Southern Connecticut State University

ISSN#: 2473-2826

JELPS
Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

LGBT Educators' Perceptions of Safety and Support and Implications for Equity-Oriented School Leaders

[1]Tiffany Wright, EdD [2]Nancy J Smith, PhD [3]Erin Whitney, BA

Abstract
Equity is desirable in all aspects of our democracy. Public schools, in particular, are essential to that enterprislse. Unfortunately, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) educators have often not experienced equity in our schools. Equity-oriented school leaders, however, can make schools more equitable for LGBT teachers while increasing student achievement. The research reported here examines LGBT teachers' perceptions of equity in their workplace—our schools—and, particularly, their sense of safety. Implications for equity-oriented school leaders are discussed.

Keywords: Social Justice Leadership, LGBT, Administration, Leadership Preparation

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[1]**Tiffany Wright,** an Associate Professor in the Educational Foundations Department at Millersville University, has served as an educator and school leader in various settings for over 20 years, i.e. juvenile facilities, a comprehensive high school, and a career/technical high school. She taught English and then served as a school administrator for 6 years while earning her Ed.D. from Johns Hopkins University (JHU). She taught part-time at JHU and Millersville University and was hired full-time at Millersville in 2011. She is the Co-Director of the EdD Program in Educational Leadership jointly offered with Shippensburg University. In addition, she coordinates the Graduate Program in Leadership for Teaching and Learning which leads to principals' certification.

[2] **Nancy Smith** is Professor Emerita and past dean of the School of Education at Millersville University. After receiving a PhD from University of Georgia, she worked at an Intermediate Educational Unit, then accepted a position at Kansas State University, earning promotion and tenure as the first out lesbian. After attending the Bryn Marwr Institute for Women in Higher Education Administration, she joined Millersville as a professor of Educational Foundations, heading development of the M.Ed. in Leadership for Teaching and Learning. She introduced Women's and Queer Studies, later becoming the Director of Women's Studies and co-creating the National Study of LGBT Educators' Perceptions of the Workplace Climate Survey. Dr. Smith was very active in the American Educational Research Association and her work has been published in *The Reading Teacher, Journal of Reading, National Forum of Applied Educational Research Journal, Educational and Psychological Research, and Women's Studies in Communication.*

[3] **Erin Whitney** received her bachelor's degree in psychology from Susquehanna University in 2014 and is currently working on her M.Ed in School Counseling at Millersville University. She is also currently a graduate assistant for the joint Educational Leadership doctoral program at Millersville University offered jointly with Shippensburg University.

Recommended Citation: Wright, T., Smith, N., & Whitney, E. (2019). LGBT educators' perceptions of safety and support and implications for equity-oriented school leaders. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies,Special Issue #2 on Educational Leadership and Social Justice, 3*(2).

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ISSN#: 2473-2826
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Introduction

Prior to 2007, much of the research regarding LGBT teachers consisted of small scale, qualitative studies. Although the qualitative studies portrayed the rich stories of small groups or individual participants, the research needed to expand to show whether those concerns truly belonged only to those LGBT educators or if they indicated the perceptions of the larger population of LGBT educators. Inspired by the Gay Lesbian Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) biennial climate surveys for LGBT students, a team of four researchers, including the first two authors of this article, originated the *The National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate* instrument in 2007 to measure LGBT educators' perceptions of school climate. In 2011, the instrument was revised and administered again online. Finally, the study discussed here extended the prior two studies by investigating the current climate for LGBT educators, utilizing the third iteration of the survey instrument, The *National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate 2017.* Research questions for this study are as follows:

1) What are LGBT educators' perceptions of homophobia and transphobia in a school setting and how do these impact *outness*?
2) **What are LGBT educators' perception of safety and support in a school setting and how do these impact *outness*?**
3) What, if any, interventions and policies are in place in the school (building, district and state level) if an individual experiences homophobia or transphobia in the school setting?
4) How do LGBT educators respond when encountering homophobia or transphobia?
5) What is the overall school climate in regards to LGBT educators?

