrast, students who did not have to rely solely on school support reported outcomes associated with the external support they found. Participant 5559 credited a support system with ensuring their academics did not suffer: “I don't think it necessarily like detracted from my studies or anything. And that's just because...I had parents that really emphasized the importance of education. So I was lucky in that regard.”

Interview Question 3

The following interview question was asked of student participants: “How did these incidents and situations affect your perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?” Teacher participants were asked, “How did these incidents and situations affect their perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?” Five themes emerged from the responses to RQ3: (a) rejecting religion, (b) losing faith in the school’s portrayal of God, (c) mental, physical, and emotional toll, (d) lack of religious support, and (e) embracing false identity (see Figure 5). Embracing identity was a theme only noted only in the responses of LGBTQIA+ students, not teachers.

Figure 5*Themes Related to IQ3*

Theme: Rejecting Religion. In total, nine participants (75%) described rejecting or exiting religion as a reaction experienced by LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming secondary schools. This theme was found in the responses of four students (57%) and five teachers (100%). Students described this rejection in straightforward terms. Participant 5883 stated, “I definitely think that school as a whole made me anti-religious... it definitely created distrust between me and religion,” Participant 5993 noted, “it completely turned me off to all religion,” and Participant 5538 said, “I just feel so repelled by it [Christianity], for that reason, like, to me feels such like a hateful thing.” Teachers also observed their LGBTQIA+ students turn away from religion. Participant 6172 noted, “I don't think we're winning...those students over to an identity in Christ. I think we're pushing...them away from Christianity and...making them a opponent of Christianity.” Similarly, Participant 6576 credited non-affirming schools as

part of the reason for students' rejection, saying, "they are more inclined to leave the church or be bitter toward Christians or the church because I don't think our response has been a very good one." Participant 6940 described students who "don't even want to read the Bible because they're like, God just hates me."

Theme: Losing Faith in the School's Portrayal of God. In total, eight participants (67%) described losing faith in a good God as a reaction experienced by LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming secondary schools. This theme was found in the responses of four students (33%) and four teachers (80%). Participant 6029 described how students felt the school's position was, "judgmental, non-loving, unaccepting and holier than thou." Another teacher indicated that "they think God is against them, and so are Christians...I feel like this has permeated where God doesn't accept me [referencing students] for who I am [referencing LGBTQIA+ identity]." A student shared that the school's religion condemned them to celibacy: "that was something they would also say, in school that, oh, if you're gay, it's, you know, it's, I guess, like, you're calling to be celibate, some crap like that;" this—the student described—came after "years and years of like, trying to change myself, and there's just, I know, now there is no way I can change myself. I've tried everything." The student then questioned, "Does it make sense that, that a righteous and just God that we want to speak of and believe in would create people who are not allowed to love?" Another student expressed that the school manipulated students using fear: "I had been kind of like, like feared into like, because you go to chapel every week and we're like, if you don't believe in Jesus, you're going to hell." Although Participant 5705 had not lost their faith, they expressed, "I very much now think it [the religion of the school] was a cult."

Theme: Mental, Physical, and Emotional Toll. In total, three participants (25%)

described mental, physical, and emotional stressors as a component of the shifting attitude toward religion of LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of two students (29%) and one teacher (20%). Participant 5538 described having a somatic response: “for me, it has such a bad connotation that it's a physical reaction to it. And a lot of it is the way that the topic of queerness was treated.” Participant 5705 described the school’s impact as “damaging,” saying, “that took a lot to shift away from.” One teacher believed the school left LGBTQIA+ students feeling “shunned and unloved.”

Theme: Lack of Religious Support. In total, three participants (83%) associated lack of support with the shifting religious attitudes and perceptions of LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of one student (14%) and two teachers (40%). Participant 5533 explained, “questioning was seen as a character flaw. And so it was never supported in a way I needed.” This participant further described, “when it came to actually, me asking for help, or pointing out something that was wrong...the sense I got is they wanted to get ahead of it instead of helping me or fixing the problem.” Participant 6940 indicated that “not all teachers are as comfortable within that community.” Another participant shared that it was challenging for an LGBTQIA+ student to “connect to a church.”

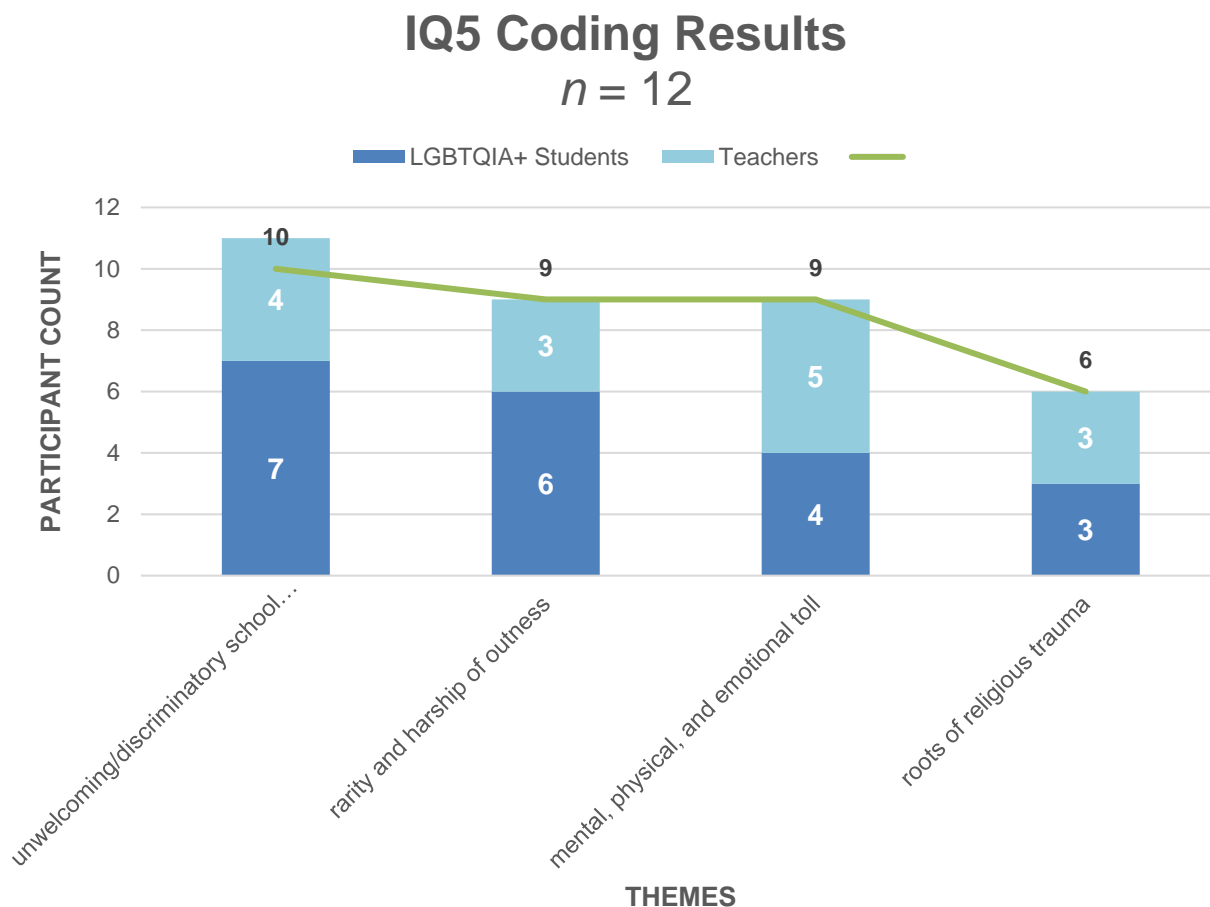
Theme: Embracing False Identity. In total, two participants (17%) described embracing a false identity or persona as part of their shifting attitude toward religion. This theme was found in the responses of two students (29%) but was not found in the responses of teachers. Although this theme was not as strong as others associated with IQ3, it has been included here because it was indicative of the complexity of the issue faced by LGBTQIA+ students. Embracing a false identity was a part of this phenomenon that was only observable to LGBTQI+ students; by its very nature, teacher participants could not observe this as one of the ways that their students

dealt with their changing perception of religion.

The two student participants indicated that their school's religious position caused them to hide pieces of their identity. One student indicated they felt pressured to lie on a class application: "identity with Christianity created so much like access at [school] and like, was like, your barrier of entry into so many different, so much involvement that you kind of had to either like, I felt like I had to like toe the line." Further, this participant indicated that this pressure extended to relationships with peers; they reported "feeling like I need to identify this way [as a Christian] to kind of protect myself from like, social ostracization." Participant 5559 indicated that some students' reaction toward religion was to fully embrace it and become "deeply closeted."

Interview Question 5

The following interview questions and probing questions were asked of student participants: "Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students encountered at your high school. How did the experiences influence their health and well-being? What other impacts do you think they had?" Teacher participants were asked, "Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students [not in your class] encountered at your high school. How did the experiences influence their health and well-being? What other impacts do you think they had?" Four themes emerged from the responses to RQ5: (a) unwelcoming/discriminatory climate, (b) mental, physical, and emotional toll, (c) rarity and hardship of outness, and (d) roots of religious trauma (see Figure 6).

Figure 6*Themes Related to IQ5*

Theme: Unwelcoming and Discriminatory Climate. In total, nine participants (75%) described school climate as a challenge to LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of four students (100%) and five teachers (33%). One teacher stated, “the school was not a welcoming place for LGBT+ students.” Participant 5559 described a school environment where bullying LGBTQIA+ students was pervasive: “There were definitely kids, and I, you know, that were bullied to their face or behind their back...it was merciless, you know...I remember them so distinctly, because everybody would, would tease, and they were, it was ruthless.” Participant 5538 also described a challenging climate: “it wasn't a school where I think

there was a lot of physical bullying or anything, it was just the, the assumption everyone had that being queer was bad, and then people would go to hell and that it was a taboo to talk about,” providing an example of a homophobic slur common on their campus. Another participant described the predicament of specific student, saying, “that was really hard for her at the time to communicate, because she knew that the the prevailing feeling on the campus was very anti or against that coming out...it was not a climate that was receptive of a student’s explaining that they identified differently than they were born in their gender.”

Theme: Mental, Physical, and Emotional Toll. In total, 10 participants (83%) described the toll on an LGBTQIA+ student’s mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being as a challenge at non-affirming secondary schools. This theme was found in the responses of seven students (57%) and four teachers (80%). One participant described the emotional toll, saying, “I would imagine that they struggled emotionally that the same way I did,” and described felling like an “outcast” and hating themselves. Another participant noted that experiences at non-affirming schools caused LGBTQIA+ students “fear. Caused more anxiety. Caused less feeling of belonging.” Participant 5559 described the impact as “long-term trauma.” Another participant indicated that students who were out suffered more than students who were not: “I know it hit a lot harder for people who were out during [school] because every, pretty much every person I knew that was out during high school tried to kill themselves upon graduation...it was really dramatic and really scary. All the sudden, all the queer kids just dropping like flies.” One participant warned that this impact to emotional and mental health could be long-lasting and that unhealthy cycles were likely to continue, saying, “my perception is that they those people are still hurting and, and might continue to, to for the rest of their lives and will probably hurt other people for that reason.”

Theme: Rarity and Hardship of Outness. In total, nine participants (75%) described the rarity and hardship associated with outness at a non-affirming secondary school as a challenge to LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of six students (86%) and three teachers (60%). Participant 5533 mentioned, “I saw that how hard it was for people that were out.” Participant 5559 described the one of the dangers of being out: “there was maybe one, maybe two people that were out, actually like out, and there would always be conversations about them, because they always seem to be like, in danger of some sort or, you know, admonished by administration.” Participant 6576 posited that “homophobic comments... cause you to withdraw or to hide even further.” Two student participants spoke about other students being outed, and one teacher described “an underground club that nearly got exposed, and there's a whole load of, ‘I don't want to be part of it. Take my name off.’”

Theme: Roots of Religious Trauma. In total, six participants (50%) described the origins or roots of religious trauma as a significant challenge to LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of three students (43%) and three teachers (60%). The theology associated with condemnation/damnation of LGBTQIA+ individuals was evident in the responses of participants. Participant 6576 explained that an LGBTQIA+ student related experiences “hearing Christians say, ‘gay people are going to hell.’” This was echoed by Participant 5538, who explained the prevailing “assumption everyone had that being queer was bad, and then people would go to hell.” Participant 5705 discussed the limiting framework of traditional gender roles and the “rigid...norms” of religious schools. Making reference to the religious incongruence of one LGBTQIA+ student, a teacher described a student who “was so confused...and he really wanted to seek God...he felt a lot of shame in that.” Another student described the lasting impact of religion, indicating that even students who did not believe the

school's religion had difficulty breaking from the morality that the school imposed on them.

Summary of Research Question 1

The first research question asked, "What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?" Ten themes emerged in participants' responses to individual interview questions associated with RQ1, indicating areas that created significant challenges for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming high schools: (a) oppressive/judgmental religion, (b) mental, physical, and emotional toll, (c) unwelcoming/discriminatory school climate, (d) hiding identity as due to fear/repression, (e) lack of school/religious support, (f) rejecting religion, (g) losing faith in the school's portrayal of God, (h) embracing false identity, (i) rarity and hardship of outness, and (j) roots of religious trauma. Analysis of the responses and themes illuminated the experiences that LGBTQIA+ students found most challenging at non-affirming secondary schools:

- The oppressive and judgmental religious messaging directed toward the LGBTQIA+ community produced religious trauma and often caused students to reject religion and lose their faith in the school's portrayal of God's character.
- Students from the LGBTQIA+ community perceived the climate at non-affirming secondary schools as unwelcoming and discriminatory.
- Attending a non-affirming school took a mental, physical, and emotional toll on LGBTQIA+ students that often persisted into adulthood.
- LGBTQIA+ students repressed their identities due to the fear associated with outness or being outed and embraced a false persona as a form of self-protection against the repercussions that accompanied outness in a non-affirming environment. This phenomenon exacerbated the rarity of outness by discouraging LGBTQIA+ students

- from openly identifying as a member of this community.
- The LGBTQIA+ community did not have access to individuals or resources that would provide them with support, which exacerbated the difficulties of attending a non-affirming secondary school.

Research Question 2

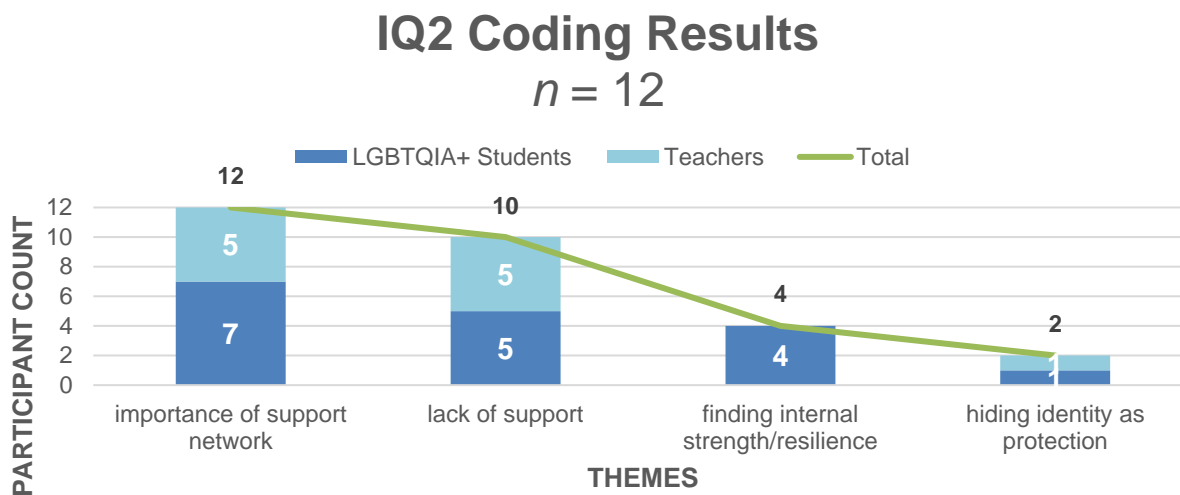
The second research question related to the best practices for LGBTQIA+ students to overcome challenges at non-affirming secondary schools. Three of the interview questions related to this research question (see Table 8). The researcher analyzed participants' responses to these interview questions, identifying common codes and themes of significance. Nine themes were identified as related to RQ2. Themes were deemed significant when multiple participants' responses to an interview question could be categorized under that theme. The following themes met this criterion: (a) the importance of a support network, (b) lack of support, (c) finding internal strength/resilience, (d) hiding identity as protection/prevention, (e) religious incongruence, (f) the need for safe support, (g) rejecting religion, (h) unhealthy coping mechanisms, and (i) religious uncertainty and poor messaging.

Interview Question 2

The following interview question was asked of student participants: "How did you deal with the impact? What resources were available to you? From whom did you seek help and advice?" Teacher participants were asked, "How did LGBTQIA+ students deal with the impact? What resources were available to them? From whom did they seek help and advice?" Four themes emerged from the responses to IQ4: (a) importance of support network, (b) lack of support, (c) finding internal strength, and (d) hiding identity as protection (see Figure 7).

Table 8*RQ2 and Corresponding IQs*

RQ Text	IQ Text for Students	Adapted IQ Text for Teachers
RQ2. What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?	<p>IQ2. How did you deal with the impact?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to you? • From whom did you seek help and advice? <p>IQ4. How did you deal with these perceptions and changes to your perception of religion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to you? • From whom did you seek help and advice? <p>IQ6. How did they deal with these issues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice? 	<p>IQ2. How did LGBTQIA+ students deal with the impact?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice? <p>IQ4. How did they deal with these perceptions and changes to their perception of religion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice? <p>IQ6. How did they deal with these issues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What resources were available to them? • From whom did they seek help and advice?

Figure 7*Themes Related to IQ2*

Theme: Importance of Support Network. In total, 12 participants (100%) cited a support network as a method of dealing with the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. Participants referred to five different aspects of a support network in responses to IQ4: (a) school employees, (b) church/pastors (connected with religion of school, if not school itself), (c) peers, (d) external network/ college resources, and (e) parents and/or family. Peers emerged as an important part of a support network, appearing in the responses of five participants (42%). Participant 6172 explained this as “a circle of support from their peers that affirm them.” Similarly, Participant 5559 described “finding a good friend group of the other weirdos...And that gave me a sort of sense of belonging.” Two of the four participants who indicated that support came from an external network did not mention peers as supportive in their responses to IQ2. One student stated that they did not have support “until college. There I had a lot of resources because I went to more liberal college, our campus pastor was very liberal. So it really became forming a new social circle.” This was echoed by Participant 5993: “I started meeting all sorts of friends who are LGBTQ and they introduced me to all sorts of resources and groups and stuff like that. So it was not until I was well out of high school and the college.” In addition to finding a supportive community in college, Participant 5538 described the importance of expanding one’s support network through “the internet, which I think makes a huge difference for, for people who are in those kinds of environments to reach out and find communities.” One student mentioned parents as part of their support network, saying, “I think parents who were not particularly religious, and...pretty progressive, was also more helpful.” Any references to school employees as part of a support network for LGBTQIA+ students indicated that some school employees were safe while others were not. For instance, Participant 5753 remembered, “we kind of had like identified for ourselves like teachers who we

felt like we can trust more.” Teachers, too, shared this view. One stated, “there's a handful of teachers that they go to.” The two students who found support in church or pastors referenced affirming theology.

Theme: Lack of Support. Although a support network was critical for LGBTQIA+ students to deal with the challenges they faced at non-affirming secondary schools, 10 participants (83%) described a lack of support at these non-affirming institutions. These responses included explicit references to the absence of support as well as students who noted having to seek external support. External support, too, was not always present. Participant 5533 stated, “while I was in high school, the only thing that I found was to get out.” Another students shared, “I did not feel like there was anybody that could reach out to. I knew for sure there was no one to reach out to at the school.” Teachers also expressed doubt that their non-affirming school provided support for LGBTQIA+ students. One explained, “I don't think there is institutional support at our school, up until perhaps even the recent past, and I don't know how much support is out there now.” The theme *lack of support* was found in the responses of three students (43%) and three teachers (60%).

