A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO EXAMINING THE ROLE OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN THE LIVES OF GAY AND BISEXUAL YOUTH

A Dissertation in
Counselor Education
by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
August 2012
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ABSTRACT

Most of the research involving lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents (LGB) in the past 10-20 years has focused on negative issues faced by LGB adolescents, not on healthy LGB adolescent development. Much of this research has been completed retrospectively as access to LGB adolescents has been difficult for a number of reasons. Addressing a gap in the literature, the current study prospectively examines ways in which gay and bisexual adolescents access and identify sources of social support in their lives.

A phenomenological study that included semi-structured, hour long interviews was conducted with seven gay and bisexual adolescents who are currently enrolled in high school and between the ages of 16 and 19. To improve rigor and trustworthiness, a number of techniques were employed including member checks, journaling, bracketing of assumptions, and consultation with colleagues. Participants were recruited at a community event designed to provide support for LGB youth and their families. Interview questions were designed to determine who has provided social support, in what way, and how LGB adolescents know from whom they are able to seek social support. Findings were analyzed and grouped by themes. Five major themes emerged from interview transcripts regarding the lived experiences of high school aged LGB youth were analyzed: (a) fear of judgment, (b) recognition of social support, (c) GLB specific forms of social support, (d) advice to others, and (e) other students are marginalized.

Gay and bisexual adolescents reported that teachers, school counselors and coaches have served in support roles. Gay and bisexual adolescents had various ways of determining who might provide such support. Study strengths, limitations, and suggestions for counselors and other professionals are also discussed.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to acknowledge the participants in this study who are making the world a better place for others by being willing to share their experiences and living openly gay or bisexual as a high school student in Central Pennsylvania. These adolescents have had the courage to lead by example and, whether they realize it or not, they have served as an inspiration to other students sitting across the aisle in their classrooms. I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Jerry Trusty, for urging me to pursue a project for which I am passionate about and giving me solid advice both as I began my career as a school counselor and now as I begin my career as a counselor educator. I also wish to acknowledge the advice and support I have received from Dr. JoLynn Carney, Dr. Brandon Hunt and Dr. Ed Yoder which has ranged the from interview and statistical techniques to the occasional pep talk. I would also like to acknowledge and apologize to Jennifer Hammond and Phyllis Sieber for having to hear far more about the dissertation process than anyone should.
DEDICATION

I have been fortunate in my life to have received a tremendous amount of social support. I would like to dedicate this dissertation to those who have provided that support including my partner Victor, my parents Stuart and Mary, my sister Carrie, friends Kim and Christie, and my favorite dissertation distractions, my nephews Dawson and Trenton.

In addition, I would also like thank Mark Klemick (Klem), who has provided social support to me and countless other students over the past 20+ years, for which I will always be grateful.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Studies in the past 10-20 years involving lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth have focused on negative issues faced by LGB adolescents (Coker et al., 2010; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Saewyc, Poon, Wang, Homma, Smith, & the McCreary Centre Society, 2007), not healthy LGB adolescent development. Often, LGB youth are termed “at risk” based on their sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 2005). Although well intended, this focus may have unintended consequences in that it may pathologize LGB adolescent development, despite research by Saewyc (2011) and D’Augelli (1996) suggesting that the majority of LGB adolescents negotiate their adolescent development with relatively few issues. A recent qualitative study by Eccles, Sayegh, Fortenberry, and Zimet (2011) found that most LGB adolescents describe their development as similar to their non-gay peers. They did find one domain in which LGB consistently reported differences between themselves and their heterosexual counterparts, namely, peer interactions. This finding suggests that one of the most important social supports in adolescence, peers, may be accessed and utilized differently by LGB youth. Further examining how peers and other social supports are identified and accessed by the LGB adolescent population will be important to educators and service providers working with LGB youth.

Research regarding LGB adolescent development has historically been completed retrospectively, as the social and political climate in the United States has made access to LGB adolescents difficult for a variety of reasons. In addition, retrospective research is easier to complete. According to Savin-Williams (2005), most research involving LGB individuals has been done either at the collegiate level or with populations that may not
be representative of society at large. Heck, Flentje, and Cochran (2011), when discussing limitations of their study, noted the problems associated with retrospective research with LGB adolescent populations, and advocated for longitudinal studies, which begin in high school and extend beyond. They noted that these longitudinal studies should follow high school students into adulthood, whether or not they go to college. Prospective research with LGB adolescent populations is important. As Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langley, and Silva (1994) note, adults do not intentionally lie about their experiences as adolescents, they simply have a different perspective as adults, depending on whether or not they have successfully negotiated their own identity development. There is very little research regarding LGB adolescents and even less qualitative research with LGB adolescent populations while enrolled in high school. As LGB youth are a historically marginalized population, it will be important to seek information using qualitative methods, giving voice to this group (Carter & Morrow, 2007; Yeh & Inman, 2007).