This study sought to examine how different factors have changed school climates for LGBT educators in recent years. Despite changes to marriage equality in federal law, LGBT educators' employment is unprotected in many areas of the country (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Teachers in 28 states can still lose their jobs because of their sexual orientation. These state laws may contribute to other measures of perceived support from school administrators and students. For this study, levels of support were gauged by the existence of civil rights protection at state, union, and local levels, the presence of LGBT-inclusive curriculum, professional development about LGBT students and/or professionals, levels of comfort talking to supervisors about LGBT issues and showing support for LGBT students, and whether or not the LGBT teacher was out, meaning open and honest with the rest of the school community about their sexual orientation and/or their gender identity.
Despite apparent improvements in civil rights for LGBT individuals in the U.S., the current climate worldwide and in the United States indicates a more polarized level of LGBTQ acceptance (Moreau, 2018) and support. Non-LGBT Americans, in a recent survey, reported a decrease in comfort in all LGBT personal situations for the first time in four years (Schneider et al., 2018). At the school level, many administrators still exhibited reluctance to implement professional development related to LGBT issues, also indicating potential levels of discomfort (Payne & Smith, 2018).

This study was an investigation of the current school climate for LGBT educators in the United States (U.S.). Overall, the survey had three primary areas of interest: (1) LGBT educators' perceptions of homophobia and transphobia; (2) LGBT educators' perception of employment and personal safety; and (3) LGBT educators' perception of support and how all these factors may impact an LGBT educator's willingness to be out in their settings.

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This paper will primarily focus on results of the study pertaining specifically to LGBT educators' perceptions of safety and support and how these factors may impact outness. These quantitative data reveal patterns of significance in responses regarding "outness" related to certain demographic factors like region of the country, level of students taught, and type of setting (i.e. rural, urban, etc). To provide depth to these quantitative results, participants had an opportunity to respond using words and stories to chronicle the positive and negative consequences of being "out" in their school settings.

While the 2007 and 2011 *The National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate* studies filled a gap in the literature on the school environments of LGBT teachers, they indicated that LGBT educators perceived a problematic climate across the U.S. As far as the researchers are aware, these three two surveys and the 2017 iteration are the only large scale quantitative surveys that have been done on this topic.

The importance of educators having safe and supportive workplace environments for the sake of their own health and well-being is self-evident, but it is also vital for students to work with educators who feel supported. Teachers who feel safe are more efficacious (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). Further, students who witness discrimination of their LBGT teachers also experience negative effects (Eckes & McCarthy, 2008). While there are evidence-based techniques which improve school climate for teachers and students (i.e. Rottman, 2006), it is obvious from Smith and Wright's (2010; 2013) research that these techniques are not being utilized in many schools. It is the researchers' hope that the dissemination of these multi-faceted results will help bring light to the challenges for LGBT educators in most work environments and encourage administrative change and incorporation of evidenced-based techniques that support LBGT teachers and, consequently, their students.

Literature Review

Effective school leaders strive to create and maintain safety within their schools (Lezotte, 1997). Bucher and Manning (2005) described a safe school as "one in which the total school climate allows students, teachers, administrators, staff and visitors to interact in a positive, non-threatening manner that reflects the educational mission of the school while fostering positive relationships and personal growth" (p. 56). Discrimination against LGBT educators damages not only those individual educators, but also students who witness it (Eckes & McCarthy, 2008).

Educators needs to feel safe and accepted to provide the best education for their students. Leithwood and McAdie (2007) found that teachers who felt safe had a higher level of efficacy. Sergiovanni (2000) highlighted the importance of relational trust among faculty and administrators by describing a teacher-centered leader as someone who gives each teacher a respectful place to work. The focus in recent years on including more LGBT issues within a school's curriculum has assisted many schools in creating safer climates for diverse populations, including LGBT students and staff (Rottmann, 2006). Despite these indications, researchers have demonstrated that many LGBT educators have felt unsafe in their school environments (Smith et al., 2008; Wright, 2010).