Theme: Finding Internal Strength/Resilience. In total, four participants (33%) cited resilience and finding inner strength as a coping mechanism for dealing with the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. This theme was identified in the responses of four students (57%) and was not found in the responses of teachers. Participant 5559 described how hardship created a “thickening of the skin,” which caused them to “[grow] to be very strong on my own, very independent, emotionally when I have to. So, you know, in that regard, that's, that's kind of the silver lining.” Participant 5538 also found internal resolve: “I think in some parts, it helped me learn how to disagree with authority figures, which is positive.”

Other participants reacted to negativity with a resilient positivity. Participant 5753 shared, “I kind of made it out, like, I got lucky I made it out unscathed.” Similarly, Participant 5883 stated, “I think I got away with not being bullied very hard. So that was kind of nice.”

Theme: Hiding Identity as Protection. In total, two participants (17%) identified hiding identity as a way LGBTQIA+ students approached the challenges. This theme was found in the responses of one student (14%) and one teacher (20%). Participant 5559 described, “I had to live out my struggle pretty much alone. I, I did not feel like there was anybody that could reach out to...There were rumors that you know, teachers or administrators would call your parents if they discovered that you were queer in some way.” The teacher indicated that gender non-conforming students did not feel they could share the name that aligned with their gender identity with teachers, implying students feared repercussions. Although this theme was only identified in responses to IQ2 by two participants, it was considered important. Field notes indicated that participants whose responses were coded under this theme were emotionally moved by the memory.

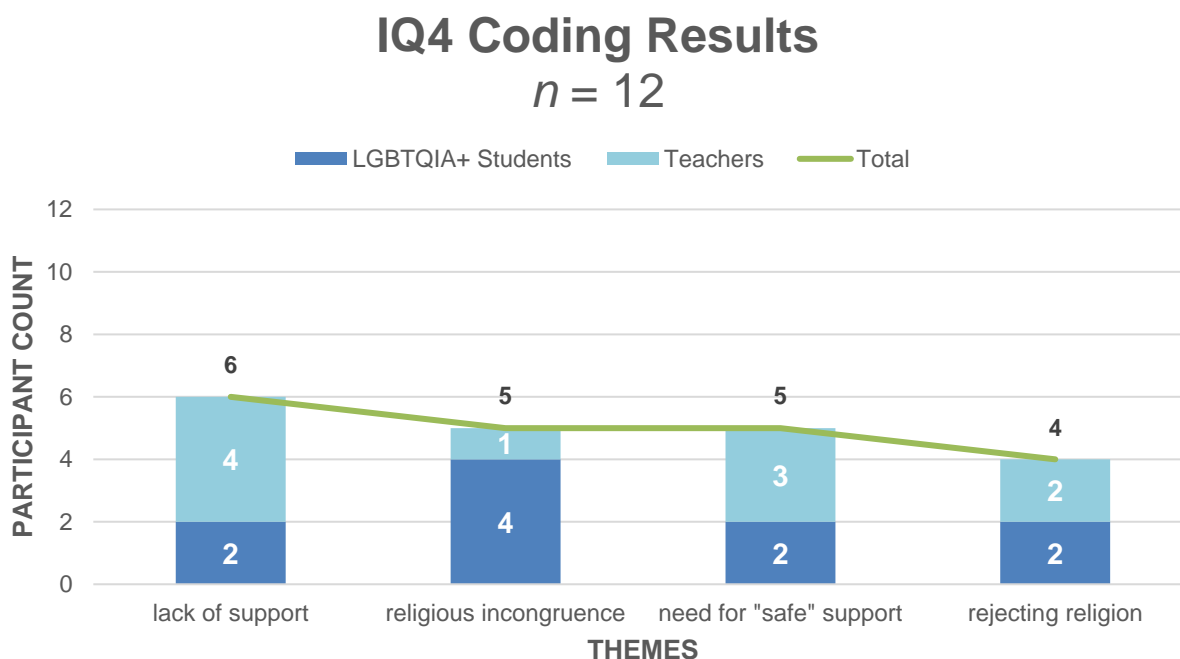
Interview Question 4

The following interview question was asked of student participants: “How did you deal with these perceptions and changes to your perception of religion? What resources were available to you? From whom did you seek help and advice?” Teacher participants were asked, “How did they deal with these perceptions and changes to their perception of religion? What resources were available to them? From whom did they seek help and advice?” Four themes emerged from the responses to IQ4: (a) religious incongruence, (b) lack of support, and (c) the need for safe support, and (d) rejecting religion (see Figure 8). Even the strongest themes identified in IQ4 achieved a lower rate of frequency when compared to strong themes in the

other interview questions. The themes associated with IQ4 appeared to represent dichotomous choices for participants. Participants were likely to respond with an answer coded for either religious incongruence or rejecting religion. Similarly, participants were likely to respond by identifying a need for safe support or by noting a lack of support. This accounted for the lower response frequency.

Figure 8

Themes Related to IQ4



Theme: Lack of Support. In total, six participants (50%) identified a lack of support to help them cope with changes to their perception of religion. This theme was found in the responses of two students (29%) and four teachers (80%). A teacher who had worked at multiple non-affirming schools could not remember spiritual support for LGBTQIA+ in any of the institutions at which they had worked. Likewise, Participant 6940, shared, “it’s shunned. It’s not talked about, there’s very little support.” And another teacher stated, “from what I’m aware of.

There was no institutional support systems or policies in place or ways to help students frame their thoughts or feel a sense of belonging or love, regardless of their sexual identity, that I'm aware of." Participant 5559 echoed the sentiments expressed by teachers: "I never felt like there was anybody, any adult that I could confide in any religious or spiritual leader that I could confide in." Another student noted that schools lacked religious resources that were affirming, saying, "there was absolutely no resources in that regard. No, sort of affirming anything."

Theme: Religious Incongruence. In total, five participants (42%) identified religious incongruence when describing how they dealt with changes to their perception of religion. Religious incongruence was explained as attempts to reconcile a religious identity with an LGBTQIA+ identity. This theme was found in the responses of four students (57%) and one teacher (20%). Participant 5705 noted when they tried approaching a teacher to ask—on behalf of an "imaginary friend"—how to find an affirming approach so that they would not lose their faith: "conversation was shut down. It's very much like if you lead them to another denomination, you're leading them to stray, they're gonna go down a path, they're gonna lose their faith, they're gonna end up in eternal damnation." Participant 5993 described this as a "crisis of faith." Participant 5533 expressed, "I thought that I was wrong and broken and that kind of stayed for a long time, I felt like everyone else had this spiritual manual kind of thing. Like it makes perfect sense to everyone else. But I'm like, your God, must just feel different than my God because it's not, none of the warm fuzzies that you're describing."

Theme: Need for Safe Support. In total, five participants (43%) identified the need for safe individuals to help support LGBTQIA+ students through changes to their perception of religion. This theme was found in the responses of two students (29%) and three teachers (60%). Participant 6029 explained, "the resources they use are if they're very desperate or if they're very

they're either at a stage of desperation, or they're at a stage of I don't care anymore. Never from a positive point of view.” One teacher noted that although students might choose to talk with or disclose information to a Bible teacher, “students also know that they have to talk with fear.” Participant 6567 explained that students were careful about what information they shared with teachers. Participant 5753 indicated that psychological and religious safety were important factors for students seeking religious support, sharing that their faith-based support system in college was safe because “they aren't like, trying to get people to come to [Christian faith-based group] events because they want to tell them they're going to hell it's like, you know, like, we want to like love you and support you.” Fear of consequences was closely tied to religion for Participant 5533, who noted, “I was definitely trying to figure out what I believed and felt like, like I had to like, do it in secret because any questioning was seen as misbehavior.”

Theme: Rejecting Religion. In total, four participants (33%) indicated that LGBTQIA+ students had or were likely to reject religion as a result of how their faith perspective had changes. This theme was found in the responses of two students (29%) and two teachers (40%). Participant 5993 described this journey: “I very slowly lost my faith...And I felt guilty about losing my faith. So there was like, still that seed of faith in there. And then finally, after years of therapy, and years of dating, I was like, whatever, I'm good. Now I am out.” Participant 5883 broke from the Christian community more abruptly, saying, “the second I left the school, I went straight into secular education and never looked back.” One teacher put it simply, saying that LGBTQIA+ students dealt with religion by “stay[ing] away from God.”

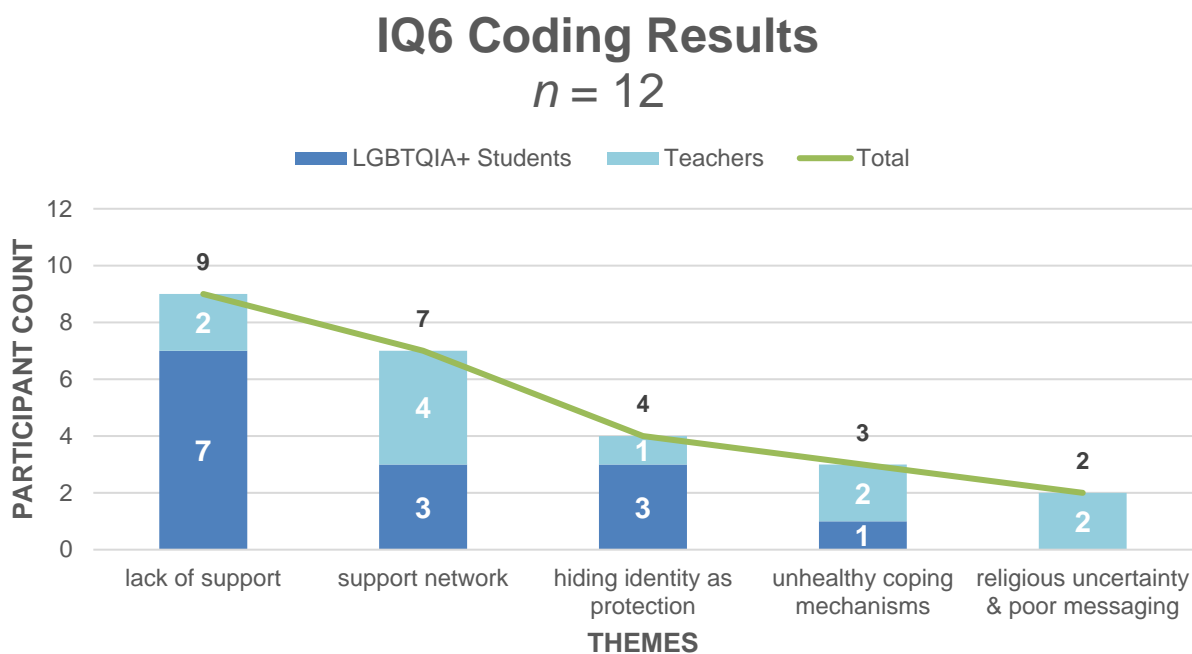
Interview Question 6

This interview question focused on the experiences of other LGBTQIA+ students with which participants were familiar. The following interview question was asked of student

participants: “How did they deal with these issues? What resources were available to them? From whom did they seek help and advice?” Teacher participants were asked, “How did they deal with these issues? What resources were available to them? From whom did they seek help and advice?” Five themes emerged from the responses to IQ6: (a) lack of support, (b) importance of support network, (c) hiding identity as protection, (d) mental, physical, and emotional toll, and (e) religious uncertainty and poor messaging (see Figure 9). Because this question asked participants to explain how other individuals responded to challenges, many responses were brief when compared with responses to IQ2, which referred to a participant’s first hand or immediate knowledge. As a result, themes that were not as strong were coded and presented.

Figure 9

Themes Related to IQ6



Theme: Lack of Support. In total, nine participants (75%) indicated that LGBTQIA+ students had little to no support as they dealt with challenges in their non-affirming secondary

school environment. This theme was found in the responses of seven students (100%) and two teachers (40%). For example, Participant 5705 stated, “Talking to a lot of my fellow high schoolers now who now come out as queer, we all sort of talked about that. And I haven't heard any sort of positive experience in terms of resources.” Participant 5538 agreed, sharing, “Definitely not at school, in any sense....I do know other people were isolated.” One teacher succinctly put it: “zero support that I knew of.”

Theme: Support Network. Seven participants (58%) indicated that a support network was important to help LGBTQIA+ cope with challenges in their non-affirming secondary school environment. This theme was found in the responses of three students (43%) and four teachers (80%). Participant 5559 noted that the LGBTQIA+ students they were familiar with at a non-affirming Catholic secondary school had a GSA, and “those resources helped those people; I would say they were not struggling as deeply at the time.” All six (50%) participants who referenced peers described them as part of LGBTQIA+ students’ support network. Participant 5559 expressed, “we’ve all found like deep community and deep acceptance in ourselves.” Participant 6029 shared, “there is a lot of camaraderie amongst our gay community...they love each other, and they rely on each other.” Participant 6576 also noted that parents could be part of a support network, saying, “I would hope that they had parents that loved them.” The most positive reference to school employees was made by a teacher, who said, “I would hope they find an adult on campus or counselor who could walk them through it as well.” While peers were identified as an important part of many LGBTQIA+ students’ existing support network, the inclusion of adults as part of a support network remained more aspirational than substantial in participants’ responses. The two student participants who referenced adults (one mentioned teachers and the other parents) cautioned that teachers and parents were not always a supportive

or safe.

Theme: Hiding Identity as Protection. In total, four participants (33%) indicated that LGBTQIA+ students hid their identity as protection as they dealt with challenges in their non-affirming secondary school environment. This theme was found in the responses of three students (43%) and one teacher (20%). Participant 5753 shared that friends were afraid to do “anything, like, that could potentially damage you” because they did not want to compromise their academic standing at the school. Another participant shared a story about a student who chose not to come out in order to protect family members who were on staff. Identity and outness was closely tied with protecting privilege, either for the LGBTQIA+ student or those associated with them. Likewise, Participant 5538 described students who feared getting reported.

Theme: Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms. In total, three participants (25%) indicated that LGBTQIA+ students turned to unhealthy coping mechanisms as they dealt with the mental health challenges produced by their non-affirming secondary school environment. This theme was found in the responses of one student (14%) and two teachers (40%). Participant 6771 indicated that the school had created “shame,” “embarrassment,” “a lot of emotions,” and awkwardness for a student with whom the teacher was familiar. Another teacher indicated that LGBTQIA+ students were prone to “suicidal ideation and depression.” Participant 5559 remembered a friend who self-harmed. Participant 5753 indicated that students could perpetuate unhealthy cycles by hurting others when they experienced hurt.

Theme: Religious Uncertainty and Poor Messaging. Two participants (17%)—both teachers—indicated that religious uncertainty and poor messaging by adults or by the school hindered LGBTQIA+ students’ ability to deal with challenges in their non-affirming secondary school environment. Both teachers shared that they were unsure how to share information with

LGBTQIA+ students who approached them. Participant 6771 stated, “there's a there's a struggle that happens there. That's really difficult.” Another teacher stated, “I don't want to betray Jesus. And at the same time, I don't want this to be the thing that causes division when it doesn't need to be.” Further, this teacher indicated that the way the school approached gender and sexuality drove students further from faith, saying, “we highlight marriage and family to the degree that we're making other people feel like you're you don't really belong, that has to drive the wedge even further.” Although this theme was not strong, it was included to demonstrate that religious uncertainty extended beyond LGBTQIA+ students to teachers, possibly indicating why LGBTQIA+ students did not have as much support as they desired.

Summary of RQ2

The second research question asked, “What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?” Nine themes emerged in participants’ responses to individual interview questions associated with RQ2, indicating areas that assisted LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming high schools in overcoming challenges and areas for growth so that schools could better support this population. These themes were (a) the importance of a support network, (b) lack of support, (c) finding internal strength/resilience, (d) hiding identity as protection, (e) religious incongruence, (f) the need for safe support, (g) rejecting religion, (h) unhealthy coping mechanisms, and (i) religious uncertainty and poor messaging. Analysis of the responses and themes indicated the strategies most effective for LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming the challenges they faced at non-affirming secondary schools:

- Despite the absence of support for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools, forming a multi-layered support network, made up of both peers and

- supportive adults is essential to the success of LGBTQIA+ students.
- Rejecting religion is a strategy that has helped LGBTQIA+ students overcome feelings of religious incongruence that were, at times, aggravated rather than alleviated by the messaging of the school.
 - Hiding one's identity is another coping strategy that students have used to protect themselves from the repercussions associated with outness at their non-affirming schools.
 - In addition, unhealthy coping mechanisms have been used by LGBTQIA+ students as they grappled with the mental health challenges associated with attending a non-affirming secondary school.
 - Finding inner strength amidst difficult circumstances promotes resilience in LGBTQIA+ students.

Research Question 3

The third research question related to how LGBTQIA+ students and their teachers defined, tracked, and measured the success of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. Two of the interview questions related to this research question (see Table 9). The researcher analyzed participants' responses to these interview questions, identifying common codes and themes of significance.

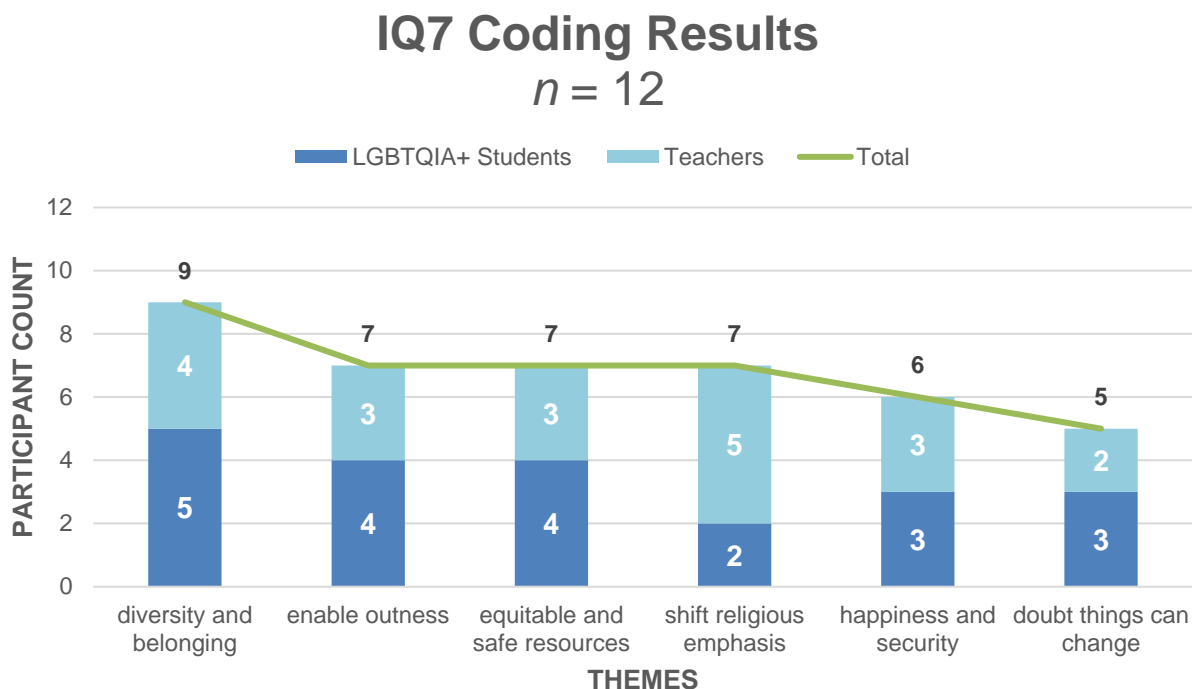
Table 9*RQ3 and Corresponding IQs*

RQ Text	IQ Text for Students	Adapted IQ Text for Teachers
RQ3. How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure LGBTQIA+ students' success?	IQ7. What was your expectation of your experience and what would a great high school experience have looked like? IQ8. How would that have manifested itself over time?	IQ7. What would a great high school experience have looked like for LGBTQIA+ students? IQ8. How would that have manifested itself for these students over time?

