MIDWEST & PLAINS EQUITY ASSISTANCE CENTER

Equity by Design:

LGBTQ+ Youth in Rural Schools and Communities

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LGBTQ+ Youth in Rural Schools and Communities

As national attention and visibility in the media rises for the needs and issues of LGBTQ+ people, so has the amount and range of research exploring the concerns of LGBTQ+ youth in schools. Few of these studies, however, focus on rural schools and communities (De Pedro, Lynch & Esqueda, 2018; Yarbrough, 2003;). Rural communities may be described as having low population density and growth (Budge, 2006; Chandler, 2014; Donovan, 2016), poor infrastructure, dependence on narrow employment sectors (Chandler, 2014), and oppression as lived experience (Budge, 2006). And while these things can be true, so, too are rural communities dynamic and encompassing shared cultural practices, lifestyles, and inherent meanings (Panelli, 2002).

The research that examines LGBTQ+ people in rural communities focuses predominantly on adults in these communities. Research that focuses specifically on LGBTQ+ youth in rural communities, particularly rural *schools*, is important because distance and transportation create unique challenges in rural contexts and schools are often the center of community-based activities and social supports (O'Connell, Atlas, Saunders, & Philbrick, 2010). Therefore, this brief reviews research regarding LGBTQ+ youth, schools, and rural contexts in North America, primarily the United States. The first empirical research that explicitly centered LGBTQ+ youth in rural communities was published in 2003 (Yarbrough, 2003). Over the past fifteen years, studies regarding rural LGBTQ+ youth highlighted the issues and concerns they face in schools and their communities, how they are affected by these issues, and what schools are doing to support rural LGBTQ+ youth.

This matters to Equity Assistance Centers (EACs) in that they are charged with providing technical assistance, including training, in the area of sex desegregation, among other areas of desegregation, of public elementary and secondary schools. Sex desegregation, here, means the "assignment of students to public schools and within those schools without regard to their sex including providing students with a full opportunity for participation in all educational programs regardless of their sex" (https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/03/24/2016-06439/equity-assistance-centers-formerly-desegregation-assistance-centers). This is pertinent to

KEY TERMS

LGBTQ+ - "LGBTQ+ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, and others. It refers to a population of people united by having gender identities or sexual orientations that differ from the heterosexual and cisgender majority" (Social Justice and Advocacy, n.d.)

Transgender - a "broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. 'Trans' is often used as shorthand for transgender." (https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-transgender-people-the-basics)

Gender Expression/Presentation - "The way a person acts, dresses, speaks, and behaves (i.e., feminine, masculine, androgynous). Gender expression does not necessarily correspond to assigned sex at birth or gender identity" (National LGBT Health Education Center, 2016, p. 2).

Gender Non-conforming - "Describes a gender expression that differs from a given society's norms for males and females" (National LGBT Health Education Center, 2016, p. 3).

LGBTQ+ students. Most directly, students who identify as trans are prevented from attending school because of the transphobia they experience there. Further, students who do not adhere to gender norms in that they experience romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of their same gender, so lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer students, are prevented from attending school because of the homophobia and biphobia they experience there. In order to provide LGBTQ+ students with a full opportunity for participation in all educational programs, we must strive to eliminate transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia in schools, including but not limited to rural schools.

Issues and Concerns

In 2012, GLSEN, which conducts an annual school climate survey of LGBTQ+ youth in US schools, released a special report that focused on rural LGBTQ+ students. In every category, rural students reported higher levels of victimization and mental health issues, with lower academic achievement than their urban and suburban peers (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012). Contributing factors includes LGBTQ+ rural students' limited access to resources and support; school staff's lack of preparation, awareness, and policy; and resistance to including LGBTQ+ youth in and out of schools in rural communities.