School leaders continue to struggle with acknowledging and improving the experiences of LGBT educators. Lugg & Tooms (2010) discussed levels of "differentiated citizenship" (p. 82) for LGBT people, emphasizing that educators identifying as LGBT have had some of the most historically difficult experiences of all. These difficulties include living with the daily stress from fear of job loss, to

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physical threats and harassment resulting in feeling unsafe, to neglect by school leadership of LGBT teachers' concerns and incidences of abuse. The literature on LGBT educators revolves around three themes: (a) the historical context (Blount, 1996, 2000; Khayatt, 1992; Kissen, 1996; Lugg, 2006), (b) school climates for LGBT educators (Blount, 1996, 2000; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Harbeck, 1997; Khayatt, 1992; Kissen, 1996; Yared, 1997), (c) and individual experiences of LGBT preservice and inservice educators (Evans, 2002; Ferfolja, 1998; Griffin, 1992; Jackson, 2007; Jennings, 1992; Juul & Repa, 1993; Litton, 1999; McCarthy, 2003; Melillo, 2003; Rensenbrink, 1996; Woods & Harbeck, 1992; Woog, 1995). Most of these studies employ qualitative methods and focus on small samples of LGBT educators.

Queer theory, which emerged in the 1990s, underscores much of the research in this field, including the study outlined in this current article (Sedgwick, 1990). Queer theory seeks to give voice to those who typically have not had a voice in schooling due to an historical prevalence of a dominant culture of heteronormativity, meaning that heterosexual behaviors and presentation are the norm (Melillo, 2003).

Another theoretical underpinning of this current work relates to the Theory of Gay Teacher Development, which emerged from Jackson (2007). In Jackson's especially salient qualitative study, nine LGBT participants identified support—especially administrative support—within their schools as a major factor that influenced their level of acceptance by peers and other stakeholders and, therefore, their own outness in the workplace. Jackson observed, "As the leader of the school, the principal's attitude about homosexuality does much to make the school a welcoming or discouraging workplace for gay and lesbian teachers" (p. 9). Jackson's findings supported the idea of including specialized training on leading for social justice in principal preparation programs (Marshall, 2004). In addition, Marshall and Hernandez (2013) found that providing specific training around issues of homosexuality to principal preparation candidates assisted them in disentangling prior views on homosexuality from attitudes that helped school leaders to consider these issues analytically.

Until 2008, only one comprehensive quantitative study examining factors that influenced LGBT educators' perception of job satisfaction had been published (Juul & Repa, 1993). In 2008, the Juul and Repa results were already 15 years old and did not specify factors contributing to LGBT educators' perceptions of school safety since the study examined the relationship between outness and job stress/satisfaction. Findings showed a positive relationship between outness and a high level of job satisfaction. This study did, however, provide a groundbreaking look at workplace climate for LGBT professionals,

İn 2008. Jackson's (2007) qualitative work, along with the other qualitative studies mentioned, helped to narrow the focus on what administrators can do to create an environment that will increase the retention rate of LGBT educators and make these educators feel valued. Jackson found through interviews that LGBT educators tended to move through developmental stages towards outness and that the administrative support impacted the speed of movement through those stages. The 2007 and 2011 iterations (Wright, 2010; Wright & Smith, 2013) of this current study provided an additional quantitative perspective on this topic to assist administrators in understanding what factors influence LGBT educators' perceptions of school climate.

Like prior iterations, this study was an investigation of a) current school climate for LGBT educators in the U.S., and b) how that climate has changed over time. These surveys had three primary areas of interest: (1) LGBT educators' perceptions of homophobia; (2) LGBT educators' perception of safety; (3) and LGBT educators'

perception of support. In relation to the first area, prior survey results from 2007 and 2011 indicated that the majority of LGBT teachers experienced homophobic comments (I.e., 86% in 2007 and 91.1% in 2011). Further, the earlier studies found that administrative intervention was utilized when homophobic comments were made and reported in only approximately half of teachers' schools. Conclusions from the first iteration indicated that overall, LGBT educators found that schools were difficult places for them to work (Smith et al., 2008). This was particularly the case in certain regions of the U.S. and if the schools educated younger children. While there were often differences noted like this, respondents everywhere reported hearing homophobic comments regularly—without intervention—from colleagues or school leaders. Many respondents also reported experiencing harassment, while approximately half reported feeling unsafe in schools.