Eleven themes were identified as related to RQ3 (see Figure #). Themes were deemed significant when multiple participants' responses to an interview question could be categorized under that theme. The following themes met this criterion: (a) diversity and belonging, (b) enable/permit outness, (c) equitable and safe resources, (d) shift religious emphasis, (e) happiness and security, (f) doubt things can change, (g) personal and social growth at the rate of peers, (h) decreased mental and emotional damage, (i) openness to God and religious school, (j) freedom to explore identity, and (k) improved school climate.

Interview Question 7

The following interview question was asked of student participants: "What was your expectation of your experience and what would a great high school experience have looked like?" Teacher participants were asked, "What would a great high school experience have looked like for LGBTQIA+ students?" Six themes emerged from the responses to IQ7: (a) diversity and belonging, (b) enable/permit outness, (c) equitable and safe resources, (d) shift religious emphasis, (e) happiness and security, and (f) doubt things can change (see Figure 10).

Figure 10*Themes Related to IQ7*

Theme: Diversity and Belonging. Nine participants (75%) indicated that a desirable secondary school experience for LGBTQIA+ students includes a climate of diversity and belonging. This theme was found in the responses of five students (71%) and four teachers (80%). These teachers and students used words, such as, “welcoming,” “safe,” “comfortable,” “security,” and “acceptance.” Participant 6940 noted that students should be included in determining how to ensure that LGBTQIA+ students felt safe in classrooms. Another teacher described a school climate where “everyone's welcome. You know, no matter who you are, and how you identify, we want to love on you, and make you feel accepted on campus.” Furthermore, Participant 5753 imagined “being able to...meet people from different... diverse group of...backgrounds.”

Theme: Enable Outness. In all, seven participants (58%) indicated that a desirable

secondary school experience for LGBTQIA+ students would include the ability to be out, meaning they would be able to be open about their LGBTQIA+ identity. This theme was found in the responses of four students (71%) and three teachers (60%). Participant 5883 stated, “I was kind of afraid to do anything that was perceived as gay or queer...So I think being able to behave like a normal student would have been nice.” Participant 5538 expressed a desire for “openness to be able to express oneself and be honest about who they are and not fear.” One teacher’s indicated that students would feel less hated by Christians if the school allowed “being more open about it [outness].” Yet, each teacher’s response indicated they were not sure how students could be out at a non-affirming secondary school. Amidst this uncertainty, Participant 6771 believed a compromise was possible, saying, “there is a medium somewhere in there where a student can feel comfortable, at least.”

Theme: Equitable and Safe Resources. In all, seven participants (58%) indicated that a desirable secondary school experience for LGBTQIA+ students includes access to equitable and safe resources. This theme was found in the responses of four students (71%) and three teachers (60%). Three participants expressed a need for formal, safe places, clubs, or support groups for LGBTQIA+ students. Participant 6029 suggested that LGBTQIA+ students have formal representation at their non-affirming school. Participant 6771 believed that “having like, a diversity club or an office of diversity” would make a meaningful difference, if it was able to engage students, and Participant 5533 expressed that “a GSA would have been fantastic.” Participant 5559 described a need for “love from others” and “acceptance.” One teacher suggested that the burden fell to adults, suggesting, “having maybe the grownups more comfortable with conversation.” Participant 6940 summarized the need: “having more support.”

Theme: Shift Religious Emphasis. In all, seven participants (58%) indicated that

shifting the religious emphasis away from the perceived sins of sexual and gender minority individuals would create a more a desirable secondary school experience for LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of two students (29%) and five teachers (100%). Participant 5705 requested “less emphasis on that [beliefs about homosexuality] and more emphasis on love and other values, but there's such an emphasis on calling out sin and immorality.” Another student, Participant 5538, called for non-affirming schools to have some affirming teachers on staff, saying, “give space to Christian teachers who are affirming.” The perspectives of teachers included a range of beliefs. Participant 6940 stated, “In a Christian school, I would love to see is somehow changing the idea that Christians hate, LGBTQ+. Just change that paradigm.” One teacher expressed uncertainty about how to shift religious policies, explaining, “I'm torn and conflicted...part of me is like, throw up in the doors and let Jesus work that out, but I also know he wants us to use discernment and wisdom. And there's other things that we would say no to if it's really sinful.” Several other teachers pointed to the need for non-affirming schools to acknowledge their own hypocrisy. Participant 6172 noted that it “feels like in Christian circles, we raise the sin of being gay to the very top of the list. And that's created a combative atmosphere between the church and in this instance, this school, with students and people in that community, so they returned combativeness, and list all the sins of the institution, and maybe rightly so.”

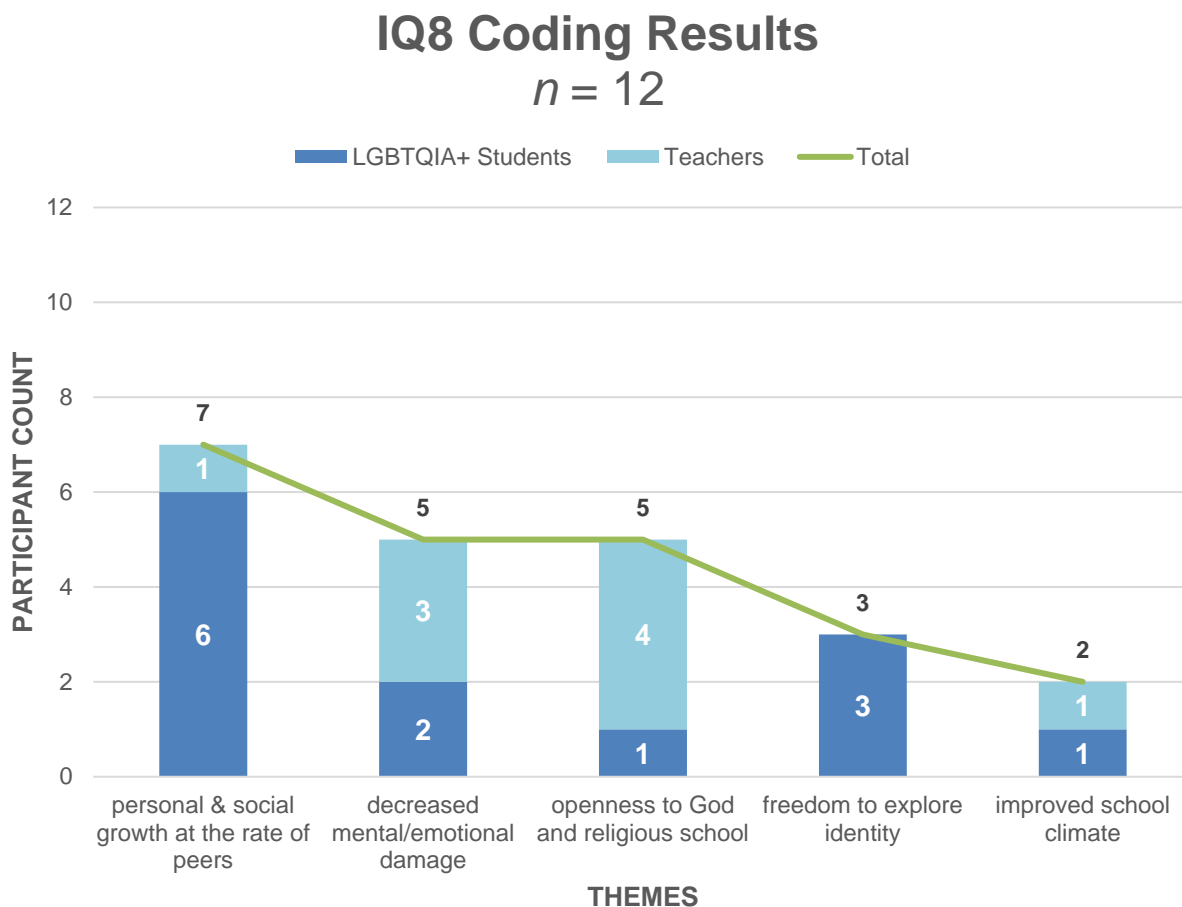
Theme: Happiness and Security. In all, six participants (50%) indicated non-affirming secondary schools should promote the happiness and emotional security of their LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of three students (43%) and three teachers (60%). Describing desirable emotions, these teachers and students used words and phrases, such as, “happier,” “relational security,” “loved,” and “peace.” Participant 5538 elaborated on the

emotions that were problematic, saying, “not fear, not fear of being shamed or being told they're being prayed for making it feel like... something is wrong with them. Not feeling like they're going to be seen as less by their teachers, like the people that are supposed to protect them.”

Theme: Doubt Things Can Change. In all, five participants (42%) expressed doubt that non-affirming secondary schools could or would change to better support their LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was found in the responses of three students (43%) and two teachers (40%) and was most often found accompanying references to affirming theology. Participant 5533, stated, “I mean, gosh, it just feels like asking for too much.” Referencing a shift to affirming theology, one teacher said, “if that’s the thing that they require, I'm not sure it's possible.” Participant 5533 expressed, “I think a lot of people, places like [school] would be resistant to being openly accepting or affirmative of those experiences.” Participant 5993 stated, “I can't imagine a scenario where that would be a safe school for anyone who's openly LGBTQ... they would have to change their doctrine. Don't think it's gonna happen.”

Interview Question 8

The following interview question was asked of student participants: “How would that have manifested itself over time?” Teacher participants were asked, “How would that have manifested itself for these students over time?” Six themes emerged from the responses to IQ8: (a) personal and social growth at the rate of peers, (b) decreased mental and emotional damage, (c) openness to God and religious school, (d) freedom to explore identity, and (e) improved school climate (see Figure 11).

Figure 11*Themes Related to IQ8*

Theme: Personal and Social Growth at the Rate of Peers. In all, seven participants (58%) indicated that if non-affirming secondary school were to better support their LGBTQIA+ students, these students would experience personal and social growth at the same rate as their peers, rather than feeling developmentally disadvantaged or behind. This theme was found in the responses of six students (86%) and three teachers (20%). Four students indicated that they would have dated earlier. Participant 5883 explained, “I did not know how to engage with people of the same sex, I did not know how to engage in dating, or, or really anything I didn't know how to behave. I didn't get any of that learning that a student might get. It was like a delayed growth.”

Five students believed their personal development would have accelerated. Participant 5753 and Participant 5993 both used the phrase “better adjusted,” while Participant 5883 indicated that they would have been more emotionally mature, and Participant 6576 used the phrase “fully functional adult.”

Theme: Decreased Mental/Emotional Damage. Five participants (42%) indicated that if non-affirming secondary school were to better support their LGBTQIA+ students, these students would experience decreased mental and emotional damage. This theme was found in the responses of two students (29%) and three teachers (20%). Participant 6771 believed students would experience “a feeling of freedom...they don't have to worry about it so much” and Participant 6940 indicated students would “feel safe, respected.” Participant 5993 shared, “I would have been a better adjusted human...I think a lot of the depression would not have been there...I probably would not have been as suicidal.” Participant 5559 believed they might not have “hurt as many people along the way” and would have been less likely to take risks to find community. Participant 6576 expressed, “they wouldn't have this pain to bounce off against. I feel like a lot of times, some of the poor decisions we make are because we're hurting. And if they felt like I was super supported and super loved and cared for, my hope, would be that as they enter their adult life, they have a lot less of these problems that kids accrue when they're reeling from pain: drug addiction, alcohol, addiction, poor choices.”

Theme: Openness to God and Religious School. In total, five participants (42%) indicated that if non-affirming secondary school were to better support their LGBTQIA+ students, LGBTQIA+ students would be more open to God and religious schooling. This theme was found in the responses of one student (14%) and five teachers (100%). Student and teacher responses indicated that one goal or positive outcome of Christian education was to draw people

to Jesus. Participant 5538 indicated that if schools were to change their practices, “I think I would be less adverse to Christianity, which I think for people at a Christian school would be kind of the ideal outcome if someone doesn't leave the church or the religion.” One teacher elaborated, comparing non-affirming schools to Pharisees, and expressing that if schools could remove their hypocrisy, students would have “a lot less resistance to the concept” of Christianity. Participant 6576 expressed, “My hope would be that they would look back on Christians and say they these are people who embrace me for who I was in the moment, before I really even knew who I fully was myself,” and that this would turn students to Jesus, even if it was not until the distant future.

Theme: Freedom to Explore Identity. In all, three participants (25%) indicated that if non-affirming secondary school were to better support their LGBTQIA+ students, these students would have the freedom to explore their identities. Different than outness, participants understood the ability to explore their identity as discovering an LGBTQIA+ identity without having to repress these feelings and understanding what that meant to them. This theme was found in the responses of six students (43%) and but was not found in the responses of teachers. Participant 5559 noted that every student required “space to discover themselves,” and without a change within schools, students were forced to delay this process until after high school. This was echoed by Participant 5538, who mused, “I think a lot of people would have just found out who they were earlier and able to, to fully explore their identities.” Participant 5993 shared, “I was suppressing this part of my identity...that's a pretty big part of my identity,” indicating that hiding their identity resulted in mental health struggles. Participant 5993 went on to say, “I would love to have avoided that.”

Theme: Improved School Climate. Two participants (17%) indicated that if non-

affirming secondary school were to better support their LGBTQIA+ students, the school climate would improve and shift undesirable behaviors. This theme was found in the responses of one student (14%) and one teacher (20%). Participant 5753 indicated that students would not be homophobic by the end of their secondary school experience. Further, Participant 6940 stated, “students...wouldn't be bullied; the community would know there's consequences for that.” Although this theme was not as strong as others associated with IQ8, it identified clear goals important to LGBTQIA+ students and was therefore included.

Summary of RQ3

The third research question asked, “How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure LGBTQIA+ students’ success?” Eleven themes emerged in participants’ responses to individual interview questions associated with RQ3, indicating areas that participants associated with the success of LGBTQIA+ students. These themes were (a) diversity and belonging, (b) enable/permit outness, (c) equitable and safe resources, (d) shift religious emphasis, (e) happiness and security, (f) doubt things can change, (g) personal and social growth at the rate of peers, (h) decreased mental and emotional damage, (i) openness to God and religious school, (j) freedom to explore identity, and (k) improved school climate. Analysis of the responses and themes delineated how key stakeholders defined, evaluated, and measured the success of their LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools:

- For LGBTQIA+ students, personal success in a non-affirming environment is closely tied with the ability to be out.
- LGBTQIA+ students measure success comparatively against the social development of their peers and perceive exploring relationships and identity as age-appropriate for

- secondary school students.
- Successful non-affirming secondary schools would emphasize the love of God in their theology and measure this success in the openness of their LGBTQIA+ students toward God and in positive attitudes toward their religious school.
 - A school climate of diversity and belonging where equitable resources and support are freely available to all students without repercussions is a defining factor of success for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools.
 - Students from the LGBTQIA+ community and their teachers measure success using the indicators of happiness, security, and mental/emotional well-being.
 - Although LGBTQIA+ students and teachers have concrete ideas of what success looks like for this population, there is doubt that change will occur.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question related to the recommended strategies and best practices for school leaders to implement to support LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. Two of the interview questions related to this research question (see Table 10). The researcher analyzed participants' responses to these interview questions, identifying common codes and themes of significance.

Table 10

RQ4 and Corresponding IQs

RQ Text	IQ Text for Students	Adapted IQ Text for Teachers
RQ4. Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders recommend to leaders within these institutions to support this population?	IQ9. If you could go back to high school and start over, what would you do differently? IQ10. What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?	IQ9. If your LGBTQIA+ students could go back to high school and start over, what would you recommend they do differently? IQ10. What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?

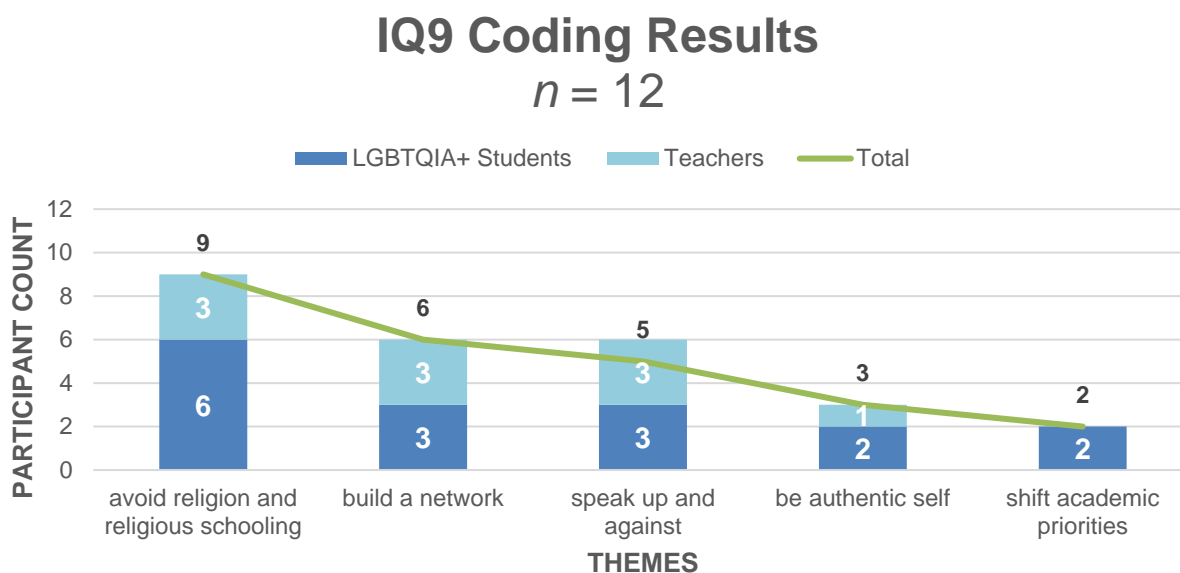
Ten themes were identified as related to RQ4. Themes were deemed significant when multiple participants' responses to an interview question could be categorized under that theme. The following themes met this criterion: (a) avoid religion and religious schooling, (b) build a network, (c) speak up and against, (d) be authentic self, (e) shift academic priorities, (f) theology of unconditional love, (g) formalized institutional support, (h) inclusion and belonging, (i) outness and confidentiality, and (j) doubt things can change.

Interview Question 9

The following interview question was asked of student participants: "If you could go back to high school and start over, what would you do differently?" Teacher participants were asked, "If your LGBTQIA+ students could go back to high school and start over, what would you recommend they do differently?" Five themes emerged from the responses to IQ9: (a) avoid religion and religious schooling, (b) build a network, (c) speak up and against, (d) be authentic self, and (e) shift academic priorities (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

Themes Related to IQ9



Theme: Avoid Religion and Religious Schooling. Nine participants (75%) indicated that they would recommend LGBTQIA+ students avoid religious schooling. This theme was identified in the responses of six students (86%) and three teachers (60%). Examples of this sentiment included Participant 5753 saying, “if I could redo it, I just wouldn't go there,” and Participant 5883 saying, “I definitely would avoid a religious school at any context.”

Note on Avoid Religious Schooling Theme. In contrast with this theme, one teacher who did not recommend that students avoid non-affirming schools indicated that the burden was on adults to “be kind and friendly and understand their perspective” to ameliorate the “harsh message” of the institution. This participant’s response was not counted toward the theme *avoid religious schooling*.