**Statement of the Problem**

According to research by Coker, Austin, and Schuster (2010), in every setting (e.g., school, home, athletic teams) LGB youth are more likely to be the targets of violence and harassment. In a meta-analysis of 18 different studies on substance abuse in LGB youth, Marshal et al. (2008) found that LGBQ (questioning) youth are three times more likely to use drugs and alcohol than their heterosexual peers. The effect sizes were moderate to very large. A number of studies (Coker, et al., 2010; Eisenberg & Resnick; 2006; Saewyc et al., 2007) have detailed higher levels of emotional distress, depression, self-harm, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts in the LGB youth population. Adolescent pregnancy is 2-10 times higher among LGB youth (Blake, Ledsky, Lehman,
Goodeenow, Sawyer, & Hack, 2001; Coker, et al., 2010; Goodenow, Szalacha, Robin, & Westheimer, 2008; Saewyc et al., 2004; Saewyc, Poon, Skay & Homma, 2008). LGBQ youth are more likely to experience forced sex and dating violence (Freedner, Freed, Yang & Austin, 2002; Williams, Connolly, Pepler & Craig, 2003). LGB youth are more likely to (a) engage in binging and purging eating behaviors, (b) have a higher number of sexual partners over a lifetime, (c) be harassed at school, (d) become homeless, and (e) engage in sexually risky behaviors (Coker et al., 2010; Saewyc et al., 2008a).

Although the volume of evidence is compelling, it should not be viewed as the complete picture of LGB youth. The majority of LGB youth, somewhere between 70% and 90% do not attempt suicide (Savin-Williams, 2005). According to Hillier, Turner, and Mitchell (2005) LGB adolescents have managed to develop complicated and sophisticated ways of protecting themselves both physically and emotionally. In a recent literature review, Peterson, Folkman and Bakeman (1996) found few reported differences in quality of life based on sexual orientation; and people who have reported same-sex attracted relationships have been found to be similar to the general public on such variables as happiness, job satisfaction, mental health concerns, and trauma (Horowitz, Weis & Laflin, 2001).

Most out adolescents even feel as if disclosing their sexuality was a positive experience, perhaps because they are selective to whom they disclosed (Grafsky et al., 2011; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Knowing that nearly 75% percent of adolescent deaths are related to behavioral factors (Blum, McNeeley & Nonnemaker, 2002) and that adolescent development is an adaptation to the environment in which we live (Bandura, 1979), the above issues are clearly cause to be concerned about adolescent development.
as a whole and specifically with LGB youth; however, knowing that environment can impact development in positive ways as well is encouraging (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975).

As Eccles et al. (2011) note, researchers and practitioners need to be careful not to overgeneralize findings that are predicated on risk-based data. Viewing LGB youth as a population at risk ignores the fact that most LGB adolescents are doing well (Savin-Williams, 2005) and could best be described as resilient. Research regarding each of the above mentioned topics (adolescent suicide, alcoholism, adolescent pregnancy, etc.) has been associated with some form of intervention in the general population. Blum et al. (2002) found that factors such as good family relationships and supportive friends can serve as protective factors in the general adolescent population. What we do not know is how these protective factors manifest themselves in LGB specific adolescent populations. This study aimed to fill a knowledge gap in this area by investigating how social supports may work for LGB youth.

**Benefits of Qualitative Research**

According to Bieschke, Paul, and Blasko (2007), qualitative studies with LGBT (transgendered) populations are rare. Qualitative methods can also be useful to examine a phenomenon in subgroups that are part of a larger population (Dowsett, 2007; Sears, 1992). Qualitative methods are perhaps the best way to examine the lives of LGB individuals as this in depth study may uncover deeper and nuanced meaning that might not have been detected with other forms of research (Singh & Shelton, 2011). Furthermore, both the disciplines of counseling and psychology encourage qualitative studies involving groups that have been marginalized (Carter & Morrow, 2007; Yeh &
Corbin et al. (2008) argue that qualitative researchers should be aware of the important implications of research decisions throughout the process, and this can only be done if the researcher is sensitive to the topic under investigation.

Phenomenological research methods are appropriate when limited information regarding a given phenomenon is available (Moustakas, 1994). Numerous researchers have recently commented on the paucity of research regarding LGB youth protective factors (Bieschke et al., 2007; Saewyc; 2011; Savin-Williams, 2005) and many have argued for the use of qualitative methods to examine the phenomenon (Resnick et. al., 2004; Saewyc, 2011; Singh, & Shelton, 2011).