Limited Access to Resources and Support

In comparison to urban and suburban communities, rural LGBTQ+ youth, as well as adults, consistently cite fewer resources and access to support as barriers to well-being. Higher levels of poverty, longer distances to resources and support, and less reliable and available transportation affect rural communities in ways that may not be a central concern to people living in urban and suburban communities (Cohn & Leake, 2012; Gray, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2010; Poon & Saewyc, 2009; Shelton & Lester, 2016; Yarbrough, 2003). Additionally, and perhaps as a result, there are few local support services that focus on LGBTQ+ people in rural communities, especially youth, and the few existing are often understaffed and underfunded (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018; Yarbrough, 2003). Most of the services and advocacy organizations available are national, like Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), but the national services are often out of reach due to membership fees and associated costs. Further, perceptions of these agencies as an outsider or stranger coming in to a close-knit community may contribute to rural LGBTQ+ people's hesitance to seek out these services (Gray,

2009). Finally, health and mental health services are often few and far between as well as difficult to get to for a young person (Gray, 2009; Shelton & Lester, 2016).

In addition to a dearth of support services, there is also a lack of "gay spaces," like gay clubs, coffee shops, and areas of town, which "has a direct negative effect" on LGBTQ+ people (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018, p. 429). In rural schools particularly, there are fewer spaces for LGBTQ+ students, like GSAs, which are sometimes called

Gay Straight Alliances and other times Gender and Sexuality Alliances (Page, 2017). In fact, rural schools are only half as likely as urban and suburban schools to have GSAs (Kosciw et al., 2016). To compound the lack of safe spaces in rural schools, there are less likely to be LGBTQ+ related resources, like books and pamphlets (Page, 2017). The need for formal and informal social networks (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018) and community-based supports (O'Connell et al., 2010) remain central to contributing to well-being, especially for LGBTQ+ youth. However, rural locales are least likely to have these readily accessible. As a result, rural students report feeling less connected to schools than urban and suburban students (Kosciw et al., 2016).

School Staff's Lack of Preparation, Awareness, and Policy

Consistently, teachers, administrators, and support staff report that they do not feel prepared, or in some cases, comfortable to address LGBTQ+ issues and support LGBTQ+ students. Rural school staff report even higher levels of inadequate preparation, awareness, and comfort than those in urban and suburban locales (Page, 2017). According to Yarbrough (2003) and O'Connell et al. (2010), several factors contribute to rural school staff's beliefs they are not able to support LGBTQ+ students: lack of research, conflicting perceptions of school safety, and the lack of comprehensive policies. First, just like students, teachers and administrators are affected by the lack of research specifically addressing needs and topics of rural LGBTQ+ youth as well as the lack of community and social support networks affect teachers and administrators as much as students. Therefore, there is a lack of adults who are prepared and willing to help students navigate their identities and experiences. This adds to LGBTQ+ students' difficulty in finding and utilizing resources (O'Connell et al., 2010; Yarbrough, 2003). Students cannot receive the services they need if school staff do not know where and how to assist them.

As both a cause and result of school staff's lack of preparation and awareness, there is a large disconnect between teachers and students about perceptions of school safety. Research shows the majority of students feel unsafe, while the majority of teachers report schools as safe (McCollum, 2010; O'Connell et al., 2010). Specifically, in rural schools, 81% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe during the past year, which is higher than urban or suburban students (Kosciw et al., 2012). Finally, many rural school districts do not explicitly address sexual orientation or gender identity or expression in their policies (McCollum, 2010). In 2015, only 5% of rural LGBTQ+ students attended schools with comprehensive anti-bullying and discrimination policies. In fact, 19% had no bullying policies at all (Kosciw et al., 2016). Rural schools are the least likely to have these kinds of protections, trailing urban and suburban schools significantly (Kosciw et al., 2009). Teachers' knowledge of comprehensive anti-bullying measures, as well as state and federal level hate crime and bullying laws, could begin redressing some of the lack of knowledge and awareness (Shelton & Lester, 2016).