Theme: Build a Network. Six participants (50%) indicated that they would recommend LGBTQIA+ students proactively build a support network. This theme was identified in the responses of three students (43%) and three teachers (60%). Three teachers recommended that LGBTQIA+ students seek out support from adults. Participants 6771 and 6940 both recommended that students make connections with teachers in addition to peers. Another teacher recommended LGBTQIA+ students get connected to a professional counselor. Participant 6576 stated, “I would hope they can talk to mom and dad.” Participant 5533 told a story about taking action to leave their non-affirming school before graduation, saying, “I feel like my own savior because of that memory,” indicating that LGBTQIA+ students should not only look for support from others but can also be a resource themselves.

Theme: Speak Up and Against. Six participants (50%) indicated that they would recommend LGBTQIA+ students increase the amount that they speak up and against the individuals, policies, and challenges they faced. This theme was identified in the responses of

three students (43%) and three teachers (60%). Participant 5705 stated, “I would have developed a little bit more independence and stood up for what I thought of instead of just trying to fit in... I would have taken less of a passive role.” Participant 5538 echoed these words, saying, “I would have stood up more.” Participant 6940 encouraged students to “to speak up every single time something [negative] happened, just let teachers know...and change the culture.” Participant 6576 had a similar recommendation: “maybe those students could come talk to somebody in admin and say, here are the things that we're experiencing. And my hope would be that it would be received with care and concern.”

Theme: Be Authentic Self. Three participants (25%) indicated that they would recommend LGBTQIA+ students be their authentic self despite the non-affirming environment. This theme was identified in the responses of two students (29%) and one teacher (20%). All of these participants indicated that students should be themselves, be out, or find a place where they could be out. Participant 5559 ruminated, “I definitely would not spend as much time or energy trying to...fit in.” Participant 6771 counseled, “I would encourage them to be themselves. I would say, I would never recommend that a student try to hide who they are, try to cover up how they're feeling.”

Theme: Shift Academic Priorities. Two participants (17%) indicated that they would recommend LGBTQIA+ students rethink how academics fit into their priorities. This theme was identified in the responses of two students (29%) but no teachers. Participant 5753 was happy with their academic experience, but did not believe that a non-affirming school was necessary to have a positive academic experience. In contrast, Participant 5559 indicated that it would be a challenge to care about academics if they returned to high school. Both participants indicated that they now valued other elements of their lives more than academics. This theme was noted

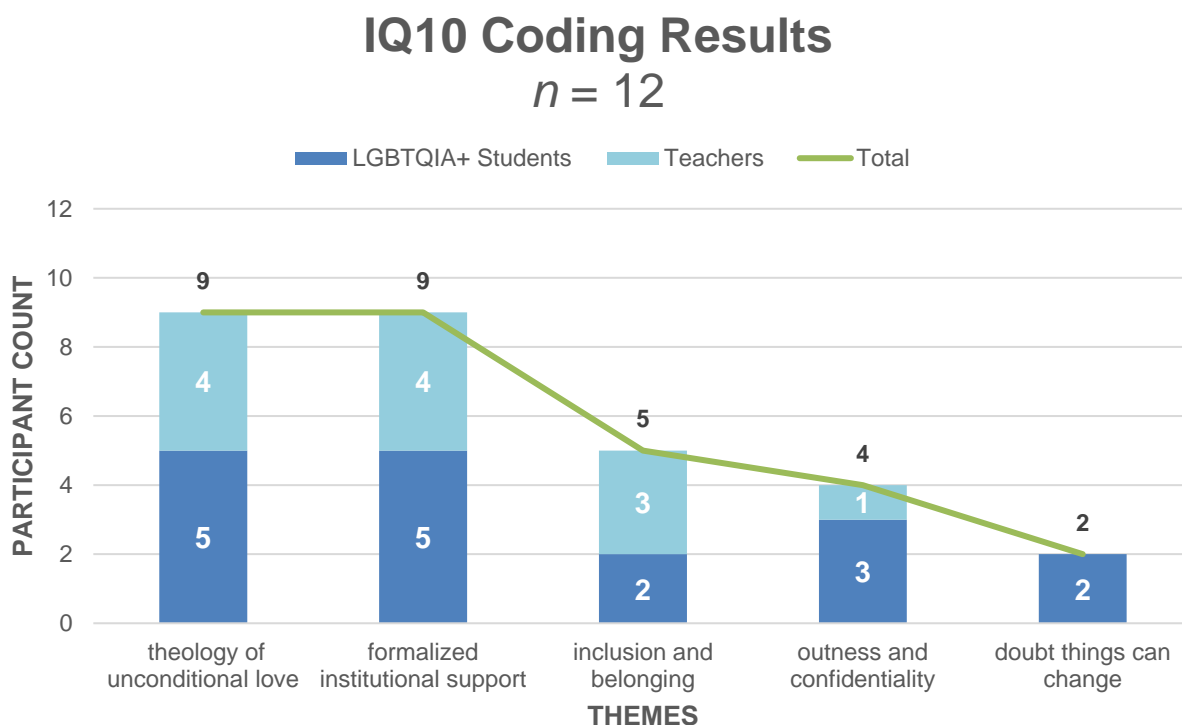
because it appeared only in the responses of LGBTQIA+ students, indicating that student participants had a different perspective than teachers on this issue.

Interview Question 10

The following interview question was asked of student participants: “What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?” Teacher participants were asked, “What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?” Five themes emerged from the responses to IQ10: (a) theology of unconditional love, (b) formalized institutional support, (c) inclusion and belonging, (d) outness and confidentiality, and (e) doubt things can change (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

Themes Related to IQ10



Theme: Theology of Unconditional Love. Nine participants (75%) recommended

school leaders shift to a theology of unconditional love, rather than a theology that emphasized condemnation associated with sexual and gender minorities. This theme was identified in the responses of five students (71%) and four teachers (80%). Pointing to the danger of misrepresenting the gospel message, Participant 6172 asked school leaders to consider their goals, “what are we trying to do with these kids? Are we trying to support students in general, not just those kids, but students in general? Are we trying to love them into Christ? Or are we trying to set up rules and systems and hoops to jump through to get to Christ?” Participants 5753 and 5705 mentioned how harmful the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin” was. Participants 5583, 5533, 6576, and 6029 indicated that it was time to stop telling LGBTQIA+ students that they were going to hell. One teacher stated, “when they hear about teachers who are saying things like ‘you’re going to hell,’ ...that’s got to be shut down...that cannot be permitted at the school.” Participant 5559 pointed out that existing policies were not drawing students to Christ, saying, “All you’re doing is pushing people away. And then, you know, what’s the point of that?” Five participants (5753, 6576, 6172, 6771, and 6029) used the word “love” in their response, calling for unconditional love and acceptance for LGBTQIA+ students. One participant noted that this could be possible even if the school remained theologically non-affirming.

Theme: Formalized Institutional Support. Nine participants (75%) recommended school leaders implement formalized institutional support for LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was identified in the responses of five students (71%) and four teachers (80%). Six recommendations related to school employees. Both students and teachers indicated that students needed staff who were known as safe and supportive. For instance, Participant 5753 used the phrase, “making sure students know that you’re a safe space,” and expressed, “you can’t have a homophobic leadership team and have an inclusive space.” Participant 5753 also suggested that

leaders may need to remove teachers who “can't...care about your students.” Participant 6940 recommended that safe teachers openly discuss issues so students knew they were not alone and that school leaders provide resources for parents as well as students, since parents were a component of students’ support network. Several participants recommended that school leaders themselves needed support. Participant 5753 suggested having leaders read books “deconstructing that idea [love the sinner hate the sin].” Participant 5538 recommended, “informing themselves and making a real open effort to engage with literature or media for the queer community.”

Participants also made recommendations about curriculum and policy. Participants 5883 and 5993 suggested “sex ed programs should be inclusive” (5883), and Participant 5883 also suggested schools reconsider how they taught science and gender identity. Participant 5993 recommended “zero tolerance, harassment policies.” Participant 5559 indicated a need for “a gay straight alliance or just, you know, a queer club, however you want to call it or you know, however you want to phrase it, there's a million ways to market Jesus in a queer space.”

Theme: Inclusion and Belonging. Five participants (42%) recommended school leaders shift the culture of their schools to be one of inclusion and belonging for LGBTQIA+ students. This theme was identified in the responses of two students (29%) and three teachers (60%). The three teacher participants indicated that they believed their school was on a path toward change. One described, “I think [school] is really doing a good job at evolving and trying to navigate this...now we're talking about it, so I feel safer in the classroom to talk about it and to be more open with the students.” Student participants pointed to the work required to effect change so that schools would be inclusive and promote a sense of belonging for LGBTQIA+ students. Participant 5753 expressed, “You ultimately have to unpack so much homophobia.” Participant

5705 called for leaders to recognize the impact of their actions: “What you promote, what you teach, what you put on the internet, who you vote for, is all being seen, is all being taken in by the students and you can tell them you love them as much as you want, but like they see it differently like you it is a direct attack on the people you supposedly care about.” Participant 6172 set a goal for leaders, “in our community... everybody feels loved and respected and valued.”

Theme: Outness and Confidentiality. Four participants (33%) recommended school leaders enable outness at their institutions, with the caveat that staff be permitted to hold students’ revelations in confidence. This theme was identified in the responses of three students (43%) and one teacher (20%). Two students indicated that it would be helpful for teachers not to report students who came out. Participant 5753 described this, saying, “not only do I [teacher], like, support you, but I also like won't tell someone if you'd like come out to me or like have questions about your faith.” Participant 5559 recommended, “allow your, your staff to maintain confidence with their kids.” Participant 5883 advocated for students being able to be out openly and was against “forcing them [students] to conform.” One teacher also advocated for authenticity and “not sweeping it under the carpet,” saying, “We are a community made up of different people, different genders, different races, different beliefs. And if we're okay to talk about things like different religions, we should be okay to talk about different feelings and different thoughts.”

Theme: Doubt Things Can Change. Two participants (17%) doubted that school leaders would make changes or that meaningful change would occur. This theme was identified in the responses of two students (29%) but no teachers. Participant 5993 stated, “I know, it's not going to happen. I can't, I'm trying to think of a way that they could support their LGBTQ

students without having to fundamentally change who they are as a church, and I'm struggling to think of a way that they can do that." Another participant suggested "maybe I'd fire a lot of them [school employees]" who could not give up harmful messaging, commenting, "you probably shouldn't be in education, if you can't like care about your students." At the end of their response, the participant stated, "That probably won't make the research."

Summary of RQ4

The fourth research question asked, "Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders recommend to leaders within these institutions to support this population?" Ten themes emerged in participants' responses to individual interview questions associated with RQ4, indicating areas that participants believed school leaders should change to better support LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. These themes were (a) avoid religion and religious schooling, (b) build a network, (c) speak up and against, (d) be authentic self, (e) shift academic priorities, (f) theology of unconditional love, (g) formalized institutional support, (h) inclusion and belonging, (i) outness and confidentiality, and (j) doubt things can change. Analysis of the responses and themes identified key recommendations for school leaders at non-affirming secondary schools supporting the success of their LGBTQIA+ students:

- Students and teachers recommend that LGBTQIA+ students have an increased ability to be their authentic selves at non-affirming secondary schools and the ability to exercise control over how information about their outness is communicated to others.
- Students and teachers recommend that non-affirming schools shift their focus away from an emphasis on sin as it relates to the LGBTQIA+ community specifically and lean into the unconditional love of God toward all students. Without this shift, many

students and teachers recommend that LGBTQIA+ students avoid non-affirming religious education.

- Students and teachers recommend that school leaders at non-affirming secondary schools construct formalized institutional support plans for LGBTQIA+ students that include safe employees, safe spaces, representation, and equitable resources.
- Students and teachers recommend that non-affirming schools shift their school climate to one of inclusion and belonging.

Even as they provided these recommendations, some LGBTQIA+ students doubted that school leaders would make changes to their non-affirming secondary institutions.

Chapter 4 Summary

This study focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming religious secondary schools to evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive student outcomes. Participants included LGBTQIA+ individuals who had attended non-affirming secondary schools and teachers who served in non-affirming secondary schools. In a semi-structured interview, these participants were asked interview questions designed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?

RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?

RQ3 - How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure LGBTQIA+ students' success?

RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders

at non-affirming secondary schools recommend to leaders within these institutions to support LGBTQIA+ students?

After IRB approval, the researcher collected qualitative data using 10 interview questions. These interviews were audio-recorded using otter.ai and revised for accuracy and deidentified by the researcher. The researcher then engaged in data analysis using the four-phase hermeneutical phenomenological process proposed by Fuster Guillen (2019). The researcher engaged graduate students from Pepperdine’s Graduate School of Education and Psychology to validate codes and themes. Thirty-eight unique themes were identified in the research. These themes are summarized in Table 11.

Table 11

Summary of Themes for Four Research Questions

RQ1. Challenges & Barriers	RQ2. Success Strategies	RQ3. Measuring Success	RQ4. Recommendations
oppressive/ judgmental religion	importance of a support network	diversity and belonging	avoid religion and religious schooling
mental, physical, and emotional toll	lack of support	enable/permit outness	build a network
unwelcoming/ discriminatory school climate	finding internal strength/resilience	equitable and safe resources	speak up and against
hiding identity due to fear and repression	hiding identity as protection	shift religious emphasis	be authentic self
lack of religious/ school support	religious incongruence	happiness and security	shift academic priorities
rejecting religion	the need for safe support	doubt things can change	theology of unconditional love
losing faith in the school’s portrayal of God	rejecting religion	personal and social growth at the rate of peers	formalized institutional support
embracing false identity	unhealthy coping mechanisms	decreased mental and emotional damage	inclusion and belonging
rarity and hardship of outness	religious uncertainty and poor messaging	openness to God and religious school	outness and confidentiality
roots of religious trauma		freedom to explore identity	doubt things can change
		improved school climate	

To complete the fourth phase of the hermeneutical phenomenological process proposed by Fuster Guillen (2019), the researcher must unite disparate themes into a cohesive whole through which individual themes and codes can be more fully understood (Fuster Guillen, 2019; Lavery, 2003; Ozaki et al., 2020). This descriptive data analysis should demonstrate how each interview question related to the *a priori* themes identified in Chapter 2 and emergent themes and codes from Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings revealed in the data analysis, review the implications of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Findings

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, 1 John 4:8)

In the past decade, the United States has seen an increased number of individuals who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Gates & Newport, 2012; Jones, 2022). Among teens, the Trevor Project has estimated that approximately 10.5% identified as LGBTQ as of 2019 (Green et al., 2019). Although the United States has passed laws to provide formal protection for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Civil Rights Act of 1964; Title IX, 1972), these rights have been increasingly tested, as evidenced by an increase in the number of laws regulating LGBTQIA+ individuals (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2023). Polling by the Trevor Project (2023) indicated that these laws and the national climate surrounding them has had a negative impact on the mental health of LGBTQ youth. LGBTQIA+ youth in non-affirming religious schools face an additional layer of legal complication, finding themselves in the crossfire of both the legal challenges (ACLU, 2023) to their Title IX (1972) rights and the religious freedom (U.S. Const. amend. I.) of these institutions. Therefore, it is unsurprising that LGBTQIA+ individuals at non-affirming institutions of higher learning have reported incidents of bullying and harassment (Soulforce, 2019). In addition, sexual minority students in these non-affirming educational spaces have indicated that they experience negative mental health symptoms (Wolff et al., 2016). Despite the increase in research into the effect of religion and religious schooling on students identifying as LGBTQIA+ (Bailey et al., 2022), several studies (Coley, 2020; Wolff et al., 2016; Yuan, 2016) related to Christian education have focused on those enrolled at post-secondary institutions rather than on students in a faith-based secondary school environment. Those studies (Anderson & Lough, 2021; Maher & Sever, 2007) that

address the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious secondary schools have been limited, and little research exists into the impact of religion on individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community (Maher & Sever, 2007). However, the paucity in research does not release school leaders from culpability; non-affirming Christian schools face a moral imperative to understand their impact on this vulnerable population.

This dissertation investigated the impact of a non-affirming secondary school experience on individuals who self-identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. It evaluated challenges, best practices, and success factors that led to supporting positive outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. This information—furnished through the direct input of participants—dictated the recommendations provided herein to drive meaningful change. Participants who chose to partake in this study had personal experience with or as an LGBTQIA+ student in a non-affirming secondary school environment. These participants were deeply committed to effecting change in non-affirming secondary schools to better support LGBTQIA+ students, often due to experiencing or witnessing the hardships and negative outcomes faced by this population. The stories of LGBTQIA+ individuals were poignant, and it was humbling as a researcher that individuals from this population were willing to participate in research to improve organizations that had caused them so much pain. Their testimonies revealed strength and resilience, and their commitment to ensuring positive educational experiences for future generations was commendable.

The findings of this study are intended primarily as a reference point for school leaders as they design policies and practices at non-affirming secondary schools. This research validates the significant challenges and obstacles faced by LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming secondary schools, indicating that at a vulnerable age, this already vulnerable population (Campos, 2017)

undergoes additional hardships in a non-affirming environment. Rather than being emotionally protected within a Christian environment by a sense of their intrinsic value as “created” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Genesis 1:21) by God, students have felt rejected, discriminated against, and unloved by peers, teachers, and—even worse—by God. If a component of Christian schools’ mission is to draw students to Christ and “do not hinder them” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Matthew 19:14), then it is essential that Christian schools adjust their practices to better serve the needs of their LGBTQIA+ community. It is the hope of the researcher that this study is also used to inform practices in other non-affirming spaces as well as secular institutions. The Christian founding of the United States has been used as justification for laws regulating the expression of LGBTQIA+ students since before the nation existed (Gray, 2008). As a result, the Christian community’s reputation has been linked with discrimination and hate (Moon, 2014). The problem, then, is not limited to non-affirming spaces or schools but extends to the nation at large. It falls to the Christian community to redefine itself as a community that embraces LGBTQIA+ individuals as “loved” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, John 13:34-35) by God. The thoughtful and rich accounts provided in this research by individuals committed to improving the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming secondary schools can be extrapolated by individuals beyond non-affirming secondary schools to inform best practices and policies for supporting the LGBTQIA+ community.

Chapter 5 begins with a summary of this phenomenological inquiry into the best practices for supporting LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. It goes on to discuss the findings, describing the results provided in Chapter 4 and discussing how these results answer the research questions that drove this study. The implications of the study—within non-affirming secondary schools and beyond this sphere—are discussed, in addition to the application of the

lessons learned. Conclusions, recommendations for future research, and final thoughts close the chapter.

Summary of the Study

This study, based on phenomenological methods in the qualitative tradition, focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming religious secondary schools to evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive student outcomes. By engaging key stakeholders from non-affirming secondary schools, the research collected firsthand knowledge revealing:

- the challenges LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools faced in their school environment,
- the best practices for non-affirming Christian secondary schools to aid LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges,
- key stakeholders' perceptions of success factors and how they measured the successes of LGBTQIA+ students, and
- strategies leaders at non-affirming Christian secondary schools should adopt to support LGBTQIA+ students.

These findings aligned with the research questions addressed in this study:

RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?

RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?

RQ3 - How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure LGBTQIA+ students' success?

RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders at non-affirming secondary schools recommend to leaders within these institutions to support LGBTQIA+ students?

The phenomenological methods selected for this study were appropriate because they investigated and illuminated the rich and complex experiences of participants who experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants—individuals over the age of 18 who identified as LGBTQIA+ and who had attended non-affirming secondary schools as well as teachers at non-affirming schools—were initially recruited using purposive sampling from publicly available data. In addition, social media posts asked qualified participants to self-select into the study. To furnish sufficient participants to achieve saturation, snowball sampling was later used. The sample size consisted of 12 participants, seven LGBTQIA+ students and five teachers. In semi-structured interviews, participants responded to 10 questions that revealed the success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive student outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. Interview questions were validated using *prima-facie* validity, peer review by doctoral students from Pepperdine’s Graduate School of Education and Psychology, and expert review by the dissertation committee members. Audio-only interview recordings were transcribed, and this data was analyzed using the four-phase hermeneutical phenomenological process proposed by Fuster Guillen (2019). This involved bracketing; multiple readings of interview transcripts in their entirety; careful, repeated perusal of the transcribed responses to each interview question to establish and refine codes and themes; and, finally, uniting disparate themes into a cohesive whole through which individual themes and codes can be more fully understood (Fuster Guillen, 2019; Laverly, 2003; Ozaki et al., 2020). Interrater review was used to validate codes and themes. A summary of the data analysis is

provided in Chapter 4. This study revealed many themes that were consistent with the literature review in addition to identifying emergent themes that contribute to a more complete understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools.