Aggregate data from a number of studies using national samples might not illuminate the real needs of any one person. For example, according to research by Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000), youth typically become aware of their developing sexual identity between the ages of 8 and 11 and typically self-identify between the ages of 15 and 17. This information will be of little consequence when counselors are working with a client who has decided to come out after retirement. Thus, qualitative methods of examining LGB adolescents are needed to assist counselors as they examine the needs of the individuals with whom they work.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study was designed to address gaps in the literature surrounding protective factors and how they may be accessed and utilized by gay and bisexual youth. The lived experiences of gay and bisexual youth who are currently enrolled in high school was qualitatively examine via semi-structured in-depth interviews. The study aimed to provide information regarding how social supports for LGB adolescents are accessed.
The intent of this study was to determine how practitioners and policy makers can best support LGB youth in their efforts to identify and access social supports. Furthermore, interview questions will aim to determine how social supports are accessed across different arenas including school, home, church, and social situations. The study will also fill a knowledge gap by examining the lived experiences of LGB prospectively. Findings can serve as a guide for future research in this area by indicating which social supports are most salient for LGB youth and how they are accessed.

**Research Questions**

According to research by Garofalo and Katz (2001) and Savin-williams (2001), the majority of LGB youth lead happy, healthy, and productive lives, but the role that protective factors play in making this possible is not clear. Little is known about which protective factors might be most beneficial, nor do we know much about how these protective factors are accessed by LGB adolescents.

*Research Question 1: Which protective factors are most salient for LGB youth?*

Interview questions were designed to elicit responses regarding protective factors across several domains (home, school, church, social life), consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s Theory of Ecological Development (1979) whereby individuals are part of larger and successively interconnected systems, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. Specifically, the interviews will aim to determine what types of social supports have served as protective factors for LGB youth across domains, and how they have been accessed.

*Research Question 2: How do LGB youth come to recognize or seek out social support?*
Provided social supports are identified as protective factors, learning how LGB youth came to recognize or seek out these types of support across various domains (home, school, church, etc.) is crucial.

**Definition of Key Terms**

Terms described below are part of the everyday lexicon/vernacular of most professionals working with children and adolescents. These terms are used frequently throughout this paper so it may be helpful to define these terms more succinctly for the purposes of this examination. I have used a broad definition of *protective factors* throughout this study. Resnick et al. (1997) in presenting their findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health define protective factors as, “factors that, if present, diminish the likelihood of negative health and social outcomes” (p. 823). Protective factors include items such as feeling connected to school, being surrounded by family members who care about your well-being, economic stability, geographic location, and having support from family and friends.

Protective factors do not stand in isolation. For every protective factor, there is an associated *risk factor*. Risk factors, generically speaking, are those characteristics that one has that increase the likelihood that a negative outcome will occur (Blum et al., 2002). Examples of risk factors specific to adolescence might include low self-esteem, being raised by parents with alcoholism, or living in a neighborhood with high crime rates. Both risk and protective factors occur across domains (home, school, community) and what may be risk or protective factors for some, may not be for others (Blum et al., 2002).
Adolescence, for this study, has been defined as being between the ages of 14 and 19 and still enrolled in high school in grades 9-12. The purpose of this distinction is two-fold: first, to access a population, LGB high school students, who have not traditionally been studied using qualitative means and, secondly, to examine a population that is in the midst of developing their identity.

Social support, as defined in this study, is a specific type of protective factor that involves accessing help from others (family, friends, teachers, etc.). Grotberg (2003) delineates this type of support by labeling it external support. Other types of protective factors would include internal coping skills and intrapsychic strengths (Grotberg, 2003).

Resilience is also used in a generic way throughout this paper. Webster’s (2011) defines resilience in terms of becoming strong or healthy after something bad happens. Garmezy (1991) describes resilience in terms of a trait that individuals possess. I would argue for a combined definition, whereby resilience is described in terms of a trait that helps individuals become and remain healthy in the face of adversity.

Eric Erikson (1968) describes identity development as a task that takes place during adolescence, and involves the process of solidifying a personal identity. Identity development is a process in which the goal is to view oneself as a complete whole, matching your inner and outward selves. Erickson believed that with identity development, adolescents have an increase in good judgment according to their own standards and the standards of those in whom they trust.