Invisibility of Transgender Youth

As another failure of inclusivity for LGBTQ+ youth, and a sign for further research, rural transgender students seem to be consistently left out of the conversation. For example, one study only included LGB as identity markers for their rural youth participants, not even acknowledging the possibility of trans youth in rural contexts (Poon & Saewyc, 2009). Another study only allowed "male" and "female" as options for gender in their study, disregarding that these are categories of sex not gender and limiting the choice to two ends of a spectrum (Cohn & Leake, 2012). In fact, many studies in last 15 years only focused on sexual orientation, not gender expression or identity,

let alone the unique needs of rural trans youth (Kosciw et al., 2009; O'Connell et al., 2010; Shelton & Lester, 2016). The CDC web page cited for suicide statistics made no mention of trans identities, and all statistics regarding youth were labeled "LGB" (https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm). This oversight in research and discourse is alarming, as trans youth more likely to experience victimization than LGBQ+ youth (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

Resistance to Inclusion

LGBTQ+ rural youth experience resistance to their inclusion from both outside of and inside of schools. First, we will outline various forms of resistance districts, administrators, and teachers face from institutions and community members against attempts to include more LGBTQ+ curriculum and spaces in schools. Then, we will explore influences from within the school that implicitly or explicitly create resistance to inclusion. Resistance outside of and inside of school shape each other and, together, can have a powerful impact on these young people.

Resistance outside of schools. With respect to resistance outside of schools, the research cites deeply entrenched religious and conservative values, as well as comparative homogeneity as major contributing factors (Kosciw et al., 2009; O'Connell et al., 2010; Yarbrough, 2003;) to anti-LGBTQ+ isolation and stigmatization in rural communities. Conservative and religious values can often view sexuality and gender roles along heteronormative, rigid binary lines. Homosexuality and gender non-conformity is often condemned and stigmatized in rural communities. If diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity is tolerated, it is unspoken and must be non-interfering with the community at large (Gray, 2009).

These common backgrounds, values, and beliefs held by many rural communities are reflected in parent and family interactions with students and their schools. Family factors, like parent attitudes, are central to LGBTQ+ youth identity development, coming out processes, and perceptions of school and community safety (Kosciw et al., 2015). Parent, family, and community factors can play an even larger role for rural youth; Gray (2009) highlights how important families are to the "struggle to make LGBT identities fit in rural places" (p. 59). These youth may struggle more than their urban and suburban peers due to emphasis on conservative and religious family values in many rural communities. Cohn and Leake (2012) point out that parent and family factors can greatly affect LGBTQ+ youths' perceptions of safety, victimization, and resilience in schools. Psychological research shows that education about inclusion and equity for families enhances the well-being for not just the LGBTQ+ student, but for all members of the family (Cohn & Leake, 2012), demonstrating the need for family-level resources and support in addition to community services.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- 81% of rural LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe during the past year, more likely than urban or suburban students
- 94% of rural LGBT students heard homophobic language, while 87% reported being the target of homophobic language and verbal harassment in the past year
- 86% of rural LGBT students heard someone wasn't "masculine" enough, while 69% heard someone wasn't "feminine" enough. Further, 68% reported being the target of verbal harassment for gender expression in the past year
- 45% of rural LGBT students were physically harassed in the past year for sexual orientation, 31% for gender expression
- 2 in 5 rural LGBT students experience cyberbullying, significantly higher than urban or suburban youth

Data gathered from Kosciw et. al., 2012, Strengths and silences

Outside resistance can outside resistance can affect attempts at inclusion from school staff, who report fearing repercussions from outside influences for attempts to integrate a more LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum at higher levels than their urban and suburban peers. Teachers cited challenges or confrontations with parents, community members, and colleagues as barriers efforts increase support and curriculum for LGBTQ+ students (McCollum, 2010; Page, 2017). Rural teachers were much more likely to feel they would be "in trouble" with their communities and principals, fearing job loss, reprimands from the principal, damaged reputation, and a summons before the school board or superintendent (Page, 2017). As some teachers explained, they are more visible in small communities, and much more likely to run into angry people outside of school (Page, 2017). Another study's participants agreed, referring to less anonymity, where "everyone knows everyone else's activities" (O'Connell et al., 2010, p. 295). These rural school staff participants further demonstrate the lack of support and services for LGBTQ+ youth, as well as for themselves if they seek to assist students, through their fear and apprehension.