Discussion of Findings

This discussion integrates the themes that emerged from interviews with key stakeholders from non-affirming secondary schools with those identified in the Chapter 3 Literature Review, in order to elucidate the challenges faced by and best practices to support the success of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. Table 12 displays the relationships between the research questions, themes that emerged from participant interviews, and key issues facing the LGBTQIA+ community in non-affirming educational institutions. In this study, issues related to identity and outness; religion; support—and lack thereof; personal growth, development, and resilience; school climate; and health and well-being emerged as significant in the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. Viewed together, the combination of issues revealed the iterative relationship between non-affirming secondary schools and their own development and coping strategies. Further, participant accounts of the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in these non-affirming spaces were invaluable in understanding the complexity and nuances inherent to each issue raised. The themes identified through participant interviews are discussed in this section, grouped by issue in order to more fully explore the breadth and depth of experiences.

Table 12*Integration of 38 Themes into Seven Key Issues Facing LGBTQIA+ Students at Non-Affirming**Secondary Schools*

	RQ1. Challenges & Barriers	RQ2. Success Strategies	RQ3. Measuring Success	RQ4. Recommendations
Identity and outness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hiding identity due to fear and repression • embracing false identity • rarity and hardship of outness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hiding identity as protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enable/permit outness • freedom to explore identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be authentic self • outness and confidentiality
Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rejecting religion • oppressive/ judgmental religion • losing faith in the school's portrayal of God • roots of religious trauma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rejecting religion • religious incongruence • religious uncertainty and poor messaging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shift religious emphasis • openness to God and religious school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • avoid religion and religious schooling • theology of unconditional love
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of religious/ school support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of support • importance of a support network • the need for safe support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • equitable and safe resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • build a network • formalized institutional support
Personal growth/ development/ resilience		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • finding internal strength/ resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal and social growth at the rate of peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speak up and against • shift academic priorities
School climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unwelcoming/ discriminatory school climate 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diversity and belonging • improved school climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inclusion and belonging
Health and wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental, physical, and emotional toll 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unhealthy coping mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • happiness and security • decreased mental and emotional damage 	
Doubt things can change			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • doubt things can change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • doubt things can change

Results of RQ1

The first research question asked, “What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?” At its core, it attempted to understand what experiences LGBTQIA+ students perceived as challenging and what impact these experiences had on participants, essentially, exploring how challenges shaped their secondary-school experience. While in this study much of the adversity faced by LGBTQIA+ students was consistent with that identified in the literature review, the strength of themes related to harsh religious messaging and the roots of religious trauma indicated that LGBTQIA+ students at religious secondary schools face a unique combination of hardships while at a particularly vulnerable stage of development.

Discussion of RQ1

In this study, religion posed an emotionally charged and deeply personal challenge facing LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. Students and teachers alike found that their non-affirming schools clearly communicated to students that homosexuality was sinful and wrong and that members of the LGBTQIA+ community would go to hell. Such an emphasis on damnation and the use of extreme religious messaging have been identified as causes of religious trauma (Downie, 2022; Ellis et al., 2022). This study found that the schools’ treatment of religion was the root of religious trauma for many students, which provided them with a distorted view of God. Students perceived God as an entity who required them to earn love and who would never be satisfied with them because of their gender or sexual identity. Many experienced religious struggles and discomfort or dissatisfaction with themselves as a result, a finding similar to those of Read and Eagle (2011), Exline et al. (2021), and Van Droogenbroeck and Spruyt (2020). It can be concluded that the messaging of non-affirming schools can lead LGBTQIA+ secondary

students to believe they have to choose between a relationship with God or their sexual or gender identity, even as they are in the process of discovering what their sexual or gender identity is. Because they felt hated by God, LGBTQIA+ students were prone to reject religion and God. These findings were consistent with the literature, which indicated that LGBTQIA+ individuals were highly likely to hear messages of religious condemnation focused toward their community (Levy & Harr, 2018). Further, this research revealed that—like other LGBTQIA+ individuals in religious spaces—many students believed they had internalized transphobia (Exline et al., 2021) or homophobia. This became a challenge that followed students long after they left their non-affirming secondary schools, demonstrating that religious incongruence can be closely correlated with incongruence toward one's own gender or sexual identity. Leaving religion is known to be a common response for those feeling rejected due to their gender (Exline et al., 2021) or sexual identity—a finding that is substantiated by this study, which revealed the deep pain that led students to choose a non-religious path.

As noted, this study revealed that religious incongruence was associated with an incongruous perception of LGBTQIA+ students' gender or sexual identity. Discussion of identity and outness was common in the themes that emerged in RQ1. Outness was rare at non-affirming secondary schools, which was an expected phenomenon to participants given the fears LGBTQIA+ students had of repercussions, such as being outed to those with whom they were not yet prepared to share their identity, being asked to leave the school, or facing discrimination due to their sexual or gender identity. Thus, both a lack of outness and the fears motivating LGBTQIA+ students to conceal their identities were related hardships. Students from the LGBTQIA+ community described both intentionally hiding their identity from others as well as repressing their identity to prevent themselves from having to address that part of themselves.

This aligned with Stewart's (2015) finding that sexual minority students at religious schools were less likely to be out than students at non-religious schools. BrckaLorenz et al. (2021) also found that the degree to which an individual is out impacts their experiences as a sexual or gender minority individual. Further, Lugg (2006) indicated that environments have often been designed to encourage hiding an LGBTQIA+ identity as a way of encouraging conformity to accepted social norms. While this study found that a non-affirming secondary school environment effectively fostered a climate of sexual and gender conformity, it did so at the expense of individual student's self-perception.

Such an environment was interpreted as unwelcoming and discriminatory to LGBTQIA+ students, who described frequent bullying, teasing, and harassment; the use of anti-LGBTQIA+ slurs; and incidents of racism. Sadly, students across the nation have described similar instances (Avery, 2012; Campos, 2017). While a challenging school climate for LGBTQIA+ students is not unique to religious schools (*Flores v. Morgan Hill Unified School Dist.*, 2003; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Logue & Buckel, 1997), the tacit understanding within non-affirming schools that homosexuality and transgenderism are unbiblical and, by extension, looked down upon can bolster the power of anti-LGBTQIA+ voices, increasing the vulnerability of a minority population. This should not come as a surprise as this phenomenon was observed in the early colonies and shaped legal precedent within the U.S. (Goodman, 2001; Lugg, 2006; Wardenski, 2005). Treating homosexuality as a joke was a common way that students policed the actions and prevented the open expression of their peers. Although not identified in the literature review, this study indicated that even when incidents of bullying were not violent and the memories of specific instances were not vivid, frequent micro-aggressions and a climate of contempt nonetheless had a significant impact on LGBTQIA+ secondary students.

To more deeply understand the challenges LGBTQIA+ students encountered, this research question delved into the impact of these challenges, thereby revealing the mental, physical, and emotional toll of attending a non-affirming secondary school. Based on this study, such symptoms functioned as both an outcome and a hardship unto themselves. Anxiety, depression, stress, and suicidality were common symptoms. In addition, students reported associated unhealthy and risky behaviors, eating disorders, and drinking. These indicators of mental, emotional and physical health struggles were consistent with those identified in the literature review, which identified risky behaviors (Doxbeck, 2020; Goldbach et al., 2017; Gonzalez & Deal, 2022; Quinn & Ertl, 2015), mental health, suicidality, and self-harm as prevalent (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Gnan et al., 2019; Kaczowski et al., 2022) among LGBTQIA+ individuals. Spencer et al. (1997) noted that the reciprocal nature of experiences, self-perception, and behaviors, noting that chronic stress, coping skills, and societal reactions all impact individual growth and development. This study was significant because it focused on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming secondary schools rather than those in higher education. Adolescence provides essential context for the mental and emotional toll faced by this population. Because adolescence is a time when individuals often identify and codify their sexual and gender identity and when individuals are likely to face pressure from society to conform to social norms (Rogers et al., 2022), the experiences individuals encounter at this age can shape their self-development, leaving a lasting impression. According to these findings, unfortunately, that impression left by non-affirming secondary schools has often ranged from merely uncomfortable to detrimental to the mental, physical, and emotional health of LGBTQIA+ students.

Both teachers and LGBTQIA+ students in the study noted that their schools did not have

a support system or support network for LGBTQIA+ students. This was perceived as a hardship for LGBTQIA+ students, who did not have trusted adults to help them when they encountered discrimination, health challenges, and/or a crisis of faith. This finding contrasted with the best practices indicated in the literature review, which found that institutional support factors can contribute to the academic success and well-being of LGBTQIA+ students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). One possible explanation found in the literature that may contribute to the lack of support for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools is that individuals affiliated with a non-affirming religion infrequently have personal contact or friendships with individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Pew Research Center, 2015). In general, these individuals are those who make up the leadership, faculty, and staff at non-affirming schools, indicating that LGBTQIA+ students may have few advocates at their institutions promoting a formalized system of support.

Summary of RQ1

Overall, analysis of RQ1 indicated that the religious messaging and discriminatory school climate of non-affirming secondary schools resulted in identity incongruence—related to religion as well as sexual and/or gender identity—and health challenges—mental, physical, and emotional. The dearth of support within non-affirming secondary schools exacerbated students' ability to cope with these hardships and was perceived as a hardship itself. Although many hardships discussed were not unique to LGBTQIA+ students in a secondary environment or in a non-affirming environment, the breadth and depth of the challenges posed by the religious messaging and resulting religious climate at these non-affirming schools impacted participants significantly, both during their time at the school and long after.

Results of RQ2

The second research question asked, “What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students

in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?” The related interview questions focused on how LGBTQIA+ students dealt with challenges and changes to their perception of religion, including asking about available resources and people from whom they sought help or advice. Gender and sexual minority students described a range of coping mechanisms to help them effectively deal with the impact of the challenges they faced at non-affirming secondary schools. While many of these strategies revealed best practices, unhealthy coping approaches were also described, congruent with Spencer et al.’s (1997) description of reactive coping leading to destructive and constructive coping outcomes. The complex range of coping strategies beyond those identified as best practices is further addressed in the discussion of RQ2.

Discussion of RQ2

This study revealed that the strategies LGBTQIA+ secondary students used to cope with hardship and challenges at their non-affirming schools were multifaceted, ranging from healthy, constructive approaches to destructive, harmful ones. This was consistent with the literature, which identified maladaptive coping processes, such as substance abuse (Stewart et al., 2015), self-harm, and suicidality (Anderson & Lough, 2021). Yet many LGBTQIA+ individuals—both in this study and in the literature—established adaptive coping mechanisms that enabled them to reconcile their faith with their gender or sexual minority identity or that helped them leave the religious tradition that harmed their net stress and emerging identity (Levy & Harr, 2018).

This study found that building a robust support network was identified as an essential element to overcoming challenges for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. The literature underscored the need for supportive faculty. The GLSEN National School Climate Survey reported that students who could identify 11 or more supportive school employees

reported a greater sense of belonging, higher GPAs, were more likely to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities, and felt safer in their school environment (Kosciw et al., 2020). This study also indicated that schools must overcome the perception among stakeholders that some faculty members and employees are not as safe as others. Boyland et al. (2018) affirmed the idea that students should be able to tell a school employee their gender or sexual identity without fear of being outed. In addition to faculty, peers were often noted as a source of support and were connected with LGBTQIA+ students having a sense of belonging in this study. This finding mirrored research at secular universities, which showed that sexual and gender minority students who had peer support from the LGBTQ+ community were less likely to experience the repercussions of loneliness (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020). In addition, participants pointed to parents and family, affirming religious figures, and the internet as additional sources of support. In contrast with the findings of this study, in which participants linked family support to positive school and mental health outcomes, Fenaughty et al. (2019) found that a supportive family environment did not have a significant impact on gender or sexual minority students' academic achievement. Responses related to a support network were closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) microsystems—which identified the important roles of teachers, peers, and family within a student's microsystems, further reinforcing the importance of building a supportive safety net for LGBTQIA+ students.

Amidst a religious environment that LGBTQIA+ students viewed as judgmental and condemning, many viewed rejecting God and religion as the best method of escaping feelings of religious incongruence. Although some student participants described attempting to maintain a Christian identity, none described maintaining a non-affirming faith. These findings were consistent with the literature review, which found that leaving one's religious tradition was a

common strategy (Exline et al., 2021; Levy & Harr, 2018) among LGBTQIA+ individuals who felt rejected or scorned by their faith tradition. While this study found that rejecting religion was an effective way to overcome the challenge of religious incongruence, both student and teacher participants recognized that this was not a desirable outcome for non-affirming schools. Thus, whether rejecting religion should be categorized as constructive or destructive is contingent on one's religious belief system. For instance, Benson et al.'s (2018) qualitative study of transgender individuals offered hope that religion could provide a sense of belonging and comfort when individuals focused on their acceptance as a child of God and love of God. Therefore, non-affirming schools with a goal of drawing students into a Christian belief system should be mindful of how their messaging to LGBTQIA+ students will shape these students' understanding of appropriate and effective religious coping mechanisms.

Another common strategy used by LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools was hiding their identity to protect themselves. Similarly, Stewart et al. (2015) posited that students at religious schools were unlikely to be out to peers, faculty, and staff because that would cause conflict and discomfort and call attention to the difference between their sexual or gender identity and the official religious position of the school. Participants believed that outness was uncommon at non-affirming secondary schools largely because students feared the potential repercussions. These included negative reactions from peers, being reported to the administration and outed to parents or asked to leave the school, and the possible loss of privileges associated with the approval of those in power, typically teachers. Stewart et al.'s (2015) research provided context for this finding, indicating that when LGBT individuals chose to hide their identities to protect themselves from negative ramifications at school, they often experienced heightened stress levels and an increased likelihood they would turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Consequently, although hiding one's sexual or gender identity was an effective coping strategy, it was found to be destructive rather than constructive in this study. However, without changes within non-affirming schools, the inverse—outness and openness with regard to one's sexual and/or gender identity—should be explored as a best practice with great care. Non-affirming schools would need to provide additional support and protections for LGBTQIA+ students in parallel with policies related to outness in order for it to be an effective best practice for LGBTQIA+ students.

Study participants demonstrated self-awareness in noting that unhealthy coping mechanisms were the natural product of the mental health and emotional challenges LGBTQIA+ students faced at non-affirming secondary schools. In order to address negative emotions, some students self-harmed or perpetuated negative cycles by hurting others. This was consistent with the findings of Gnan et al. (2019), who noted that mental health struggles and self-harm were common among LGBTQ university students. In addition, researchers have found that sexual and gender minority youth were more likely than their heterosexual or cisgender peers to engage in risky behaviors (Doxbeck, 2020; Goldbach et al., 2017; Gonzalez & Deal, 2022; Quinn & Ertl, 2015). Risky behaviors included increased sexual activity (Gonzalez & Deal, 2022; Quinn & Ertl, 2015) and substance abuse (Doxbeck, 2020; Goldbach et al., 2017; Gonzalez & Deal, 2022). Dagirmanjian et al. (2017) posited that homosexual college students may have engaged in abusing pain medication because they lacked essential support systems on their campuses. Further, Stewart et al.'s (2015) study of U.S. students found that LGBT students at religious schools were more likely to report problems with alcohol abuse than LGBT students at public schools. Anderson and Lough (2021) found that sexual and gender minority students who attended Christian homeschools exhibited high rates of self-harm and suicidality. It should come

as no surprise that secondary students were prone to these same struggles and employed the same outlets. Although these approaches were identified by LGBTQIA+ students as strategies for overcoming the challenges and their lasting impact to their psyches, they were not categorized as best practices in the context of this research. Instead, they are included in the discussion to reveal what LGBTQIA+ students perceived as their only options to cope with their experiences at non-affirming secondary schools. These outcomes serve as a warning to LGBTQIA+ students and non-affirming schools alike. Sexual and gender minority students may interpret these findings and determine that the desperation-driven coping mechanisms common to this population indicates that a non-affirming school environment poses too great a risk. In contrast, non-affirming schools should examine how they have contributed to these destructive coping strategies.

In contrast, resilience emerged as a stable, constructive coping mechanism, with participants describing instances in which they overcame challenges by developing strength and boldness. Similarly, Levy & Harr (2018) identified resilience as an important element for individuals facing hardships in religiously non-affirming environments. Despite describing personal hardships and challenges that they encountered while attending non-affirming schools, two additional participants expressed gratitude that their pain had not been as significant as that of others and that their challenges had been manageable. Consistent with Spencer's (1997) PVEST framework, this indicated that the attitudes of participants as they experienced challenges impacted their perceptions of those challenges. Further, summoning internal strength and resilience in the face of religious incongruence was identified by Levy & Harr (2018) as an element that at times accompanied leaving a religious tradition. Although resilience surfaced as a powerful and effective approach for LGBTQIA+ students to overcome challenges in a non-

affirming secondary school environment, this theme was not as strong as others associated with RQ2. This warrants further exploration in future research to determine how schools and other microsystems can promote resilience.

Summary of RQ2

As noted earlier, although the strategies provided in this section were all identified in the research, not all approaches employed by LGBTQIA+ students should be considered or implemented as best practices. In some instances, students faced extreme external and internal pressures and struggles—some particular to non-affirming religious schools and others common to LGBTQIA+ students in any educational environment, turning to a variety of strategies to cope with pain. Destructive strategies were detailed in order to provide an accurate account of the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming institutions. School leaders, parents, and those who care about the well-being of their students must consider that if these are the only strategies students have found that were successful, either schools must change their policies and practices to better support students or—as many participants indicated in their responses to RQ2—the best practice may currently be for LGBTQIA+ students to avoid or leave non-affirming religious schools.

Results of RQ3

The third research question asked, “How did key stakeholders from non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure LGBTQIA+ students’ success?” The related interview questions (IQ7 and IQ8) asked students about their expectations of a secondary school experience, what a great experience would have looked like, and how a great secondary experience would have manifested itself in their lives over time. Because the literature review drew from a variety of studies, each of which related to an element of the population studied in

this research—LGBTQIA+ students from non-affirming secondary schools—many significant success factors were identified, but prior to examining the data collected in this study, it was unclear which measures of success LGBTQIA+ students and key stakeholders found most critical. Congruent with the literature, this research indicated that understanding themselves as loved by God was essential for LGBTQIA+ students perception of success at a non-affirming school (Hill, 2016; Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978; Yuan, 2016). However, this study did not find that LGBTQIA+ students placed a significant emphasis on academic success when evaluating and measuring their own success—unlike studies by Fenaughty et al. (2019) and Sansone (2019)—whether this was because students were satisfied with their academic outcomes or because other success factors outweighed their academic concerns. The success factors key stakeholders determined were critical for LGBTQIA+ students are further explained in the discussion of RQ3.