The second study found that there had been an increase in the number of schools that had policy regarding homophobic language from the first iteration of the study to the second (52.3% to 88.4%) (Wright, 2010; Wright & Smith, 2013). The previous studies also explored how many LGBT teachers felt safe in their school environments, a concept which was measured using items related to fear of job loss if out to students/administrators, perception of rumors about teachers' sexual preferences, experiences of harassments, and teachers' assessment of community safety. Results showed that more educators' believed that the attitude of the community was unsafe in 2011 than in 2007 (78% and 41.2% respectively) (Wright, 2010; Wright & Smith, 2013).

Other areas of assessment included perceived support from school administrators and students. Teachers' perceptions of support were also gauged through the existence of civil rights protection at state, union, and local levels; the presence of LGBT-inclusive curriculum; professional development about LGBT issues; levels of comfort talking to supervisors about LGBT issues and showing support for LGBT students; and whether or not the LGBT teacher was out. While 87% of educators felt comfortable showing support to LGBT students in 2007, only 67.9% felt comfortable in 2011. Further, while all other areas of support remained close to the same over the 4 year time span, there were still alarmingly low rates of educators receiving professional development about LBGT professionals and LBGT students (86% and 65% respectively) with many receiving no relevant professional development (Wright, 2010; Wright & Smith, 2013). Altogether, the previous research indicates a climate of concern, of inhumaneness, and of fear for safety for LGBT educators across the U.S. The current study extended previous research by focusing more intentionally on transgender issues and exposing additional perceptions related to new political realities in the U.S. which impact work environments.

All three versions of the survey have included items asking LGBT teachers to describe the negative and positive consequences of being out. Without question, the responses in 2007 and 2011 were bleak. The following is a summary of those responses reported:

> Very serious negative consequences that were reported related to administrators. Respondents reported being threatened with job loss, not having contracts renewed, being reassigned and investigated, having payment for extra duties withheld, not being promoted, being denied merit pay, receiving unfair action plans, and having services for their students withheld (Wright & Smith, 2015).

This iteration of the study aimed to highlight the climate for LGBT educators during 2017.

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Method

In 2006, the *LGBT Teachers' School Climate Survey* was piloted to collect LGBT educators' perceptions of their climate in the workplace, and then in 2007 the survey was released to a nation-wide sample (Smith, *et al*., 2006). In 2010 and early 2011, instrument revision was achieved collaboratively by the researchers in seven steps: 1) using feedback from participants in the original study; 2) reviewing the 2007 objectives; 3) revising items; 4) conducting a new pilot study; 5) revising items based on an item analysis as described by Patton (1990); and finally, 6) validating the revised survey instrument by three educational professionals (items had been validated by six educational professionals for the 2007 study). This same seven step process was used to revise the survey again, which was launched in Spring 2017. For this 2017 iteration, a lead researcher at the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network (GLSEN), a national, well-known organization that surveys students on school climate, provided feedback about the improved instrument. The researchers also worked to condense items and make the survey more concise, per feedback from 2007 and 2010 participants in addition to researchers' concern about missing data from both prior iterations of the survey. Finally, all items were written so that the most desirable outcome choice of the item for an LGBT educator would be the highest score.

The resulting forty-one-item *2017 National LGBT Educators'* survey was distributed to a small sample to pilot it. Care was taken to allow self-identification for the demographic items and to discern differences between issues and items related to sexuality and gender identity. Minor revisions were made to the survey instrument based on pilot study participant feedback.