Outside resistance can also affect attempts at inclusion from the district and state levels. Some states have attempted to pass laws forbidding teachers from supporting LGBTQ+ youth or intervening on their behalf. In 2014, for example, Tennessee proposed to change their anti-bullying laws to allow bullying due to religious beliefs (Shelton & Lester, 2016). Sometimes resistance comes at the district level. One rural teacher incorporating queer topics and theories into her curriculum had a local pastor complain to superintendent, even though he was not a parent. Only threat of legal action through the teacher's state level educators' association saved her job and ended the struggle with the superintendent and school board (Shelton & Lester, 2016). Sometimes districts resist the founding of GSAs in addition to curriculum. For example, one rural district even canceled all student organizations in order to subvert a court order to allow a GSA in their high school (Gray, 2009). In effect, outside influences like community values, religious beliefs, family and parent factors, and district and state policies contribute to consistently hostile school environments for LGBTQ+ rural youth.

Resistance within schools. In addition to outside resistance to addressing rural LGBTQ+ students' needs, oftentimes resistance comes from within the school as well. School climate and staff may implicitly and/or explicitly reinforce heteronormativity, traditional and rigid gender roles, and patriarchy (Shelton & Lester, 2016; Yarbrough, 2003;). Open bigotry or homophobia and negative attitudes by school staff can contribute to the hostile climate for LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw et

FACTS AND FIGURES CONT.

- Only 6% of rural LGBT students reported their peers intervening in instances of victimization based on sexual orientation, while only 5% based on gender expression
- In the past year, students heard staff make homophobic remarks (25%), sexist remarks (30%), or negative remarks about a student's gender expression (35%)
- Only 13% of rural LGBT students reported that school staff intervened most or all of the time when in instances of homophobic language, while only 11% said teachers intervened on behalf of students being verbally harassed for gender expression
- 60% of rural LGBT students don't report harassment or assault to school staff or family members
- 68% of rural LGBT students said that when instances of victimization are reported, the responses are ineffective

Data gathered from Kosciw et. al., 2012, Strengths and silences

al., 2009; Shelton & Lester, 2016). One study of 653 educational professionals from public schools in three rural counties in New York State showed more negative attitudes toward sexual minorities than any other minority category, while teachers, of all categories of school staff, held the most negative attitudes (O'Connell et al., 2010). Thus, school staff can create barriers for the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth in schools through several main behaviors and actions.

One of the most common ways LGBTQ+ students experience a lack of support from school staff is through language choices and verbal reinforcement of sexual orientation and gender norms. In fact, nearly two-thirds of LGBTQ+ students reported hearing homophobic remarks from school staff (De Pedro et al., 2018). Such remarks may be explicit or implicit. When teachers and administrators encourage students to ascribe to particular group, activity, or item based on gender, they may not perceive it as openly discriminatory. For example, one trans researcher recalled being not only encouraged, but forced to play with boys during recess, even though she identified as a girl. Such strict adherence to rigid gender lines made her feel uncomfortable (Shelton & Lester, 2016). One principal admitted a "knee jerk response" to gay student wanting to invite same-sex date to dance was to talk him out of it (Pace, 2004). More explicit examples include refusal to use preferred and proper pronouns for students, or calling students "abnormal" (Shelton & Lester, 2016, p. 147), "funny," or "not right" (Shelton & Lester, 2016, p. 150).

Further, teachers, administrators, and support staff may not confront or intervene in instances of bullying and victimization. To put it bluntly: "School administrators and teachers often refuse to address the harassment of gay adolescents by other students," (Yarbrough, 2003, p. 132). This trend has not improved over the years; in the 2001 GLSEN climate survey of self-identified LGBTQ+ students, 82% of youth answered that teachers rarely or never corrected or disciplined the harassing students, and in the 2011 survey, only 13% of students reported that teachers intervene in these cases (Kosciw et al., 2002; Kosciw et al., 2012). Some teachers and administrators felt addressing LGBTQ+ concerns in schools was the role of the school counselors, yet counselors reported little receptivity on part of administration and teaching staff to address needs of LGBTQ+ students (O'Connell et al., 2010). More specifically, research shows school staff members in rural localities are even less likely to intervene on behalf of LGBTQ+ students experiencing harassment (De Pedro et al., 2018). However, one study revealed that the

majority of teachers surveyed were willing to learn more about how to support LGBTQ+ students (Page, 2017). To address resistance to inclusive curriculum, practices, and policies for LGBTQ+ youth within rural schools, administrators, teachers, and school staff need to intervene on students' behalves and work as a team to support and protect them.