Discussion of RQ3

Many of the ways that teachers and LGBTQIA+ students from non-affirming secondary schools defined success for this population were closely tied to school policies and how gender and sexual minority issues were discussed and dealt with at the school. Success for LGBTQIA+ students was closely tied with their ability to be out. BrckaLorenz et al. (2021) also found that the degree to which an LGBQ+ student is out on their college campus contributed to their experiences and outcomes. Likewise, participants indicated that allowing outness at non-affirming secondary schools would establish a sense of normalcy for LGBTQIA+ students and would enable them to explore their own identities and engage in relationships alongside their gender and sexual majority peers. Without the opportunity to experience dating relationships before leaving their secondary school environments, LGBTQIA+ students felt stymied and

behind their peers socially and developmentally. Further, students believed that the ability to investigate this aspect of their identity rather than repressing it would result in lessened mental health struggles. This was supported by Stewart et al.'s (2015) finding that LGBT students at religious schools who were not out had an increased risk of risky behavior. In desiring to develop at a rate akin to their peers, LGBTQIA+ participants aligned with the importance that Bronfenbrenner (1986) placed on an individual's microsystems and chronosystems. Students who identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community desired normative secondary school experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), such as dating and identity expression, representing typical milestones for their peer group. Taylor and Cuthbert's (2019) recommendation to deconstruct heteronormative policies at faith-based schools in the United Kingdom aligned with this proposal, though their research posited that religious schools were no more problematic than non-religious schools. While outness was a defining characteristic of success, participants appeared to measure this based on whether LGBTQIA+ students experienced important milestones and developmental stages at the same time as their peers. However, because outness can also carry with it the risk of negative repercussions for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Haug, 2018), non-affirming schools and LGBTQIA+ individuals should effect change thoughtfully, protecting the well-being of this vulnerable population.

How non-affirming secondary schools communicated their theology was also closely tied to success factors for LGBTQIA+ students. Participants indicated that a theology that pointed LGBTQIA+ students to God's unconditional love rather than separating them out as a community condemned to hell was desirable, and that success could be measured based on students' openness to God. Similarly, Benson et al. (2018) found that transgender individuals who had experienced religious rejection were able to overcome their negative experiences by

focusing on the love of God and on the example of Jesus as compassionate. Such an outcome appears to be aligned with the goals of religious schools; one assumption of this study was that religious secondary schools had a purpose of strengthening their students' faith. Yet, Exline et al. (2021) found that transgender students often left religion after being made to feel unwelcome or rejected. Similarly, according to Levy and Harr (2018), bisexual and pansexual individuals described religious experiences in which they were told they were sinful. In the current study, it was noted that communicating a theological position based on individuals earning their way out of hell and into God's love was not an accurate representation of the gospel presented in the Bible, which identified salvation as the result of God's grace rather than the efforts of any individual (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Ephesians 2:8-9). While some participants coupled this theological shift away from condemnation toward grace with an affirming theological perspective, this was not universally expressed among those who advocated shifting the theological emphasis and messaging of non-affirming schools. The research of Yuan (2016) agreed with this supposition that educational institutions could maintain a non-affirming theology while providing a welcoming environment that emphasized God's love and compassion. In addition, Taylor and Cuthbert (2019) indicated that religion had the potential to offer support systems for students struggling through hardship. However, Hamblin and A. M. Gross (2013) found that sexual minority individuals who attended non-affirming churches experienced higher rates of anxiety than those who attended affirming churches. In addition, sexual minority participants attending non-affirming churches felt less support from their community than did those at affirming churches (Hamblin & A. M. Gross, 2013). Schools must consider these factors in light of their commitments to biblical doctrine and to students. If the most important success outcome for schools is measured in the openness of their students to

God, then this study has shown that a shift in how non-affirming schools preach about sin and salvation is warranted.

Because religious messaging is closely associated with non-affirming schools' commitments to their doctrine, several participants expressed doubt that change could or would occur. Teachers were unsure how to remain faithful to the teachings of the Bible without alienating students, and some students agreed. Given the failure of churches in the past to integrate support for the LGBTQIA+ community into their practices (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978) or into mainstream evangelical beliefs (Brownson, 2013; Gushee, 2015), it is not surprising that participants were skeptical.

Participants identified a positive school climate that promoted diversity and belonging as a critical marker of success for LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming schools. This climate was defined as one that was welcoming, safe and secure, accepting, loving, and comfortable for LGBTQIA+ students. In addition, the school climate should be diverse, including individuals from different backgrounds, cultures, orientations, etc. Similarly, the literature review identified a climate characterized by belonging as an important factor in student success (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). Unfortunately, school climates are often hostile for LGBTQIA+ students (Kosciw et al., 2020; Logue & Buckel, 1997). The GLSEN National School Climate Survey found that more than 90% of students reported hearing slurs related to sexual identity while at school, and 87.4% reported hearing slurs related to gender identity, and more than 50% of students heard remarks such as these from teachers and staff (Kosciw et al., 2020). According to the same survey, 25.7% of students experienced physical harassment due to their sexual orientation, and 22.2% experienced physical harassment as a result of their gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2020). Similarly, E. Meyer and Stader (2009) found

that instances of bullying and slurs were often the result of a student's perceived status as a sexual or gender minority. Although the GLSEN National School Climate Survey found that students at religious schools reported hearing homophobic language less often than their peers at secular schools, the word *gay* was used pejoratively in both religious and public schools with a similar frequency (Kosciw et al., 2020). Likewise, negative comments about transgender individuals were noted with similar frequency at religious and public schools (Kosciw et al., 2020). In addition, peer victimization due to bullying or other harassment occurred at similar rates in public and private religious schools (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, students at religious schools were the most likely (83.5% perceived discrimination) to report institutional policies that were discriminatory toward LGBTQ students and the least likely to cite access to LGBTQ resources on campus (Kosciw et al., 2020). Similarly, Yuan (2016) found that students at religious universities often described a school climate that was unfriendly toward LGB students, even at schools known for having more progressive policies. In addition, creating a school environment that was not based on normative whiteness was identified by Duran et al. (2020) as a way to ensure that minority individuals, including LGBTQIA+ students, were not marginalized.

One method of assessing the impact of school climate could be to measure the happiness, security, and mental/emotional well-being of LGBTQIA+ students as key indicators; these factors were identified by participants as hallmarks of success. Participants described students who were secure in knowing they were loved and valued in their relationships rather than shamed or made to feel inferior based on their sexual or gender identity. This aligned with studies in higher education, which indicated that an increased perception of belonging or school connectedness was associated with improved student outcomes: academic success and

persistence (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). Further, Hatchel et al.'s (2019) study of transgender students found that transgender participants who experienced increased belonging in school also reported less peer victimization and negative mental health symptoms. Social-emotional health were found to be a measure of success in the literature review, indicated by quality, healthy relationships and the absence of bullying or victimization (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009). Further, positive self-concept and self-efficacy were related to supportive relationships (Ullman, 2015).

Summary of RQ3

This study supported many of the indicators of success identified in the literature review. Participants in this study emphasized a climate of belonging (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Kosciw et al., 2020) that would improve the social-emotional (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009) and mental health (Gnan et al., 2019) of LGBTQIA+ students. In addition, openness to God and the ability to integrate one's sexual and/or gender minority identity with a religious identity was believed by participants to be a desired outcome (Hill, 2016; Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978; Yuan, 2016). This outcome was made more likely when non-affirming schools shifted their religious messaging to emphasize God's love and compassion (Benson et al., 2018; Yuan, 2016) rather than focusing on gender or sexual minority identity or actions as uniquely sinful. In addition, participants identified a school climate of diversity and belonging (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021) where equitable resources (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021) and support (Boyland et al., 2018; CDC, 2022) were freely available to all students without repercussions as a defining factor of success for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools.

Because outness has been tied to both positive and negative outcomes for students (Haug,

2018), it was not identified as a success factor in itself in the literature review. However, participants in the current study clearly connected personal success in a non-affirming environment with the ability to be out. It is possible that this was expressed strongly in this study because participants' outness was so rare in non-affirming secondary schools. In addition, although the current study indicated that LGBTQIA+ students measure success comparatively against the social development of their peers and perceive exploring relationships and identity as age-appropriate for secondary school students, this did not appear in the literature review. It is possible that this was the result of the factors specific to this study, which examined non-affirming secondary schools while most of the literature related to either secular secondary schools or higher educational institutions or religious higher education institutions.

Results of RQ4

The fourth research question asked, "Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do key stakeholders at non-affirming secondary schools recommend to leaders within these institutions to support LGBTQIA+ students?" Participants' responses indicated that religious secondary schools should communicate the gospel message of God's unconditional love and grace as well as providing agency and respect for LGBTQIA+ students. These strategies are delineated in the discussion of RQ4.

Discussion of RQ4

In order for non-affirming schools to support their LGBTQIA+ students, participants advocated for LGBTQIA+ students to be out at their non-affirming schools and to have the ability to exercise control over how information about their outness was shared with others. Respect for the confidentiality of students was a key recommendation. This was supported by Boyland et al. (2018), whose research indicated that schools should use the preferred names and

pronouns of gender minority students while also honoring students' privacy. In addition, participants indicated that it was important for students to be able to express themselves and talk about LGBTQIA+ issues openly. The impact of outness for LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming education is yet unclear (Wolff et al., 2016), and moving ahead with policies that encourage student outness should be considered carefully as previous research (Garvey & Rankin, 2015) indicated that increased outness could lead to more negative perceptions of school interactions or that outness may not have a statistically significant impact on university students' psychological distress (Haug, 2018).

Outness was closely tied with the recommendation that students stand up for themselves and speak out against elements of their non-affirming schools that were troubling. This aligned with the Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality's (1978) model and recommendation of including sexual minority individuals in the decision-making process. Beyond student representation, this recommendation could apply to hiring LGBTQIA+ teachers and staff and (Kosciw et al., 2020). This would not necessitate non-affirming schools change their hiring criteria: Yuan (2016) and Hill (2016) are examples of openly gay ministers in non-affirming religious traditions. By drawing attention to problems, participants in the current study posited that LGBTQIA+ students could drive change within their institutions. Making teachers aware of problems blended the assertion of teacher participants—that they were often unaware of negativity toward their LGBTQIA+ students—with the research of Fantus and Newman (2021), who indicated that teacher intervention was critical to stopping bullying and harassment in schools. Boyland et al. (2018) indicated that students must have a process by which to report incidents of bullying and peer victimization anonymously to school leaders. Thus, while schools can encourage LGBTQIA+ students to advocate for their needs, school leaders must also be

aware of the risks to LGBTQIA+ students and provide protections and anonymous opportunities to bring forward problems so that schools can address them.

A recurring finding in this study was that non-affirming secondary schools have not made religion attractive to LGBTQIA+ students. Instead, the harsh or extreme religious messaging that has emphasized damnation and gender binaries may serve as the root cause of religious trauma (Downie, 2022; Ellis et al., 2022), making LGBTQIA+ individuals feel rejected (Exline et al., 2021). Both Levy and Harr (2018) and Wilcox (2002) found that rejecting organized religion was a natural reaction to experiences of religious trauma. This finding was mirrored in the current study, in which participants indicated many LGBTQIA+ students' experiences at religious schools had caused them to turn away from God and reject religious schooling. Participants noted that school leaders must compare their goals with their results and reevaluate their practices in light of the widening chasm opening between them: existing outcomes of students leaving religion are not congruent with bringing students to saving faith. Participants in the current study specifically called for an end to telling students the LGBTQIA+ community was condemned to hell. The recommendations of participants aligned with the Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality's (1978) suggestion that Christians should avoid an overemphasis on divisive passages regarding sexuality and gender and Benson et al.'s (2018) finding that gender minority individuals who retained their faith did so by focusing on God's love for them. These recommendations aligned with Falconer and Taylor's (2017) assertion that university students should not be forced to choose between religion and LGBTQ identity. In addition, advocates (Mason, 2014; Yuan, 2016) for LGBTQ individuals in religious spaces have recommended embracing a theology that focuses on compassion for marginalized groups.

The current study indicated that support for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming

schools must extend beyond religious messaging. Students and teachers recommended that school leaders at non-affirming secondary schools construct formalized institutional support plans for LGBTQIA+ students. One of the key elements identified was educating leaders and other school employees about different interpretations of the Bible, about queer issues, and about the language and ideas that the LGBTQIA+ community found harmful. Training employees on how to create safe school environments for LGBTQ youth was also a recommendation of the CDC (2022), which advocated for professional development related to creating safe school environments. Participants suggested that safe school employees and spaces should be clearly identified—another recommendation aligned with CDC (2022) guidance—and that employees who were communicating damaging, condemning messaging to LGBTQIA+ students should be retrained or removed from their positions. Some participants suggested having some staff who were religiously affirming or connecting LGBTQIA+ students with outside affirming resources. This finding was supported by the research of Hamblin and A. M. Gross (2013), who noted that sexual minority individuals with affirming religious support were more likely feel supported than those in a non-affirming religious tradition and less likely to suffer from generalized anxiety disorders. It was found that a support network for LGBTQIA+ students was important; therefore, school leaders should facilitate students' ability to find supportive individuals. One suggested resource was having a GSA or other formalized student support group. This finding was supported by the research of Wolff et al. (2016), Boyland et al. (2018), and Kaczowski et al. (2022). Boyland et al. (2018) found that GSAs on middle school campuses was shown to reduce the use of homophobic language on campus and help make LGBTQ students feel safer and more likely to advocate for their needs. Further, Kaczowski et al. (2022) noted that when schools established GSAs and implemented policies to support gender and sexual minority students, even

gender and sexual majority students' outcomes improved. The research did not universally support establishing GSAs, however; even when GSAs or other support groups were available on a student's campus, Eisemann (2000) noted that sexual minority students might not attend due to fears of increased bullying or fear of outing themselves to individuals unaware of their sexual identity. Beyond GSAs, participants in the current study noted that parents were an important part of students' support network and should also receive resources from the school. Educating parents is of critical importance as Green et al. (2022) found that 35% of participants had a caregiver, guardian, or parent who advocated conversion to a non-LGBTQ identity. Green et al.'s (2020) analysis found that youth who underwent conversion therapy were almost twice as likely to have considered suicide or attempted suicide as those who did not participate in conversion therapy. Furthermore, Green et al. (2020) noted that participation in conversion therapy was the largest risk factor associated with multiple suicide attempts for LGBTQ subjects. The research of Anderson and Lough (2021) supported parent education as they found that when students had unsupportive family members, the students were more likely to exhibit negative health outcomes. Participants also suggested policy and program changes, including inclusive sexual education programs and reevaluation of how science courses approached gender identity. Equitable resources and curriculum such as this were also identified in the CDC's (2022) guidelines. In addition, Boyland et al. (2018) indicated that schools should be mindful that their curriculum is inclusive of LGBTQ role models. Moreover, participants desired clear, enforced harassment policies that explicitly mentioned protecting the LGBTQIA+ community. Gender and sexual minority students at schools with anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies that expressly prohibited discrimination based on LGBT identity reported lower instances of the use of slurs related to gender and sexual identity and fewer instances of harassment, bullying, and

assault due to their gender or sexual minority status (Kosciw et al., 2020). Overall, the recommendations of participants were closely aligned with those of the CDC (2022) and Kaczkowski et al. (2022). Kaczkowski et al. (2022) noted that when schools implemented multiple supportive practices for LGB students, all students—including gender and sexual majority students—reported improved or positive social and health outcomes.

Students and teachers recommended that non-affirming schools shift their school climate to one of inclusion and belonging. Belonging has been found to be an important factor in positive school outcomes (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran et al., 2020; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). Participants elaborated, saying that school culture should be one built on love, respect, and value. Such cultural shifts and practices must occur at an institutional level and at a classroom level, involving not only policy changes but teacher actions in the classroom that indicate discrimination based on sexual and/or gender identity will not be tolerated (Fantus & Newman, 2021). Participants suggested that bringing about a culture shift would involve reviewing existing practices and beliefs to identify and dismantle homophobia and ensuring that school employees modeled Christian love in all areas of their lives, recognizing that they were role models students looked to even outside of classrooms or off school grounds. These recommendations were supported by the findings of Fantus and Newman (2021), who noted that teachers must be mindful of the language they themselves used when addressing LGBTQIA+ issues. While many teachers had observed changes within their institutions toward supportiveness and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ students, some LGBTQIA+ students—even as they provided these recommendations—doubted that school leaders would make changes to their non-affirming secondary institutions.

Summary of RQ4

Consistent with the literature review, this study found that best practices for non-affirming secondary schools to support LGBTQIA+ students involved enabling outness and respecting confidences (Boyland et al., 2018), facilitating LGBTQIA+ students' self-advocacy and representation in the decision-making process (Kosciw et al., 2020; Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978), establishing policies that protect LGBTQIA+ students (Boyland, 2018; Fantus & Newman, 2021), and implementing teacher and staff training (CDC, 2022). In addition, crafting religious messaging to focus on God's love and compassion toward all students rather than separating out the LGBTQIA+ community as uniquely sinful was an essential recommendation (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978; Yuan, 2016).

Rather than expressing a desire for schools to repent of the way they had dealt with LGBTQIA+ issues—a recommendation of the Presbyterian Task Force to Study Homosexuality (1978)—and students, participants in the current study were doubtful that non-affirming schools would change. Rather than indicating that repentance was not important, this reaction demonstrates further need for repentance to occur. Participants in the current study expressed doubt that non-affirming schools would change to better serve their LGBTQIA+ students. Without repentance, the relationship between the LGBTQIA+ community and religious secondary schools is likely to be characterized by doubt and mistrust. The burden falls to non-affirming schools to repair this relationship if their goal is to draw students toward Christ.

Implications of the Study

This study was designed to evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. Although the study limited participants to key stakeholders from non-affirming secondary

schools, the implications of the study extend beyond this limited sphere. For instance, the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students may be found in other non-affirming spaces. In addition, support factors contributing to the success, health, and well-being of LGBTQIA+ students may be extrapolated so that individuals beyond school walls can better support the LGBTQIA+ individuals in their lives. This support extends to policymaking as well as daily interactions.

Implications for Churches. Many of the recommendations of this study related to how LGBTQIA+ students perceive God and salvation due to the messaging prevalent in non-affirming religious spaces. This study found that the gospel message had been distorted, leaving many LGBTQIA+ students with the idea that they were hated by God and that they had to fix something about themselves in order to be worthy of his love or the love of others. Religious leaders should take this to heart and carefully consider how to communicate the Bible's message, which presents "grace" (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Ephesians 2:8), truth, and love as a single, cohesive plan of salvation. Emphasizing a few Bible verses that comment on homosexual practices and others referencing gender has left LGBTQIA+ students feeling stigmatized and set apart from the Christian community. The burden now falls to the church to repent for distorting the gospel message and share the unconditional love of Christ with the LGBTQIA+ community.

Implications for Parents and Families. Parents and family emerged as a critical support for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. At various times, participants credited supportive parents with ensuring positive academic and mental health outcomes. Both participants and research have identified that when parents withdraw their support or contribute to religious condemnation (Yuan, 2016), LGBTQIA+ students suffer negative mental health consequences (Green et al., 2022). Parents and family members of LGBTQIA+ youth should

carefully consider how to respond with sensitivity, love, and compassion when a child comes out and how to provide ongoing unconditional love to their child.

Implications for Policymakers. The reach of policy often extends far beyond its original intent. It is doubtful that Puritan lawmakers anticipated their records being cited hundreds of years later by a researcher investigating the plight of LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools. However, the literature review for this study revealed that current laws, beliefs, and practices were heavily influenced by those early documents, which Lugg (2006) asserted served to reinforce societal norms rather than dictating essential and enforceable elements of the law. Now, as the rights of LGBTQIA+ students are being tested across the nation, it is important for lawmakers and policy makers to evaluate who they are protecting and how they will measure whether the intent of their initiatives was successful. The stakes are high for LGBTQIA+ individuals; the mental health challenges this community faces are not limited only to those in non-affirming schools. The U.S. would do well to consider not only the impetus guiding laws but the messages that the LGBTQIA+ community has received from the laws restricting their expression and rights. As this research has shown, isolating and stigmatizing a minority population sends the message that they are rejected, unloved, and not valued. Policy makers should ensure that they protect the rights of their constituents and direct their attention to the laws that will have positive outcomes at a systemic and personal level.