The *National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate 2017* was posted on Survey Monkey and made available for responses on April 1, 2017. The survey was closed to data collection on October 31, 2017. Given the difficulty of achieving a random sample due to the lack of a national database of LGBT educators and the challenges in some regions for teachers to be open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, participants were recruited through various national educational organizations (e.g., National Education Association and state level affiliates), academic organizations and conferences, national LGBT organizations, and from the participants themselves after they completed the survey. The link to the survey was posted on multiple Facebook pages and on several Twitter accounts. This purposive sampling is employed in circumstances when a random sample is impossible and when participants need to have particular characteristics to be eligible for the study (Dixon et al., 1987; Kerlinger, 1986; Morse, 1991; Patton, 1990). The overall sample contained 244 participants and included educators in public, charter, private, parochial, and technical schools (See Table 1); and schools in urban, suburban, and rural settings (See Table 2). Participants from all regions of the United States answered the survey (See Table 3). Responses to the survey were anonymous, and confidentiality was guaranteed. No individually identifiable information was requested. The same sampling methodology had been used for the earlier 2007 and 2011 studies.

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Table 1

School Type Described by Participants

	n	%
Regular public school	192	80.67
Public charter school	14	5.88
Religious-affiliated school	5	2.10
A career/technical school	3	1.26
Another kind of private or independent school	38	11.1
Other (no category accurately described school) 13 5.46		
Total	238	100.0

Table 2

Type of Setting Described by Participants

	N	%
Large city	57	23.95
Midsize city	68	28.57
Suburbs	52	21.85
Small town	24	10.08
Rural area	32	13.45
Other(no category accurately described setting)	5	2.10
Total	238	100.0

Table 3

Respondents by Region of the United States

	n	%
Southeast	39	16.74
Northeast	74	31.76
Midwest	45	19.31
Southwest	31	13.30
Northwest	44	18.88
Total	243	100.0

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Table 4

Respondents by School Level

Level	*n*	%
Primary	3	1.23
Elementary	44	18.11
K-8	20	8.23
K-12	17	7.00
Middle	57	23.46
Jr. High	2	.82
High	86	35.39
Other (no category accurately represented level)	14	5.76
Total	243	100.00

This study disseminates results indicating pertinent demographic data about how respondents identify themselves and the settings in which they work. SPSS One-Way ANOVA of LGBT educators' perceptions of employment risk, safety and other factors related to outness based on those certain demographic characteristics was conducted. Also, emergent themes from the open ended items pertaining to the positive and negative consequences of being out have been identified. In addition, researchers aimed to find a relationship among certain variables to provide equity-focused school and district leaders as well as university faculty members working with pre-service school leaders tos hare guidance and best practices for creating safe, equitable, and inclusive environments that support all teachers and students.

Results

Quantitative

How does LGBT educators' perception of safety and support in a school setting impact outness? One Way ANOVA was run in SPSS to compare various demographic information to LGBT educators' experiences in a variety of school types, settings, and geographical locations. In looking at level of school taught by participants, ANOVA procedures found significance $p<.05$ existed between groups in regards to perceiving negative consequences at school due to being out (i.e., $F(6, 232)=2.801$). Higher scores demonstrate a lower concern for negative consequences due to being out. Type of school is listed in Table 5 from least concern for negative consequences to highest concern.

Table 5

Negative Consequences of Being Out According to School Level

Level	*M*	*SD*
Jr. High	2.00	.000
K-12	1.82	.393
High	1.58	.496
Elementary	1.56	.502
Middle	1.43	.500
Other	1.36	.497
K-8	1.32	.478
Total	1.53	.500

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Due to the presence of a statistically significant Levene's test, post hoc comparisons using the Dunnett T3 test indicated that the mean score for those who reported working at the Junior High School (M = 2.00, SD = .000) was significantly higher than those who reported working at a high school (M = 1.58, SD = 0.496), middle school (M = 1.43, SD = .500), K-8 school (M= 1.32, SD= .478), or elementary school (M = 1.56, SD = .502). In addition, this post hoc test also indicated that the mean score for teachers reporting working in K-8 schools (M = 1.32, SD = .478) was significantly higher than those working in K-12 schools (M = 1.82, SD = .393).