According to Merchant and Durprey (1996), phenomenology is an interactive qualitative approach between researcher and participants. The process allows participants and researchers to jointly construct meaning (Ponterotto, 2005) as the
researcher seeks to understand the lived experience of the participants (Cresswell, 2007). In the case of this study, this will be accomplished via in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews between the researcher and the participants as well as the process of analyzing and coding data.

**Significance of the Study**

The study has been undertaken to fill a gap in the literature regarding the healthy identity development of LGB adolescents, specifically, how LGB youth utilize and access social supports. Several researchers have noted that there are several studies examining “at risk” behaviors of LGB youth, but those addressing healthy development are nearly non-existent, with one recent notable exception, a qualitative study by Eccles et al. (2004) examining developmental similarities between LGB adolescents and their counterparts.

Several researchers (Bieschke, Paul, & Blasko; Dowsett, 2007; Sears, 1992; Singh & Shelton, 2011) have also called for qualitative examinations of issues pertinent to LGB populations or smaller subsets of larger populations. According to Carter and Morrow (2007), qualitative methods give voice to historically marginalized populations.

This study is also significant because study participants were adolescents who are currently enrolled in high school, grades 9-12. As noted by Savin-Williams (2005), access to LGB participants who are also minors can be difficult. Prospective research with LGB youth is nearly non-existent and when prospective research does take place, it is usually with a population that is “at risk” in other ways. For example, Grafksy, Letcher, Slesnick, and Serovich (2010) compared responses to counseling between LGB and non-LGB youth who were living on the street.
This study also purports to address a gap in the literature by examining how social support as a protective factors may be accessed or utilized by LGB youth. There are protective factors that are specific to LGB youth (Blum et al., 2002), but little is known regarding how these protective factors are accessed differently. This study also uncovered ways in which adults have been supportive in relatively small ways that have made an impact on gay and bisexual adolescents.

**Limitations**

The current study aimed to describe the lived experiences of LGB youth currently enrolled in high school. To do this, it was necessary to obtain permission from parents or guardians of these youth. Because the aim of the study was to examine differences in social support access between LGB and heterosexual youth, it was hoped that gaining parental permission would not be a barrier to data collection, as the phenomenon under investigation, social support, is more likely to be present in those LGB youth whose parents have consented to their participation in the study. Although study participants were found, it is impossible to know if others chose not to participate because they needed parent permission. So, we may have learned little about how LGB adolescents who do not currently have a supportive family seek out and access social support. In addition, I wish to note that the omission of lesbian and transgendered youth from the title of this paper as it is in no way meant to minimize their struggle. Attempts were made to recruit adolescent lesbians for the current study, but those attempts were not successful. There is very little research available regarding transgendered youth and concerns specific to this population were not addressed in much of the research reviewed
for this paper. In addition, there are multicultural implications associated with working with LGLBT students that are not adequately addressed here.

As with all qualitative research, the meanings conveyed by research participants are open to the interpretation of the researcher. To address this issue, a number of steps were built into the research design, which included consultation with research colleagues and faculty advisors regarding the meaning of the participants. In addition, member checks were built into the design by asking participants to read transcripts of interviews to be sure their words were accurately captured.

Participants for the study were recruited from predominately rural areas in North Central Pennsylvania and therefore results may not be relevant beyond the immediate population. This limitation aside, it is my hope that this investigation will lead to further research with this population, and healthy LGB adolescent development.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of empirical studies (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Eccles et al., 2004; Eisenberg, M.D. & Resnick, M.D, 2006; Harris Interactive, 2005; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter & Braun, 2006) in the past 15 years have moved lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescent research forward. Unfortunately for LGB adolescents, this research has provided ample evidence (Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter & Braun, 2006; Saewyc, 2011) that LGB youth experience poorer outcomes related to overall health and wellbeing when compared with their heterosexual peers, and there has been limited research to date regarding what makes the majority of LGB youth so resilient (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that although protective factors such as family connectedness, caring adults, and school safety provide a mediating effect regarding suicidality, these variables accounted for only some of the variance in suicidality among LGB youth, the largest part of which was unexplained. A knowledge gap exists in the literature as little is known about how protective factors are accessed and utilized by LGB youth.

Recent LGB adolescent studies (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Eisenberg, M.D. & Resnick, M.D, 2006; Harris Interactive, 2005; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Rosario et al., 2006) have included issues related to identity development, health and well-being, bullying, and harassment, as well as risk and protective factors. Saewyc (2011) notes that much of the research involving LGB adolescents up to this point has focused on negative issues faced by LBG adolescents, not on healthy LGB adolescent development. And although authors (D’Augelli, 1996; Saewyc, 2011) have noted that the majority of LGB
adolescents move through this time period with relatively few issues, past and current research continues to show that LGB students are more vulnerable than their heterosexual peers and this research should not be ignored. This literature review examines the role of risk and protective factors as they relate to the identity development of LGB adolescents.