Application

The purpose of this research was to identify the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools in order to determine the best practices to support this population in achieving positive outcomes. The strategies uncovered focused on how school leaders can make practical and policy changes that promote the success of their LGBTQIA+

students, both while they are in secondary school and as they continue on in life. An important finding of this research into a nascent area of study was that LGBTQIA+ students found the religious messaging of their non-affirming school and their own religious outcomes to be an important part of their secondary school experience. Thus, recommendations for how a non-affirming school can adjust its religious messaging—whether or not it maintains a non-affirming theology—to support student outcomes related to ongoing connection to faith are a key part of the application of this study. This research produced a model to guide implementation of best practices for supporting LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming schools as well as a framework through which educational practitioners may examine the relationships between strategies and resulting outcomes. According to Nilsen (2015), while both models and frameworks simplify complex relationships and concepts into categories that enable practical action, a model is designed to support implementation while a framework provides indicators of how strategies impact outcomes and is well-suited to a “systems approach” (p. 5). The resulting John 13:34 Model delineates best practices upon which non-affirming schools must focus their attention in order to produce desired student outcomes. To further illustrate the complex relationship between school policies and practices and expected student outcomes, the challenges and strategies uncovered in this study were also integrated into Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) EST and Spencer’s (1997, 2021) PVEST to provide a cohesive framework depicting how school support can promote the healthy development of their LGBTQIA+ students. While the John 13:34 Model may serve as a guide for school leaders to support LGBTQIA+ students, the System-based Framework for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in Non-affirming Schools is intended as a resource for any member of a non-affirming school seeking to understand how they as an individual can work toward and support change within a complex system.

John 13:34 Model

Throughout this research, participants regularly referenced love, describing God's unconditional love, explaining that LGBTQIA+ students received a message that God's love for them was conditional, and indicating that their experiences at non-affirming secondary schools had left LGBTQIA+ students feeling isolated and unloved. Yet in John 13:34 (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011) Jesus commanded, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." The model that resulted from this study provided practical steps non-affirming schools can take to show God's love to their LGBTQIA+ students and to ensure that members of the school likewise practiced this command of Jesus. By situating critical factors for non-affirming schools and the areas that LGBTQIA+ student would see improvements as equal portions of their respective spheres, this model demonstrates that each of these components is essential.

Strategies for Non-affirming Schools. The John 13:34 Model identifies three factors upon which non-affirming schools should focus their attention in order to support their LGBTQIA+ students: (a) formalized and informal support structures, (b) school climate, and (c) religious position, all of which are influenced by school policies. The arrows connecting the three factors depict their intrinsic connection; changing one is likely to impact another.

Formal & Informal Support. The results of all four research questions indicated that increasing both formalized and informal support systems was essential for LGBTQIA+ students. Lack of existing support systems was identified as a challenge to LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming schools in RQ1 despite robust support systems emerging as a key driver for success in RQ2. According to RQ3, needed support systems included both the presence and availability of resources as well as establishing pathways for LGBTQIA+ students to gain the support of trusted, safe individuals who would show unconditional love. This recommendation was

consistent with the findings of the CDC (2022), which recommended that schools train school employees to create a safe environment for their LGBTQIA+ students and establish designated safe places on campus. Fantus and Newman (2021) also identified teacher support as critical for LGBTQIA+ students. Although beneficial, it is not enough for individual employees to signal their support for LGBTQIA+ students; the results of RQ4 demonstrated the need for non-affirming schools to develop formalized institutional support plans to make clear to LGBTQIA+ students how to find support. In addition, support should include a path toward growing a support network that expanded beyond school employees to school peers, family, and even community or affirming religious resources. This element of the model is supported by Kaczkowski et al. (2022), whose research found that implementing multiple supports produced the best impact for LGBTQIA+ students.

School Climate. School climate appeared in the findings of three research questions. An unwelcoming and discriminatory environment was identified as a challenge to LGBTQIA+ students in RQ1. However, building a climate of inclusion and belonging was a recommendation identified in RQ4. The importance of school climate was bolstered by RQ3, which indicated that LGBTQIA+ students measured success at a non-affirming school based on their perception of how inclusive the school climate was and whether it promoted belonging. Developing an inclusive climate involved not only inclusion and belonging (Fantus & Newman, 2021; Yuan, 2016) but building students' self-esteem (Ullman, 2015) and establishing a sense of safety (Fantus & Newman, 2021).

Religious Position. Religion was a topic that surfaced in all four research questions. Investigation of RQ1 and RQ2 indicated that LGBTQIA+ students perceived non-affirming religious schools' portrayal of religion as oppressive and judgmental, leading to the roots of

religious trauma, religious incongruence, and the rejection of religion. Non-affirming schools must be careful that the language used to discuss gender and sexual minority issues is not extreme and is not used to explicitly or implicitly communicate that the gospel message is not for the LGBTQIA+ community. This study further indicated that poor religious messaging was at times the result of lack of clarity on the part of the school or lack of understanding of the impact of religious messaging. For instance, many participants described feelings of hurt when the words “love the sinner; hate the sin” were used to condemn homosexuality, perceiving it as an indicator that God’s love toward them was qualified rather than unconditional. However, RQ4 indicated that if non-affirming schools were to shift their religious emphasis to focus on the unconditional love of God rather than emphasizing a doctrine that focused on sin specific to gender or sexual identity, LGBTQIA+ students would be less likely to avoid religion or reject religious schooling. Further, the results of RQ3 revealed that LGBTQIA+ students believed that this shift would result in them being more open to God and likely to view religion—and, by extension, religious schooling—favorably. Embracing “a posture of compassion” (Yuan, 2016, p. 101) and openly repenting for not extending grace to LGBTQIA+ students (Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 1978) were two ways suggested by the literature to implement a religious position less likely to turn LGBTQIA+ students away from the gospel message promoted by Bible-based schools.

Policies. The non-affirming school sphere is driven by school policies, which this research determined were often unclear to school stakeholders. Findings from RQ2 and RQ4 indicated that schools must change their formal policies to effect real, meaningful change for LGBTQIA+ students. Policies should be written to explicitly communicate the love of Jesus and to provide clear guidelines for how teachers support and protect their LGBTQIA+ students.

These findings corroborated those of the literature review, which indicated that schools must craft and implement policies to protect gender and sexual minority students from harassment (CDC, 2022; Fantus & Newman, 2021; Kosciw et al., 2020; Yuan, 2016). Such policies should be regularly communicated to stakeholders and consistently enforced (Boyland et al., 2018; Yuan, 2016). Policies are not limited to school climate, religion, and support but may also explicitly or implicitly address LGBTQIA+ students' identity, outness, health, and well-being.

Impact on LGBTQIA+ Students. If non-affirming schools address these key areas, this study indicated that LGBTQIA+ students would see positive impacts in the areas of (a) identity and outness, (b) health and well-being, and (c) personal growth and resilience. These areas are closely linked for LGBTQIA+ students, and the arrows on the model display this connection. Further, policies that explicitly target these outcomes—in addition to addressing a formalized support network, school climate, and the religious position—will be most effective in supporting LGBTQIA+ students.

Identity and Outness. Themes related to identity and outness emerged in the finding from all four research questions, despite many study participants noting that outness was uncommon and that not all LGBTQIA+ individuals were yet aware of their sexual or gender identity when they began their secondary school experience. While LGBTQIA+ students feeling forced to hide their identities—either as a result of student bullying or unprotective school policies—is not unique to non-affirming schools (Freedom for All Americans, 2022; Logue & Buckel, 1997; Marcus & Gore, 2018), religious pressure condemning the expression of LGBTQIA+ identity is limited to faith-based environments. This is one possible explanation for the strength of themes related to identity and outness in this study although they appeared in a more tertiary capacity in the literature review (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Haug, 2018). This finding indicated that

LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming schools closely link their ability to explore their identity while thoughtfully sharing that identity with others in their school environment with their perception of success and happiness. This study suggested that gender and sexual identity students feel they are not only marginalized by non-affirming schools but that their very existence is—if not overtly condemned—denied. This has led LGBTQIA+ students to believe that they must reject faith in God in order to live authentically, with some participants in this study describing how they could not deny their same-sex attraction despite religiously motivated efforts.

Although previous research related to outness in schools has primarily focused discussions of identity on sexual and gender identity (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Haug, 2018), participants in this study considered identity in Christ and a faith-based or religious identity as an outcome that religious schools would hope to achieve for their students. In order to elicit that outcome, this study posits that LGBTQIA+ students must be allowed to explore how to integrate a Christian worldview with other emerging identities and beliefs. Establishing safe havens on campuses for LGBTQIA+ students (CDC, 2022), GSAs (Kaczkowski et al., 2022), and gender-neutral policies, when possible, are all paths toward permitting outness without compromising a non-affirming school's religious position. This recommendation was substantiated by the research of Wolff et al. (2016), who found that students at Catholic universities—which rarely published policies explicitly forbidding same-sex relationships—experienced some of the lowest levels of religious incongruence compared with sexual minority students at other religious universities. It should be noted that because many religious secondary schools forbid public displays of affection on campus and limit sexual activity to the institution of marriage, there is little need to forbid same-sex relationships given the rarity of marriage among students in a

secondary school environment. Beyond these recommendations, several participants in this study indicated that providing connections to affirming faith-based resources would have increased their likelihood of remaining open to God. Hamblin and A. M. Gross's (2013) findings that sexual minority individuals in affirming religious environments felt more supported and reported lower instances of anxiety support the premise that providing LGBTQIA+ students with affirming resources may lead to better outcomes for this student population.

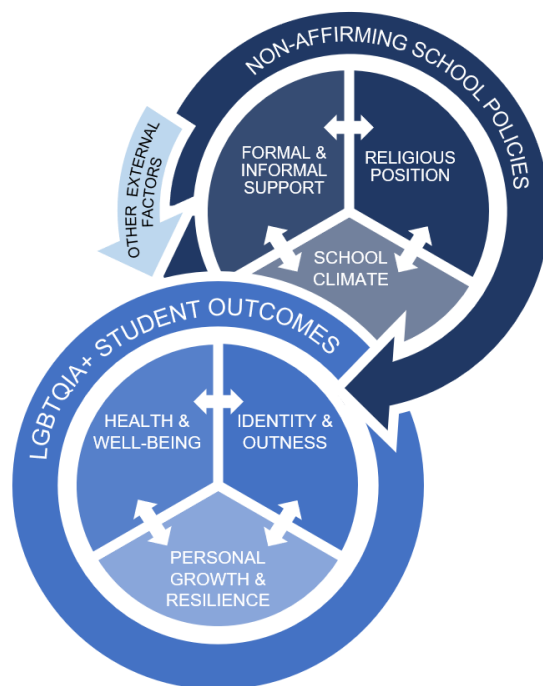
Health & Well-being. This study found that the health and well-being of LGBTQIA+ students was a direct outcome of the policies of non-affirming secondary schools. Not only is there a significant mental, physical, and emotional toll (RQ1) imposed by non-affirming schools, but LGBTQIA+ students often attempt to overcome this hardship by turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms (RQ2). In contrast, key stakeholders from non-affirming schools indicated in RQ3 that the happiness and security of their LGBTQIA+ students would be an indicator of success. The literature described outcomes related to health and well-being in detail, indicating that desirable outcomes included quality relationships free of bullying (E. Meyer & Stader, 2009), decreased instances of self-harm, depression, and suicidality (Gnan et al., 2019), and a personal understanding that they mattered (Duran et al., 2020; Spencer, 2021). Such outcomes are likely when students have a robust support system (CDC, 2022), supportive school climate (Duran et al., 2020; Fantus & Newman, 2021; Yuan, 2016), and access to inclusive resources (Boyland et al., 2018; CDC, 2022; Kaczkowski et al., 2022) inside and outside of the classroom.

Personal Growth & Resilience. While personal growth and resilience are essential for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools, this element was intentionally situated farther away from the arrow showing the direct impact of non-affirming schools. This is because developing strength and resilience has often been the unintended outcome of harmful school

policies. Regardless of whether non-affirming schools modify their policies to support their LGBTQIA+ population, their policies will affect these students. The question is whether the outcomes will be those that the non-affirming schools desire. The current study has demonstrated that many student outcomes are contrary to those that religious schools target. While the students in this study described summoning internal strength in order to overcome the challenges that their non-affirming schools posed to their well-being and development, improved school policies could instead reduce challenges and intentionally support LGBTQIA+ students in growing a support network, reaching milestones alongside their peers, and developing avenues to advocate within their schools. In this way, non-affirming schools could channel the energy of their LGBTQIA+ student population to ensure schools and gender and sexual minority students work alongside one another for improved outcomes rather than—as participants in this study perceived—working against one another.

Figure 14

John 13:34 Model for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in Christian Schools



Systems Context: EST and PVEST

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described this ecological systems approach as one that examined the reciprocal nature between human development and the environments and social structures through which one moves during their life. These systems that influence individuals are the (a) microsystem, (b) mesosystem, (c) exo-system, (d) macrosystem, and (e) chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986). At a foundational level is the microsystem, which contains one's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1977). A student's microsystems would include settings such as school and home and roles such as teacher, peers, and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1977). Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1977) described mesosystems as the interactions of one's microsystems. In contrast, exo-systems are external systems that affect an individual but that the individual has little ability to impact (e.g., government agencies and media; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). At a broader level is the macrosystem, which includes the political, economic, and educational systems that shape ideology and values. Inclusive of all these systems, the chronosystem indicates how systems and individuals change over time and as a result of significant normative events (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Spencer et al.'s (1997) PVEST posited that the systems described in EST not only influenced individuals in a complex way that also impacted those systems and reinforced existing relationships but that these systems acted upon the self-esteem and perceptions of the individual. The PVEST model reveals how individuals cope with the challenges and stressors inherent in each level of EST using a 5-step recursive cycle (Spencer, 2021). The first factor is the individual's *net vulnerability level* (Spencer, 2021) or *risk contributors* (Spencer et al., 1997). This consists of an individual's personal characteristics, the strengths and environmental factors

and challenges that impact an individual's self-image, for better or worse (Spencer et al., 1997; Spencer, 2021). The *net vulnerability level* includes someone's gender and sexual identity and other components impacting daily life (Spencer et al., 1997). The second factor is an individual's *net stress engagement level*, which discerns the risk factors that the individual encounters and must cope with from those simply present in their environment (Spencer et al., 1997; Spencer, 2021). The third factor is an individual's *reactive coping* mechanisms, representing an individual's attempt to respond creatively to an environmental problem (Spencer et al., 1997). When reactive coping mechanisms become engrained responses that impact how an individual views their identity, they result in the fourth factor: *stable emergent identities* (Spencer et al., 1997; Spencer, 2021). The fifth factor, *life-stage-specific coping outcomes*, may be destructive or constructive, and these coping outcomes inform an individual's *net vulnerability*, completing the cycle (Spencer et al., 1997; Spencer, 2021).

System-based Framework for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in Non-affirming Schools

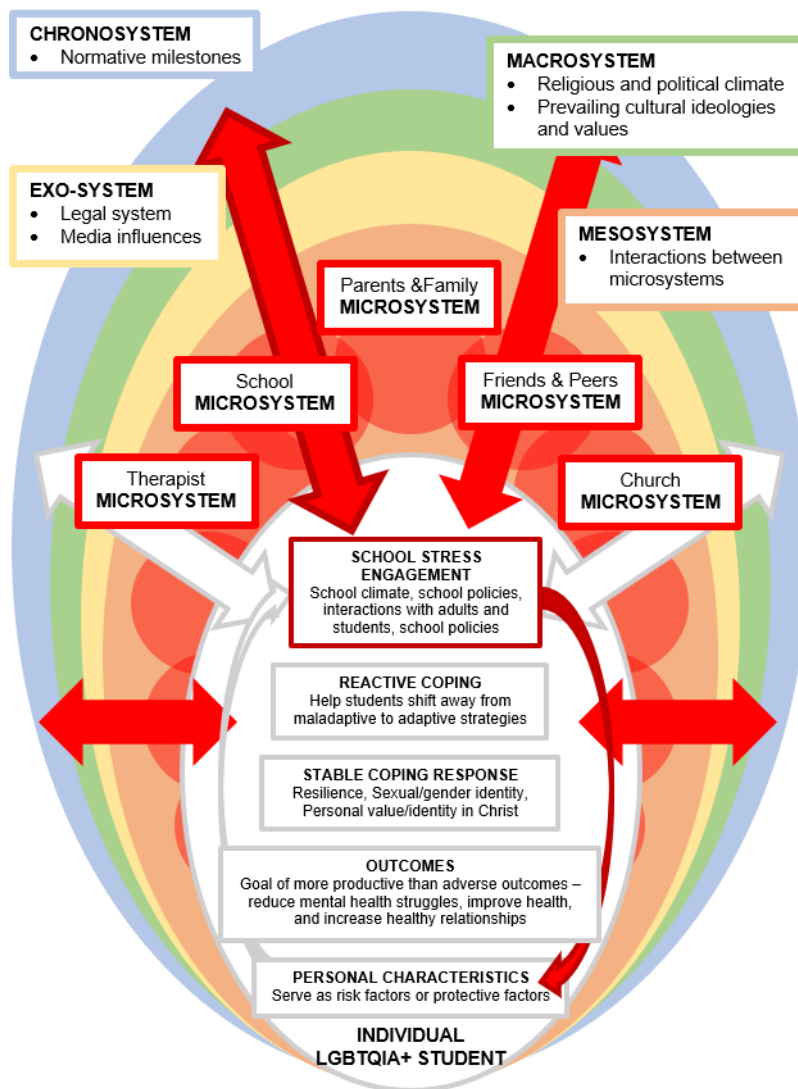
The framework herein described integrates the challenges, success factors, and recommendations of participants to support LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools into EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and PVEST (Spencer, 2021), guided by the command found in John 13:34 (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011; see Figure 15). As in EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), this framework situates the LGBTQIA+ student within the ecological systems with which an individual has reciprocal relationships, both being impacted by these systems and—at times—impacting them in turn. The white arrows indicate this reciprocity. This integration of the research on non-affirming secondary schools seeking to support their LGBTQIA+ students into EST and PVEST also demonstrates the ability of any given microsystem to not only impact other microsystems (represented by transparent red overlapping spheres) within the mesosystem, but to

mediate the impact of the other systems within a student's ecology, which can improve or degrade a student's perception of themselves and personal growth factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Spencer, 2021).

Rather than showing all factors that impact an LGBTQIA+ student's engagement with stressors, this framework displays stressors specific to non-affirming schools. In this study, participants revealed that a school's portrayal of religion acted as a central stressor for LGBTQIA+ students. However, the treatment and portrayal of religion is within the power of the school microsystem to revise. This study suggested that by shifting language and emphasis away from judgement that was specific to the LGBTQIA+ community, schools should lead with a doctrine that emphasized God's love. Achieving this goal requires retraining staff to be aware of language that LGBTQIA+ students find harmful, such as "love the sinner, hate the sin." Further, this shift must impact the language and messaging of school leaders, teachers, and other employees. Reevaluating Bible curriculum was also noted as an essential component of shifting the school's emphasis away from sin perceived as specific to LGBTQIA+ community. Making this change within the school's microsystem was expected to mediate stress engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Spencer, 2021) and result in adaptive coping mechanisms (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Spencer, 2021), such as openness to God, rather than what religious schools would view as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Spencer, 2021): rejecting God. It should be noted that, given their experiences at non-affirming schools, some participants understood rejecting God to be an adaptive and preferable coping mechanism. If schools were able to effectively convey the love of God to their LGBTQIA+ students, this has the potential to impact an LGBTQIA+ student's stable coping identity by allowing them to integrate religion into their personal identity.