Findings for positive consequences of being out at school were also significant $p<.05$, according to school level (i.e., $F(6, 236)= 2.223$). Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HD test indicated that those who reported working in high schools (M = 1.67, SD = .471) had significantly higher mean scores on this item than did those reporting working in elementary schools (M = 1.36, SD = .487). This demonstrates to the reader that the respondents working in the high school setting felt there were more positive consequences to working with younger students. Elementary school teachers perceive the least positive consequences. The school levels are listed in Table 6 from most positive consequences to least.

Table 6

Positive Consequences of Being Out According to School Level

Level	*M*	*SD*
Other	1.71	.469
High	1.67	.471
K-8	1.60	.503
Middle	1.55	.502
K-12	1.53	.514
Jr. High	1.50	.707
Elementary	1.36	.487
Total	1.57	.496

It should be noted that when looking at level of school taught through a One Way ANOVA analysis, researchers found significance at the $p<.05$ level between groups where participants felt their employment would be at risk if they came out to students (i.e., $F(6, 230)= 2.628$,). The Dunnett T3 test was again used for post hoc comparisons due to a significant Levene's statistic. Here, perceived employment risk at the Junior High level (M=2.00, SD= .000) showed significantly higher mean scores than the elementary level (M= 1.29, SD= .457) and the middle school levels (M=1.38, SD= .489). This woud seem to indicate that respondents working in the Junior High level perceive less employment risk that respondents who work at the elementary or middle school level. School levels are listed in Table 7 from most perceived employment risk down to least perceived risk.

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Table 7

Employment Risk if Out To Students According to School Level

Level	*M*	*SD*
Elementary	1.29	.457
Middle	1.38	.489
K-8	1.40	.503
K-12	1.47	.514
High	1.58	.497
Other	1.62	.506
Jr. High	2.00	.000
Total	1.46	.499

While comparing the regions respondents teach in, between groups significance of $p<.05$ was found for respondents feeling like their employment would be at risk if they came "out" to another teacher (i.e., $F(4, 228)= 2.607$). A Dunnett T3 test was used to examine post hoc comparisons, due to a significant Levene's statistic. The Southwest had the highest mean score (M=1.90, SD=.301), while the Midwest (M=1.69, SD= .468) had the lowest. See Table 8 for the comparison of means. This indicates respondents in the Southwest perceived less employment risk if they came "out" to another teacher. Regions are listed in Table 8 from lowest perceived risk to highest perceived risk.

Table 8

Employment Risk if Out To Another Teacher According to Region

	M	*SD*
Midwest	1.69	.468
Southeast	1.80	.405
Northwest	1.86	.351
Northeast	1.89	.313
Southwest	1.90	.301
Total	1.83	.374

Significant findings were also present between groups for feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at school because of sexual orientation $F(4, 234)= 2.815$, $p<.05$. The Dunnett T3 test for post hoc comparison was run, as the Levene statistic was significant. This test found the Northeast region had the highest mean scores (M=1.74, SD=.441), while the Midwest had the lowest (M=1.44, SD=.503). Based on these results, respondents employed in the Midwest felt less safe or comfortable in their teaching environment due to their sexual orientation. Table 9 lists regions from least level of discomfort for being out to most discomfort for being out.

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Table 9

Discomfort in Outness of Sexual Orientation According to Region

	M	*SD*
Northeast	1.74	.441
Southwest	1.65	.486
Northwest	1.60	.495
Southeast	1.59	.499
Midwest	1.44	.503
Total	1.62	.487

Finally, type of school was considered (public, career/technical, etc.). A One-Way ANOVA was run and showed significant results, $F(5, 238)=3.119$, $p<.05$, between types of school for feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at school because of sexual orientation. Post hoc comparisons using the Dunnett T3 test were run, due to a significant Levene statistic. Results indicate respondents who identified as working in "another kind of private or independent school" demonstrated significantly higher mean scores (M=2.00, SD=.000) than respondents who identified working in a religious-affiliated school (M=1.20, SD=.447) (see Table 10 for the comparison of means). This would indicate respondents who work in a religious-affiliated school feel less safe or comfortable. Types of schools are listed in Table 10 from most comfortable first to least comfortable last. It is noteworthy that teachers in public schools rank fourth lowest on the list since they represent the largest number of educators, an indicator that most teachers feel discomfort in outness.