**History of Research with LGB Adolescents**

The need for researching topics related to LGB youth is evident when the history of research with this population is examined. Savin-Williams (2005) details the history of research with LGB youth populations and some of the struggles that this particular area of study has faced. It was 1972 when the first research regarding LGB youth was published, making the study of LGB adolescents a relatively new field. The 1980s were a time when studies of LGB youth involved specific, targeted groups such as homeless gay youth. Savin-Williams (2005) notes that it was not until 1986, at the National Symposium on Gay and Lesbian Youth, that LGB youth as a group were formally acknowledged. Researchers before that time often viewed LGB youth as non-existent, relegating sexual orientation among LGB youth as a phase or experimentation only. And, because of the stigma associated with being LGB at that time, researchers often did not publish their findings for fear of the stigma associated with LGB research (Savin-Williams, 2005). Research with LGB populations, and even more so with the healthy development of adolescent LGB populations, is in its infancy. As LGB populations are gaining acceptance in the general population, opportunities for continued research regarding LGB adolescent development may increase and include more diverse populations for study.
General Adolescent Identity Development

Both counselors and researchers working with LGB adolescents need to have a thorough understanding of adolescent identity development models in general, as LGB youth may have more in common with those models than they do LGB specific adolescent development models. The importance of understanding typical development across the lifespan, including various developmental crises, is important enough in the counseling profession that human growth and development is one of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Program’s (CACREP) eight core academic areas that accredited counselor education programs must address (CACREP, 2009).

As Bandura (1979) points out, human development is not independent of environment. According to research by Blum, McNeely, and Nonnemaker (2002), identity development, vulnerability, and resilience are linked variables that are difficult to separate and highly dependent on context and place in time. Blum et al. (2002) used logistic regression models with data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health \( n = 20,775 \) to test protective processes across contexts, domains, and across risk processes. However, data from adolescents was collected via surveys administered in their home, often with parents present, which may have impacted their findings. Even without environmental considerations, adolescents, as a research population, are a complex group to study. Adolescence is a time of incredible physical, cognitive, and emotional changes and a time to learn how to navigate friendships, romantic interests, family demands, and academic demands, while at the same time, attempting to establish themselves as individuals. In discussing his theory of identity development, Arnett
(2000) states that patterns of behavior that affect health and well-being are often established during adolescence.

According to Savin-Williams (2005), adolescent development is consistent whether adolescents identify as LGB or heterosexual as they share most developmental characteristics. Recent research by Eccles et al. (2011) supports this assertion. Eccles et al. (2011) interviewed 13 self-identified gay youth who reported minimal distress related to their sexual orientation and organized their findings according to themes. The authors found that LGB youth perceived their identity development process, in most ways, as similar to their heterosexual peers. For instance, LGB adolescents reported that they felt similar in that they were less involved with family and moving toward more involvement with peers, increasingly made more decisions for themselves, and were given more independence by their parents as evidenced by later curfew and driving privileges. Perhaps most significant were reported changes in friendships over time from elementary school, when most youth are friends with anyone in their class, to middle school where cliques begin to form and in high school where it was reported that friendships become deeper and move toward a more emotional level (Eccles et al., 2011). Participants in this study (Eccles et al., 2011) were university students who reported minimal distress related to their sexual orientation and were responding to questions regarding their past, which may not be a sample that should be used to draw comparisons with heterosexual adolescents as they may more accurately represent college bound students who have successfully negotiated their adolescence.

Examining some of the most prominent general adolescent development models as well as LGB specific identity development models is helpful. As models of
adolescent development are presented, remembering that LGB adolescents, as well as other historically marginalized groups, move though the identity development process at the same time they may be experiencing discrimination is helpful (Harper & Schnieder, 2003) and often without the benefit of LGB role models for guidance (Rosario et al., 2004), making models that take into account environment and context perhaps most salient. As Erickson (1959) points out, adolescents learn “ways of being” both formally and informally from individuals in their lives, including parents, teachers, classmates, and coaches.

**Erickson’s Stage Model**

One of the most prominent human development models is Erickson’s (1950) stage model in which he labels the adolescent stage as identity vs. role confusion. During this stage, all adolescents work to develop a self-image that integrates their roles as children, students, athletes, and workers, while at the same time managing their burgeoning sexual and romantic interests. Even within this stage, people who work with adolescents know that there is considerable variability in everything from physical development to emotional regulation. Although there is also great variability in physical and emotional development among LGB youth, no differences based on sexual orientation have been found in such variables as the chemistry of love, self-esteem, feelings of mastery, perceived stress, and number of romantic relationships (Diamond & Lucus, 2004; Hillier, Turner, & Mitchell, 2005; Savin-Williams, 1990).