Figure 15

System-based Framework for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in Non-affirming Schools



Note. This figure provides as visual display of a System-based Framework for Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students in Non-affirming Schools. It is adapted from Bronfenbrenner’s EST model and Spencer’s PVEST adaptation of EST. This framework does not attempt to show every impact on an individual, but is specifically focused on the issues facing LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming Christian schools, in keeping with the scope of this study. John 13:34 (NIV, 1973/2011) states, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

Altering how the school approaches religion is also a step toward improving LGBTQIA+ students’ perceptions of school climate. School climate is a critical portion of the school

microsystem, impacting students' perceptions of school employees, policies, and peers, among other factors. A climate perceived as discriminatory, unwelcoming, and unsafe will exacerbate stress engagement and negatively impact a student's self-appraisal (Spencer, 1997). However, a climate of inclusion and belonging should help to mediate the stress engagement within the school microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Spencer, 2021). In order to create a welcoming and inclusive climate based on love, respect, and value, schools should engage with LGBTQIA+ students to identify where they have experienced homophobia and use this input to craft policies and training that prevent discrimination. Including students in the change initiative and providing representation is a strategy to build belonging. Further, welcoming diversity of people, ideas, and discussion was found to promote belonging.

Building out formalized institutional support for LGBTQIA+ students and their families was a strategy identified that spanned the microsystem and mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Spencer, 2021). The existing lack of support at non-affirming secondary schools aggravated stressors for LGBTQIA+ students. By facilitating peer support through GSAs or other LGBTQIA+ clubs or groups, designating safe adults who would maintain student confidences, and providing resources for students and families, schools have the potential to improve conditions within multiple microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), further improving stress engagement (Spencer, 2021) conditions for LGBTQIA+ students. One school policy that was important to LGBTQIA+ students was the ability to be out, which they believed increased their access to a support network. The ability to be out on campus rather than hiding a part of their identity would not only reduce a central stressor for LGBTQIA+ students but would stop pushing students to adopt a maladaptive coping mechanism of constructing a false persona (Spencer, 1997). Students who identified as LGBTQIA+ believed that being out would allow

them to experience normative social and personal milestones on the same timeline as their peers, indicating that LGBTQIA+ students perceived the impact of their non-affirming school microsystem on their chronosystem as a net stressor. Beyond these additions to LGBTQIA+ student support, participants requested access to external support, equitable resources, such as sex education, and reexamination of how science courses teach about gender differences. These resources were theorized to reduce stressors that made LGBTQIA+ students feel separate or different from others at their non-affirming secondary school.

Implementing these strategies was anticipated to have a significant impact within the individual LGBTQIA+ student, influencing their reactive coping methods and resulting outcomes. Not only did LGBTQIA+ students anticipate shifting away from maladaptively hiding their gender and/or sexual identity in favor of embracing their authentic self, changes to non-affirming schools were anticipated to reduce the number of adverse health and behavioral outcomes (Spencer, 1997), including mental health struggles, self-harm, risky behaviors, cycles of harm, and suicidality. Instead, participants predicted healthy outcomes, such as positive relationships, happiness, and security.

Study Conclusion

The most concerning conclusion of this research was that religious schools have created a harmful environment that many LGBTQIA+ graduates would avoid if given the opportunity. Not only have non-affirming secondary schools contributed to the negative mental, physical, and emotional health outcomes of their LGBTQIA+ students, they have communicated a distorted picture of God's love, essentially failing at a critical aspect of the mission of Christian education. Although change would be challenging—as participants noted, it is necessary. Non-affirming schools must navigate the precarious balance between their religious convictions and the needs

of their students. Considered from a Christian perspective, these positions should not be at odds but aligned; God's love and value for his children is evident throughout the Bible (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2021, John 3:16, 1 John 4:8, 1 Peter 4:8; Yuan, 2016). The Bible teaches that sin separates every individual from God (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:8) but that through Christ's redemptive death and resurrection we have been provided with a new life (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Romans 6:23, Titus 3:5), essentially leveling the playing field and identifying all individuals as sinners saved by grace. If the goal of religious schools is to share this gospel message, they must follow the example and admonitions of Christ: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye" (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Matthew 7:3,5). Before considering the sins or perceived sins of others, Christian schools must repent of the damage they have done in turning LGBTQIA+ students away from God and the gospel. The burden falls to school leaders to implement strategies that will both accurately represent the truth and grace found in scripture and show Christ-like love and biblical compassion to LGBTQIA+ students. Suggested strategies identified in the research are summarized below:

- Religion: Communicate God's unconditional love to LGBTQIA+ students rather than portraying homosexuality or gender non-conformity as the worst sin. School leaders and employees should acknowledge their own sins and faults or risk modeling hypocrisy.
- Outness: Permitting students to explore their identity and be authentic in their relationships with others promotes healthy coping mechanisms and reduces feelings of incongruence. Not being able to be out cut many LGBTQIA+ students off from the majority of adults at non-affirming schools, removing what—for a

number of participants—was the only religious influence or resource they had available to them.

- **Support:** Provide access to equitable, safe resources, including identifying safe teachers and spaces for LGBTQIA+ students to seek help and advice. Support groups such as GSAs can include religious support.
- **School climate:** A welcoming environment that embraces students from all backgrounds and orientations was described as one that would promote inclusion, belonging, and diversity. To facilitate this, school leaders must implement policies that have zero tolerance for harassment and should explicitly protect LGBTQIA+ students rather than shying away from addressing sexual and gender issues.
- **Developing resilience and encouraging personal growth:** Schools should encourage LGBTQIA+ students to be involved in inciting change. By inviting students in, listening to their experiences, and making changes so they have a safe, healthy secondary school experience, they gain a sense of agency and increase their self-esteem.
- **Health and well-being:** When LGBTQIA+ students are supported, their health and well-being are positively impacted. Students posited that the above changes would reduce the negative mental health problems common in LGBTQIA+ individuals.

As the number of students who publicly identify as LGBTQIA+ grows, challenges to unsupportive schools will become increasingly common. It behooves non-affirming schools to take a proactive approach in implementing policies to support their LGBTQIA+ students in order

to meet their own desired outcomes of creating well-educated Christ followers. By keeping desired outcomes in mind, non-affirming schools can better achieve their own goals and better serve their students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming religious secondary schools to evaluate success factors and best practices that lead to supporting positive student outcomes. It revealed the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming secondary schools, best practices and coping strategies that have aided LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming these stressors, key stakeholders' perceptions of success factors for LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming education, and the strategies school leaders should adopt to support this population.

1. This study was limited to non-affirming secondary schools. However, several participants addressed issues they faced prior to their secondary school experience. Further research into K-12 non-affirming education is needed to investigate best practices for younger LGBTQIA+ students.
2. This study was focused on the well-being of LGBTQIA+ students and helping them achieve positive outcomes. In interviews with teachers, it became clear that school employees desire additional clarity, support, and training in order to serve their LGBTQIA+ students well. In particular, teachers cared about communicating a religious message that emphasized God's love without alienating students or compromising their faith. Additional research into how this message should be communicated in order to have the intended impact on LGBTQIA+ students should be conducted.
3. A limitation of this study was in only engaging student participants who had left their

secondary school and who were over the age of 18. Many participants had graduated from secondary school at least 10 years prior to this study. Although this limited risk to or exploitation of vulnerable LGBTQIA+ youth, it did not produce current perspectives from LGBTQIA+ students. The only current data was provided by teachers. Thus, the study had the potential for hindsight bias and participant bias. Thus, anonymous studies of current LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools are a recommended next step to further validate this research and ensure that the best practices used by schools are those most meaningful to their current student populations.

4. This study was limited to non-affirming schools and did not examine the impact between non-affirming religious influences and affirming religious influences on secondary students. Some participants indicated that affirming religious role models, pastors, and peers enabled them to reconcile the religious incongruence they experienced and reengage with God and faith. The impact to the faith of LGBTQIA+ students based on experiences with non-affirming and affirming schooling should be compared.
5. Negative mental health outcomes have been observed in LGBTQIA+ youth in non-affirming and secular school environments. Larger-scale, quantitative studies should be employed to measure the impact of each environment. This will aid LGBTQIA+ students and their families in making decisions about how best to support this population. Studies should examine both the short-term and longitudinal impact of each school environment.
6. Only a small number of participants commented on the academic impact of attending non-affirming schools on LGBTQIA+ students. Responses varied widely and were rarely connected by students to their LGBTQIA+ experiences. Future studies should expand the work of Kilgo et al. (2019), BreckaLorenz et al. (2021) and Forber-Pratt et al. (2021) to

assess the impact of a non-affirming school on the academic achievement of LGBTQIA+ students.

Final Thoughts

Conducting this study has been a privilege. As a Christian school educator and administrator, it has been humbling to listen to the testimonies of LGBTQIA+ students and the teachers who have served them. While this research has presented a bleak picture of the experiences and outcomes for many LGBTQIA+ students, it has also indicated the changes that non-affirming schools can make to improve outcomes for this population. No individual should feel hated by God or unwelcome in their school environment. By implementing practices based on Christian love (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, John 13:34), non-affirming schools can shift their practices, climate, and communication of the gospel to better reflect the heart of God to “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (*NIV Bible*, 1973/2011, Mark 10:14).

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Notice

Pepperdine University
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263
TEL: 310-506-4000

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: March 01, 2023

Protocol Investigator Name: Alexis Schneider

Protocol #: 22-09-1934

Project Title: Best practices for non-affirming Christian secondary schools to support outcomes for LGBTQIA+ students

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Alexis Schneider:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at community.pepperdine.edu/irb.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair

cc: Mrs. Katy Carr, Assistant Provost for Research

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Document

IRB Number 22-09-1934

Study Title: THE IMPACT OF NON-AFFIRMING CHRISTIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS ON STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBTQIA+: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Invitation

Dear [name],

My name is Alexis Schneider. I am conducting a study on the impact of attending religious high schools on LGBTQIA+ and best practices to support LGBTQIA+ students in these environments. If you are 18 years of age or older, identify as LGBTQIA+, and have attended a non-affirming religious high school, you may participate in this research.

What is the reason for doing this research study?

This research project focuses on experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attended religious high schools to evaluate success factors and best practices that will enable school leaders to support positive student outcomes. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, identify as LGBTQIA+, and have attended a religious high school with a theology that approved only of heterosexuality and gender identity assigned at birth.

What will be done during this research study?

- The researcher obtained approval for research from Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board.
- The researcher contacted participants using the recruitment script.
- You have the choice to provide informed consent if you agree to proceed with the interview.
- In the interview, the researcher will collect data by asking you questions (included below). This interview is expected to take approximately 30-60 minutes and will take place in an audio-recorded Zoom meeting.
- The researcher will transcribe your responses to the interview questions.
- The researchers will analyze data from all participants to identify common challenges for LGBTQIA+ students and the best practices that religious schools should adopt.
- The researcher will document the findings of this study in a dissertation.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?

You can anticipate no more than minimal risks due to participating in this study. Possible risks may include a loss of confidentiality, emotional and/or psychological distress because the interview questions ask about your experiences, which may include negative encounters or events.

What are the possible benefits to you?

The results of this study will be used to improve conditions for LGBTQIA+ students in non-affirming religious secondary schools. At this time, you are not anticipated to gain personal benefit.

How will information about you be protected?

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be deidentified and stored electronically on a password-protected computer and stored using a secure server. The original data will only be viewed by the primary researcher, and the interview recording will be destroyed after transcription. Any identifying information in the interview, including the names of individuals or schools will be deidentified with pseudonyms.

The only persons who will have access to your deidentified research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but the data will be reported as group or summarized data, and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

What are your rights as a research subject?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study-related questions, please contact the investigator:

Alexis Schneider: alexis.schneider@pepperdine.edu

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

Phone: 1(310)568-2305

Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or stop participating once you start?

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or choosing to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

To help you decide if you are willing to be interviewed, below you can read the questions that will be asked during the interview, if you choose to participate.

1. Think back you your years in high school. Is there a situation or incident that stands out as your most difficult experience? Please describe that incident. Were there any other

- incidents that come to mind?
2. How did the incident(s) influence your health and your emotional and physical well-being?
 3. What other impact did it have on you?
 4. How did you deal with the impact? What resources were available to you? From whom did you seek help and advice?
 5. How did these incidents and situations affect your perception (thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, and actions) of religion at your school?
 6. How did you deal with these perceptions and changes to your perception of religion? What resources were available to you? From whom did you seek help and advice?
 7. Tell me about any difficult experiences you are aware of that other LGBTQIA+ students encountered at your high school. How did the experiences influence their health and well-being? What other impacts do you think they had?
 8. How did they deal with these issues? What resources were available to them? From whom did they seek help and advice?
 9. What was your expectation of your experience and what would a great high school experience have looked like?
 10. How would that have manifested itself over time?
 11. If you could go back to high school and start over, what would you do differently?
 12. What advice do you have for school leaders at these institutions to better support LGBTQIA+ students?

Documentation of informed consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that you have read and understood this consent form, and you have decided to be in the research study.

Please retain a copy of the informed consent document for your records.

**Participant
Name:**

(First, Last: Please Print)

**Participant
Signature:**

Signature

Date

Digital Informed Consent Link: <https://forms.gle/f7JGemGzTjKZTHjr9>

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Script: Sent to Sampling Frame

Dear [name],

My name is Alexis, Schneider, and I am a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University.

I am conducting a research study that seeks to identify the impact of religious schools on LGBTQIA+ students and how religious high schools can better support them. I am contacting you because your name appeared in a search for students who believed their religious school could have served this population better.

I am seeking volunteer study participants for an interview that would ask you about your experiences as an LGBTQIA+ student at what scholars call a non-affirming school, meaning that its theology does not affirm sexual relationships that are not heterosexual or gender identities other than the sex assigned at birth. Your participation in the study would consist of an audio-recorded Zoom interview and is anticipated to take no more than 30-60 minutes.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and your identity as a participant will be protected before, during, and after the time that study data is collected. Strict confidentiality procedures will be in place. Confidentiality will be maintained using a password-protected laptop to store all data collected, including informed consent, the recorded interview, and the transcribed data. All data will also be deidentified using a numerical pseudonym which will be assigned to each individual recording.

I attended a religious high school, and saw that the environment was uncomfortable for my LGBTQIA+ friends. Now, working for a religious high school, in my experience little has changed, and my goal in this study is to identify best practices based on the perspectives and insights of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in this study, please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience or follow this link (<https://forms.gle/f7JGemGzTjKZTHjr9>) to provide your contact information.

Thank you for your consideration,

Alexis Schneider
Pepperdine University
Graduate School of Education and Psychology
Status: Doctoral Candidate
alexis.schneider@pepperdine.edu

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Script: Social Media Post

As a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University, I am conducting a research study that seeks to identify the impact of religious schools on LGBTQIA+ students and how religious high schools can better support them.

If you attended what scholars call a “non-affirming” high school—meaning that its theology does not affirm sexual relationships that are not heterosexual or gender identities other than the sex assigned at birth—and if you identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community and would be willing to participate in an interview about your experiences and how these schools can better meet the needs of their LGBTQIA+ students, please email alexis.schneider@pepperdine.edu or follow this link (<https://forms.gle/f7JGemGzTjKZTHjr9>) to provide your contact information.

Your participation in the study would consist of an audio-recorded Zoom interview and is anticipated to take no more than 30-60 minutes. Participation in this study is voluntary, and your identity as a participant will be protected before, during, and after the time that study data is collected. Strict confidentiality procedures will be in place. Confidentiality will be maintained using a password-protected laptop and secure safe to store all data collected, including informed consent, the recorded interview, and the transcribed data. All data will also be deidentified using a numerical pseudonym which will be assigned to each individual recording.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in this study, please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience.

Thank you, Alexis Schneider (alexis.schneider@pepperdine.edu)

APPENDIX E

Peer Reviewer Form

The digital version of this form was available to peer reviewers at

<https://forms.gle/HbBnCaUVaEo6QeKVA>.

Interview Question Validity Survey

Thank you for helping me refine my interview questions.

The table below is designed to ensure that my research questions for the study are properly addressed with corresponding interview questions.

In the table below, please review each research question and the corresponding interview questions. For each interview question, consider how well the interview question addresses the research question. If the interview question is directly relevant to the research question, please mark "Keep as is." If the interview question is irrelevant to the research question, please mark "Delete it." Finally, if the interview question can be modified to best fit with the research question, please suggest your modifications in the space provided. You may also recommend additional interview questions you deem necessary.

Each section of this Google survey is focused on one research question (RQ). That RQ is listed at the top of the section so you will always be able to reference the research question that belongs with the interview question (IQ) you are evaluating. You will be able to give feedback on whether the question should

- remain as is ("Keep as is")
- be removed ("Delete")
- be revised (and, if so, how; "Other")

Before you begin, please look over the table (below) showing how my research questions correspond with my proposed interview questions. The IQs are numbered to show the order they would appear in the interview protocol.

I know your time is limited, and I appreciate your willingness to help. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Your email will be recorded when you submit this form

Research Questions & Interview Questions

<p>RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?</p>	<p>IQ1. What unique challenges did you face as a gender or sexual minority at a non-affirming religious secondary school?</p> <p>IQ2. How did these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your academic success?</p> <p>IQ3. How did these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions regarding your perception</p>
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	<p>of the religion of your school?</p> <p>IQ4. How did these challenges impact your health and well-being?</p>
<p>RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?</p>	<p>IQ5. What did you do in school to overcome challenges as an LGBTQIA+ student?</p> <p>IQ6. What did the school or others do to help support you in overcoming challenges?</p>
<p>RQ3 - How did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure their success?</p>	<p>IQ7. How would you define success for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools?</p> <p>IQ10. How did you track and measure your success as a student when you were in school?</p> <p>IQ11. Reflecting back on your time at a non-affirming secondary school, how would you measure your success as a student now? (if differently)</p>
<p>RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do LGBTQIA+ students recommend to leaders within these institutions to support this population?</p>	<p>IQ8. What recommendations would you give to school employees (administrators, teachers, etc.) to ensure LGBTQIA+ students achieve your definition of success?</p> <p>IQ9. What recommendations would you give to students to ensure LGBTQIA+ students achieve your definition of success?</p>

Suggestions for additional needed questions.

If you found that additional questions were needed, please suggest those here.

(Section 2)

RQ1 - What challenges did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools face in their secondary school experience?

IQ1. What unique challenges did you face as a gender or sexual minority at a non-affirming religious secondary school?

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

IQ2. How did these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions **regarding your academic success?**

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete

- Other:

IQ3. How did these challenges impact your behaviors, thoughts, and actions **regarding your perception of the religion of your school?**

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

IQ4. How did these challenges impact **your health and well-being?**

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

(Section 3)

RQ2 - What are the best practices of LGBTQIA+ students in overcoming challenges at non-affirming Christian secondary schools?

IQ5. What did **you** do in school to overcome challenges as an LGBTQIA+ student?

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

IQ6. What did **the school or others** do to help support you in overcoming challenges?

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

(Section 4)

RQ3 - How did LGBTQIA+ students who attended non-affirming Christian secondary schools define, track, and measure their success?

IQ7. How would you define success for LGBTQIA+ students at non-affirming secondary schools?

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

IQ10. How did you track and measure your success as a student when you were in school?

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

IQ11. Reflecting back on your time at a non-affirming secondary school, how would you measure your success as a student now? (if differently)

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

(Section 5)

RQ4 - Based on their experiences, what strategies and best practices do LGBTQIA+ students recommend to leaders within these institutions to support this population?

IQ8. What recommendations would you give to school employees (administrators, teachers, etc.) to ensure LGBTQIA+ students achieve your definition of success?

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

IQ9. What recommendations would you give to students to ensure LGBTQIA+ students achieve your definition of success?

Please use the "Other" option at the bottom to suggest revisions to content, numbering, etc.

- The question directly addresses the research question – Keep as is.
- The question has little or no relevance to the research question – Delete
- Other:

(Confirmation Message)

Thank you for helping me in my dissertation journey! I appreciate your time.