Table 10

Discomfort in Outness of Sexual Orientation According to School Type

	M	*SD*
Another kind of private or independent school	2.00	.000
Public charter school	1.87	.352
A career/technical school	1.67	.577
Regular public school	1.60	.492
Other	1.57	.514
Religious-affiliated school	1.20	.447
Total	1.62	.486

There were no significant findings regarding how school setting (rural, suburbs, etc.) has an impact on perceptions of safety or outness.

Qualitative

In the 2017 iteration of the survey, several themes emerged from the two open-ended items related to the positive and negative consequences of being out in school. The negative consequences will be presented first followed by the positive consequences.

For the first time in the administration of these surveys, there was a smaller number of comments (n = 116) offered by those expanding on the item related to negative consequences as opposed to positive consequences (n = 138). The following themes emerged from the responses related to the negative consequences: students, parents, bullying, staff, and teacher.

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In discussing students, respondents either felt that students were unaccepting of their LGBT status (e.g., “Middle school kids talking about me among peers.”) or that students also were not safe to be out in the environment (e.g., “For students, probably negative comments from some other students”). When it came to parents, respondents expressed concern about parents from religious backgrounds, those who did not want their child placed with them, or those who felt that an LGBT educator was a pedophile.

Another common theme that emerged from the data was bullying. There were general comments of it expressed (e.g., “Both teachers and students have experienced bullying from students as well as adults”) and one respondent very clearly stated the bullying and lack of response from any administrator on what happened in his classroom (i.e., “Once my class was covered in graffiti after having a substitute. The words ‘f#cking faggot’ was written all over the walls, board and computer monitor screen in permanent marker. Nothing was done about this. I write up students who call me maricon and faggot and nothing is done”). Finally, the respondents who chose to comment on this item expressed concern over incidents with other teachers and staff at the school (e.g., “I am ostracized by my peers/colleagues, I am asked inappropriate questions, as the only out staff member at my school I am tokenized and expected to provide information on behalf of the entire LGBTQ community”).

As stated above, for the first time out of three surveys, the number of respondents who commented on the positive consequences of being out exceeded the number who commented on the negative consequences of being out. The following themes emerged from the responses related to the positive consequences: support, role model, and GSA. Overwhelmingly, many of the respondents reported that supporting LGBT students was the very best consequence of their being out. One participant stated, “LGBT students have someone ‘like them’ to come speak to. Other teachers will come to me with questions about how they can be more sensitive to and inclusive of the LGBT students.” Another participant stated that they, “... have made connections with students who might otherwise feel marginalized, and I feel more positive and confident about myself.” Additionally, one respondent offered the following: “No one argues with me after I out myself and explain why their homophobic language is unacceptable. Kids get to see a queer adult flourishing in the wild.???” This last comment could also fall under the theme of role model, which emerged as a strong theme related to the data gathered from this item. One respondent stated, “It would give my students a positive LGBT role model and help foster conversations about valuing diversity. As a school counselor, it would also help my LGBT students and families feel more comfortable coming to talk to me about LGBT specific issues.” Finally, several more respondents noted their involvement in the school’s GSA as a positive consequence of being out. One noted, “I was the founding sponsor of my school district’s first Gay Straight Alliance this past year. There are obviously LGBTQ kids who don’t attend meetings, but the presence of the club benefits all. And for those who come, it has proved to be a small but powerful source of strength, friendship and support.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Is the climate in our schools indicative of the equity we hope to achieve in our democracy? The most recent research, conducted also in 2017, from GLSEN (Kosciw et al., 2018) revealed that the progress in reducing level of victimization for LGBTQ students has slowed for the first time in ten years. Furthermore, many students reported more hostile environments for transgender students than in 2015. This may also be true for transgender educators about whom, as a group separate from the larger