**Marcia’s Theory of Identity Achievement**

Building on Erickson’s work, Marcia (1966) developed his theory of identity achievement. This theory can be used as way to view adolescent identity development.
Marcia’s work focused primarily on adolescents and, using semi-structured interviews with adolescents to gather data, he came to propose four identity statuses. The statuses should not be thought of as stages similar to Erickson’s model as they are not sequenced. Statuses described by Marcia (1966) include (a) identity diffusion, (b) identity moratorium, (c) identity foreclosure, and (d) identity achievement. During identity diffusion, adolescents report having no real choices to make or not wishing to make choices about their identity. Adolescents in identity moratorium are described as adolescents in the middle of a crisis, exploring several choices, perhaps confused, and not yet ready to commit to any one choice. Adolescents in identity foreclosure are not ready to make a commitment to particular life roles without exploring options and often do so to meet expectations set by others. And lastly, identity achievement refers to adolescents exploring the life options available to them and then developing a sense of identity based on choices they have made Marcia (1966).

**Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory of Development**

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of development can be used as a framework to consider the complicated nature of risk and protective factors. In the model, youth are nested in several successively larger and interconnected systems. The individual (everything that makes up an individual including cognitive ability, biology, etc.) operates within a microsystem (family, friends, school), which operates in a mesosystem (the relationships between the other systems), which operates within an exosystem, which represents connections between settings (political structures, public policy): All of these operate within a macrosystem consisting of culture, values, and race, which is referred to as the social blueprint (McWhiter et al., 2004). Remembering
Savin-Williams’ (2005) differential developmental trajectories model, assumptions about the model are easily incorporated into Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory of Development model; although all adolescents have much in common, their environment can play an important role in establishing developmental trajectories. This model is consistent with the finding of Turbin et al. (2006) in that environment (family, school, geography, etc.), sometimes referred to as context, also has a tremendous influence over risk and protective factors, vulnerabilities, and resilience.

**LGB Identity Development Models**

There have been a number LGB identity development models proposed (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Troiden, 1988) including stage, developmental, linear, milestone, and developmental trajectory approaches. Perhaps the continuous revision and further sophistication of these models is related to access to research participants and changing socio-political cultures that have allowed for more in-depth and complex research. It should be noted that the development of most major LGB identity development models is based on research with convenience samples of predominately gay men (Savin-Williams, 2005). And, although the models presented below discuss development throughout the lifespan, when discussing adolescents, we are usually concerned with only one aspect or stage of each model.

**LGB Stage Models**

The first major model proposed by Cass (1984) is a stage model beginning with identity confusion where individuals begin to question their own sexual orientation. In the second stage, identity comparison, comparisons are made between gay and non-gay
others and feelings of isolation and alienation are experienced. Identity tolerance, the third stage, involves seeking out other LGB individuals with which to identify. The fourth stage, identity acceptance, involves disclosure to others leading to the fifth stage, identity pride, in which LGB individuals immerse themselves in gay culture and reject heterosexual values and norms. The sixth and culminating stage is identity synthesis, and in this stage the LGB identity becomes part of the self as a whole, not the totality of one’s identity (Cass, 1984). Critics of the model argue that this model does not allow for individual differences and is based on outdated historical accounts, primarily from gay men (Savin-Williams, 2005). A similar stage model put forth by Coleman (1982) involves five stages moving through a pre-coming out stage to a coming out stage, exploration, moving to first relationships, and, similar to Cass’ identity synthesis, a final stage called integration.

Fassinger’s (1998) model of sexual identity development has four stages and is divided into two branches, individual and group development with parallel stages in each. Individuals may pass through the stages in each branch separately or at the same time. The first stage is awareness of feelings that are not part of the heterosexual norm. This stage may be characterized by confusion but not necessarily knowledge of the oppression faced by sexual minorities. The second stage, exploration, may be characterized by longing for a partner, exploring the extent of a gay community, recognizing heterosexism, and exploring possibilities with other LGB individuals. The third stage is referred to as a deepening or commitment stage where individuals may solidify their same sex attraction feelings, commit to self-fulfillment, and become more self-assured, but they may also feel sad and angry regarding the treatment of LGB individuals.
Finally, similar to other stage models, Fassinger’s final stage is labeled internalization and synthesis where gays and non-gays are judged as individuals and sexual orientation is integrated as part of the self.