How Rural LGBTQ+ Youth are Affected by School Failures

Victimization, mental health concerns, and academic struggles among LGBTQ+ communities are well documented. These are particularly pronounced among rural youth.

Research consistently shows higher levels of assault, violence-related risk behaviors, and physical and relational aggression toward students who identify, or are even perceived as being, LGBTQ+ (De Pedro et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2009; Pace, 2004; Schroth, 2018). Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth report a higher level of dating violence (Poon & Saewyc, 2009) and sexual harassment (Kosciw et al., 2009). Hate speech and homophobic language are commonplace, with over 90% of students surveyed by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) hearing negative messages regularly, mostly at school and among peers (Cohn & Leake, 2012; De Pedro et al., 2018). The levels of victimization are highest for trans youth (Kosciw et al., 2009). However, even the small amount of research focusing on rural LGBTQ+ youth shows higher levels of victimization in rural schools than urban and suburban districts (De Pedro et al., 2018; Hulko & Hovanes, 2018; Kosciw & Cullen, 2002; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2015; Kosciw et al., 2016; McCollum, 2010; Schroth, 2018; Shelton & Lester, 2016; Yarbrough, 2003) and lower levels of school belonging and connectedness than "nonsexual minority peers in rural schools" (Cohn & Leake, 2012, p. 293). Rural LGBTQ+ students report the highest level of verbal teasing, harassment, and homophobic remarks (Kosciw et al., 2009; McCollum, 2010).

Considering these staggering statistics, it may be no surprise mental health issues and generally lower sense of well-being are common among LGBTQ+ youth. Research reveals consistently higher levels of depression, substance abuse, and suicide. One study found 60% percent of sexual minority boys surveyed used illegal substances on an ongoing basis (Yarbrough, 2003). Additionally, as highlighted by national attention in 2010 through the "It Gets Better" campaign and others, the rate of suicide among LGBTQ+ youth is significantly higher than any other demographic population among youth (Cohn & Leake, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2009; McCollum, 2010; Poon & Saewyc, 2009). What is most distressing is that the needle has barely moved. In 1998, 32.8% of LGBTQ+ youth attempted suicide, compared to 7.6% of non-sexual minority youth (Pace, 2004). In 2015, the CDC reported 29% attempted suicide for LGBTQ+ youth, as opposed to 6% of non-sexual minority youth (https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm).

Among LGBTQ+ youth, students in rural schools and communities consistently report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and self-harm than urban and suburban locales (Cohn &

Leake, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2015; O'Connell et al., 2010; Shelton & Lester, 2016). Tied to these elevated levels of depression and anxiety, substance abuse is rampant among rural LGBTQ+ youth (Cohn & Leake, 2012; O'Connell et al., 2010; Poon & Saewyc, 2009). Mental health issues are one of the most pressing concerns facing LGBTQ+ youth, and rural students particularly need reliable, accessible services and support.

In addition to higher levels of victimization and mental health concerns, LGBTQ+ youth experience more negative outcomes in school, including academic achievement, absenteeism, and dropout rates (De Pedro et al., 2018; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Kosciw et al.,

2015; Page, 2017; Yarbrough, 2003). LGBTQ+ students often describe skipping school specifically due to feeling unsafe (Pace, 2004). In 2015, 53% of highly victimized LGBTQ+ students missed school in the last month (Kosciw et al., 2016), while a staggering 81% of rural LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school (Kosciw et al., 2012). As a result, rural LGBTQ+ students have higher dropout rates, lower GPAs, and are less likely to seek post-secondary education, like college or trade school (Kosciw et al., 2016; McCollum, 2010; Page, 2017). Finally, higher levels of homelessness and a greater sense of isolation in rural environments greatly affect all these academic outcomes for rural LGBTQ+ students (Cohn & Leake, 2012; Shelton & Lester, 2016).