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LGBT community, little is known. Although this current study on LGBT educators has shown some pockets of places where being out as a teacher matters less as far as employment risk, the mean scores among most groups on multiple demographic items hovers between 1.5 and 2.0. On the likert scale items, “1” represented the least positive response (i.e. Almost never being comfortable being out), and “2” represented “Sometimes comfortable being out.” With the recent concerns cited in GLSEN’s 2017 study, it is paramount for the climate for LGBT educators to be more conducive to outness in order for these educators to support their students (Kosciw, 2018; Leithwood & McAdie, 2007).

While the overall school climate in 2007 was perceived by teachers as problematic and one-third in 2011 listed negative consequences for being out, in 2017 many more report positive consequences for being out such as being a role model for LGBT students and a resource to colleagues. The school climate is not perceived as hostile for all LGBT teachers, but LGBT teachers still perceive a strong need for change. The additional comments that were analyzed qualitatively present a more complex understanding of the climate for LGBT educators. In 2017, the reported negative consequences for a third of the LGBT teachers still indicate a hostile school climate. The negative consequences they perceive for being out as teacher or student are disrespect demonstrated through such behaviors as bullying, harassment and knowing they would be fired. Many are not out due to fear of negative consequences. In one sense the comparison to the 2007 data indicates a positive shift, but the climate is still quite difficult and, in many cases, hostile.

This study aimed to gain understanding of the climate of LGBT educators so that administrators may utilize best practices related to policy enactment, advocacy, and enforcement, relating specifically to creating an LGBT-inclusive climate in schools. The research shows that while improvements have been made since 2007 and 2011, some LGBT educators continue to experience barriers to being open and honest about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This study also points towards the need for continued striving towards equity and justice within the realm of sexual diversity. These changes will not only benefit LBGT teachers and their well-being, but also students. While it is important that all students feel safe and supported at school, it is necessary for the wellbeing of LGBT students, who are less likely to have those supports and sense of safety outside of school. Further, non-LGBT students will benefit from having a healthy faculty culture concerning LGBT issues, as it will model appropriate, respectful behavior to them. This research not only informs the practice of current school administrators but also those preparing future school leaders to be more equity-oriented. Additionally, this third iteration of 10 years of research on LGBT educators continues to provide insight for researchers and school leaders alike, largely due to the quantitative understanding it provides.

Based on the findings of this research, the following list encompasses some suggestions that could work to underscore a disruption of heteronormative (also discriminatory) practices currently seen in many schools which, as noted earlier, result in over 90% of LGBT educators enduring homophobic or transphobic comments, which surely contributes to an LGBT educator’s development (Jackson, 2007) and willingness to be open and honest.

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1) Policy language should enumerate LGBT individuals by separate categories, meaning it should mention those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc. specifically. These policies should include those related to employment, health benefits for domestic partners, bullying and harassment, etc).

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ISSN#: 2473-2826
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2) Professional development should be ongoing and inclusive of LGBT issues.

3) School personnel, especially leaders, should continue to increase their frequency and quality of intervention on homophobia and transphobia.

4) Any school sponsored events that allows spouses or significant others should be inclusive of LGBT individuals.

Finally, the research indicates the need for greater efforts being made to achieve equity for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc, in schools in the U.S. In following the above suggested practices, those school leaders who consider themselves equity focused will have the opportunity to show that in their support of LGBT individuals.

Additional research needs to be conducted to highlight the experiences of transgender educators specifically. While they are often included in the overall LGBT research, there are issues unique to this population of educators that should be explored in future research. Some examples of this needed understand relates to the specific physical and emotional healthcare needs of these individuals is one area ripe for research. Additionally, how administrators specifically work with transgender teachers in relation to their gender presentation in schools is an area in need of further study. Finally, a full comparison of the data from the three iterations of this study will help to demonstrate the state of support for LGBT educators across the last 10 years.

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