**Troiden’s Sociological Linear Model**

Troiden (1988) posited a sociological linear model that begins with youth recognizing that they do not fit in with heterosexual norms (sensitization), followed by identity confusion in which youth may be confused about who they are and fight against their orientation because of stigma and shame. From there, Troiden states that some youth may go through a transition period where they label themselves as bisexual. Finally, youth reach a stage referred to as identity commitment, where they affirm their sexual orientation. Although there is little empirical support for Troiden’s model, it has made contributions to the literature in that it emphasizes the individual social realities faced by LBG youth.

**Developmental Milestone Models**

Milestone approaches such as the one put forward by Floyd and Stein (2002) support developmental milestones including first same sex experience as a step in identity development. A common critique of milestone approaches is that they fail to account for changing social contexts (Hammock Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009). There is no doubt that societal attitudes regarding LGB individuals have changed with several states now recognizing same sex marriages. Another critique of the milestone approach is that it assumes sexuality is a constant, unchanging trait that is established during adolescence (Saewyc, 2011; Savin-Williams, 2005).
Differential Developmental Trajectory Model

Savin-Williams and Diamond’s (2000) differential developmental trajectory model is based on four tenants. The first claims that LGB adolescents are similar to all other adolescents—biologically, psychologically, and socially. Second, areas where LGB adolescents are dissimilar to their heterosexual counterparts may be caused by differences in psychological development or hetero-centrism. Third, LGB individuals vary among themselves regarding development that is impacted by a number of contextual variables such as geography and socioeconomic status. Finally, given the diversity in each of our lives, no two developmental trajectories are the same (Savin-Williams and Diamond, 2005).

An important distinction between the differential developmental trajectory model and others is that the differential developmental trajectory model accounts for what is already known about LGB youth AND what is yet to be discovered (Savin-Williams, 2005). The model takes into account individual characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, geography and cohort effects. Cohort effects are important differences that are also considered in the model and may be especially important when considering future LGB research, as the last 30 years have taken the gay rights movement from a place of criminalization to marriage rights. Given the individual differences among LGB youth being explored in the current study, the differential developmental trajectory model (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) is perhaps most salient to the current discussion.

Support for Models

Many of these theoretical models have been tested (Rosario et. al., 1996; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) and researchers have found that these developmental paths
are not quite as precise as the theories might lead one to believe. Other researchers have found that LGB youth do not follow traditional developmental patterns (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Hancock, 1995; Savin-Williams, 2001). LGB youth often face unique developmental circumstances in that they are most often not raised by people who are similar to them in terms of sexual orientation and are not raised in homes that support their identity development (Rosario et al., 2004). In many cases, not only are youth not raised in supportive households, they are raised in environments where the opposite is true (Rosario, Shrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). In addition, most often identity development research has been done retrospectively, and when this is the case, many research participants create narratives (stories told about individual LGB identity development) that are consistent with their current life situation (Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langley & Silva, 1994). Hammack et al. (2009) believe that these narratives are slowly changing from stories about struggling against societal norms to emancipation narratives.

According to Boxer and Cohen (1989) and D’Augelli (1994), LGB identity development needs to be studied longitudinally and prospectively to capture what is really happening during adolescent identity development.

All this is not to say that there are not differences between LBG and heterosexual adolescents, but rather that there are tremendous differences among all adolescents. It has been theorized that LGB and heterosexual adolescents are more alike than they are different (Savin-Williams, 2005); if that is the case, individual characteristics that serve as protective factors for all adolescents should work similarly, but if this is not the case, it will be important to find out why. If, as theorized, heterosexual and LGB adolescents are
more similar than they are different, it will be important to understand the role that risk and protective factors play in the lives of all adolescents.

**Intersecting Identities**

Although the previously mentioned general and LGB specific identity development models could be considered generic models in that they apply to all adolescents or only those who identify as LGB, there are also a variety of identity development models that have been developed according to gender, racial, and ethnic identity. It is important to note that individuals often do not fit into just one model and viewing identity development as type a of Venn diagram might be more appropriate.