What Can Schools Do to Support LGBTQ+ Youth?

Rural schools can support LGBTQ+ youth by insuring positive representation and helping to create a sense of belonging for these young people. Support from school staff is essential to students feeling safe and empowered (Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Cohn & Leake, 2012; O'Connell et al., 2010; Shelton & Lester, 2016; Yarbrough, 2003). As a positive finding in the research, a majority of teachers, administrators, and school staff are willing to learn more and better support students (Page, 2017). Teachers and school staff should become familiar with LGBTQ+ resources locally and online, whether for offering support to students or implementing an inclusive curriculum. Additionally, safe and supportive guidance counseling can significantly benefit LGBTQ+ students. (O'Connell et al., 2010; Pace, 2004). Teachers and staff can also support LGBTQ+ youth by implementing comprehensive anti-bullying policies that explicitly protect sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. Teachers at schools with comprehensive discrimination policies are more likely to feel comfortable with addressing issues and concerns with LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw et al., 2015; Page, 2017). Therefore, implementing such policies can be a pivotal step in making schools safer and more welcoming for LGBTQ+ students (De Pedro et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2016; McCollum, 2010; O'Connell et al., 2010).

Representation and inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters, topics, and storylines go a long way in cultivating a more supportive schooling environment for all youth. Research shows inclusive lessons, materials, and curriculum allow rural LGBTQ+ students to feel safer, contribute to less absenteeism, and help students feel more connected to their schools and accepted by their peers (De Pedro, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2016; Page, 2017). The vast majority of rural schools, however, do not integrate LGBTQ+ curriculum (Shelton & Lester, 2016). More specifically, GLSEN reported that only 11% rural LGBTQ+ students experienced a curriculum that included information on LGBTQ+ people, history, or events (Kosciw et al., 2016). Though 52.6% of surveyed rural teachers said they felt comfortable incorporating "literature that features LGBT characters or storylines," only 23.7% reported actually integrating this literature, and almost exclusively as choice reading and not required material (Page, 2017). In fact, Page's (2017) study was the only project that examined in depth the integration of LGBTQ+ curriculum in a rural ELA classroom. No research explored LGBTQ+ lessons, materials, or curriculum in rural schools in the sciences, math, social studies, or arts. Including authentic representation of LGBTQ+ figures, characters, storylines, and history would improve well-being for rural youth.

Affirming school climates and a strong sense of belonging can play a protective role, decrease victimization and mental health concerns, and increase perceptions of safety (Kosciw et al., 2015; De Pedro, 2018). Cohn and Leake (2012) assert: "Connection or sense of belonging is an important feature for those who live in rural areas, for both adults and adolescents" (p. 292). Community connectedness and a sense of

belonging among rural LGBTQ+ adolescents lowered health risks, substance abuse, and suicidal behavior, while a lack of sense of belonging to either school or home contributed to emotional distress (Cohn & Leake, 2012). GSAs and spaces that encourage positive and affirming LGBTQ+ identities and experiences can be vital in creating a sense of connection and belonging (O'Connell et al., 2010; Page, 2017; Hulko & Hovanes, 2018). Students in schools with GSAs felt safer, experienced less victimization, heard fewer homophobic remarks, and had a greater sense of connectedness to their schools(Page, 2017). Page (2017) posits a lack of support and feelings of vulnerability from teachers may contribute to and reflect the lack of GSAs in rural schools. As a counterpoint, rural LGBTQ+ students more frequently attend a GSA than urban and suburban students, if there is one (Kosciw et al., 2016).

Implications

From this review of research concerning rural LGBTQ+ youth in North American schools, several recommendations and action items arise for moving forward, particularly with respect to further research, conceptualizations of rurality, and professional development.

First, there is a clear need for further research that specifically investigates the intersections of rural youth and identities, especially given the alarming statistics about the health and safety of LGBTQ+ students. Reports like GLSEN's special issue on rural LGBTQ+ youth was the main source of data or background literature for almost all of the research reviewed; this type of work should continue and expand. However, almost every article in the existing literature centered teachers or administrators; none privileged youth voices, and most didn't have any youth-centered aspects, let alone their thoughts and perceptions. Additionally, the research concerning rural LGBTQ+ youth needs to be more humanizing (Paris & Winn, 2013) and less heteronormative; some literature used outdated clinical terms and narrow ideas of identity. Indicative of another gap, none of the research explored rural LGBTQ+ youth's identities along faith, religion, or spirituality, class, gender, or racialization. When the history and significance of religious, racial, and class tensions that structure rural communities are taken into account, this gap is even more stark against the rich landscape of intersectional work among urban youth. Finally, the research surrounding LGBTQ+ youth in rural communities and schools needs to move beyond victimization, toward recognition of well-being, strengths, and assets (Gray, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009).

Further, it is imperative that researchers understand LGBTQ+ youth in rural communities not as a homogenous population. It is important that they keep in mind how history, context, and characteristics matter (Gray, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; Shelton & Lester, 2016). Rurality itself often falls prey to essentialized notions of what rural communities look like. Under closer inspection, it is clear that different regions, states, and counties can have vastly different rurality both across these boundaries and within them. Nevertheless, the literature often reflects monolithic, or at best, dichotomous understandings of identity and place: straight or gay, rural or urban, insider or outsider (Gray, 2009; Page, 2017; Hulko & Hovanes, 2018). As a practical example of the range of meaning to rurality, three of the articles reviewed here had vastly different populations in their settings, even though all were classified as "rural." Poon and Saewyc (2009) included all communities under 10,000 people in their definition of rural. Hulko and Hovanes (2018) conducted their study in one rural community, which they relayed had grown from 60 to 90,000 people in the last couple of decades. Pace (2004) conducted his case study in one rural community with a population of 1,500. Rurality is not monolithic, just as LGBTQ+ communities are not monolithic. There are unique contexts that research must take into account and explicitly address.

In addition to increasing the scope and volume of research regarding rural LGBTQ+ youth and implementing more LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum in schools and classroom, education is needed for both preservice and in-service teachers to better support LGBTQ+ students. Teacher educator programs mark a jumping off point: preservice teachers report they have minimal knowledge and a higher reluctance to discuss or raise issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression in classroom, and this hasn't changed in last fourteen years. Replicated studies of preservice teachers across the United States between 1992 and 2006 demonstrate consistent results. Further, the level of knowledge and comfort of LGBTQ+ topics among rural teachers is lowest (O'Connell et al., 2010). Education on resources and where to find them, models of inclusive teaching practices and methodologies, and programs like Safe Zone trainings are all recommended by this body of research as necessary steps for both preservice and in-service teachers (O'Connell et al., 2010; Pace, 2004; Page, 2017). Active reflection about biases, norms, binaries, and LGBTQ+ issues could help teachers facilitate change for more inclusive schooling (Shelton & Lester, 2016).

Conclusion

Wider dissemination and greater accessibility to tools, resources, materials, and research is a first step in communities where schools have lower budgets, higher rates of poverty, poor internet connections, and higher shipping and transportation costs. Educators are vital to addressing issues, advocating for students, and facilitating change, perhaps more so in rural locales, where schools are often the community center.

Though the research here may seem to paint a stark picture of victimization, mental health issues, and negative school experiences for rural LGBTQ+ youth, it is encouraging as well. Most teachers and administrators across the research expressed a willingness to gain further training and education to support students at this intersection. To begin working toward safety, comfort, and well-being, school staff, students, families, and communities need to communicate and collaborate on change. Time and again the research showed that students don't feel comfortable talking with school staff about LGBTQ+ concerns. Teachers and administrators felt this responsibility fell to the counselors. Counselors felt they weren't prepared and that administrators didn't support their efforts. Teachers feared repercussions from administration and school boards. Through all this displacement of whose role it is to support and serve LGBTQ+ students, it is the students who suffer. Together, prepared with resources, knowledge, and confidence, and educators can change the hostile climate that affects so many rural LGBTQ+ youth.

About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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