For a number of reasons, very little research has been conducted examining these types of intersecting identities. Recruitment issues make research on individual minority LGB populations difficult. In a recent study with LGB African American and Latino youth, Rosario et al. (2004) found very few differences in developmental milestones such as age of awareness of a LGB sexual orientation or age of first sexual experience when compared with their majority counterparts—with one notable exception: public disclosure of their sexual orientation and involvement in LGB related activities. This may be problematic as involvement in LGB related activities has been found to be a protective factor (Rosario et al., 2004). Russell, Steif, and Truong (2001) suggest that LGB minority youth do not report being stigmatized as a result of their sexual orientation as much as their majority peers because they already have experience with a marginalized identity and may be inoculated against stigmatization. Given the research on risk and protective factors to be presented below, these exceptions are noteworthy.
Protective Factors, Resilience, and Risk

Webster’s (2011) defines resiliency as the ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something negative happens. Garmezy (1991) describes resilience as an interaction between individuals and their environments. According to Garmezy (1991), resilience is not a trait that one does or does not possess. Being resilient implies that someone is resistant to threats, but not invincible. Garmezy (1991) further notes that cumulative risk or threat can defeat the most resilient individuals. According to Grotberg (2003), there are three sources or types of resilience or protective factors: (a) the external environment (adults, family, financial well-being), (b) intrapsychic strengths (self-esteem, self-efficacy beliefs, cognitive abilities), and (c) internal coping skills (learned strategies). Grotberg links these types of resilience to Erickson’s (1950) stages of development, again showing the important link between identity development and risk and protective factors. It is important to remember that risk and protective factors are related and cannot be separated (Blum et al., 2002). The concepts of risk and protective factors and vulnerability and resilience are often used interchangeably throughout this review. All of these terms has been defined herein, but have been used almost interchangeably in previous research. When referencing specific studies, I have used the terminology used by the original researcher.

Protective factors have been defined as those factors that reduce the negative impact of risk factors (Blum et al., 2002). Research on protective factors in the general adolescent population is not new. According to Blum et al’s. (2002) research, protective factors such as supportive friends, good family relationships, the involvement of caring adults, school connectedness, and religiosity/spirituality have all be shown in the general
adolescent population (Blum et al., 2002). The question becomes whether or not these protective factors work in the same way for LGB youth.

Turbin et al. (2006) describe three types of both protective and risk factors: (a) models protection, (b) controls protection, and (c) support protection. Models protection includes having positive role models from whom adolescents learn behaviors. Models could be family members, teachers, coaches, and so forth. Controls protection refers to rules and regulations set up by adults or the environment that lower risk. Examples of controls protections include setting up curfews, not allowing a student to ride to school with friends, and insisting on knowing the parents of friends if a child is to spend the night in their home. Support protection means having family members, adults, and peers who are caring and available for support. Similar, but not necessarily just the opposite of the protective factors, the three risk factors described by Turbin et al. (2006) include models risk (having poor role models), opportunity risk (having fewer parental controls, regulations, etc.), and vulnerability risk, which are individual factors that may make one youth more vulnerable than another (LGB, lower SES, neighborhood, etc.).

**The Role of Risk and Protective Factors**

Acknowledging that adolescents as a group—no matter their family structure, income level, or a host of other demographics—are not immune to risk is important. This may be particularly true for LGB youth. Jessor (1991) discussed adolescent risk in terms of a large problem of society, in that risk is inextricably linked with adolescent development. Jessor believes that *at risk* behaviors such as drug abuse and dangerous sexual activity have the potential to derail typical adolescent development, leading to a
host of issues including failed career plans, mental health concerns, and unmet expectations of self.

Three approaches put forth by Saewyc (2011) are often discussed when researchers and practitioners examine risk and protective factors in LGB youth. The first approach is to determine which risk factors have an effect on adolescents in general and determine the reasons why LGB youth are disproportionally affected by these risks. The second approach is to identify those factors that are specific to LGB adolescents such as coming out and experiencing discrimination and studying these factors. The third approach is to examine how the stigma associated with a LGB identity might lead to a higher incidence of specific risk factors such as substance abuse. In one such study using the third approach, Meyer (2003) found that substance abuse is a way of coping with minority stress and describes minority stress as psychological stress based on a stigmatized existence. Reaction to stigma or enacted stigma, including experiences of harassment, is often cited as the reason that LGB youth have higher rates of risk factors (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogart, 2006; Saewyc, Poon, & Homma, et al., 2008). These higher incidences of risk factors have not gone unnoticed by researchers in the medical community.

**Medical Perspectives on LGB Youth**

Jessor (1991) discusses the concept of risk as it has evolved from a medical perspective. In the medical model, risk factors are associated with an increased probability of some medical problem. For example, being overweight is a risk factor associated with heart disease. Jessor argues for a more comprehensive view of risk factors that includes the social environment. Using the example above, a physician
would move beyond recommending exercise and diet to examining what might make an individual overeat, which could include social or environmental issues. Regarding adolescents, Jessor believes that many risk behaviors not only have negative consequences, but many have rewards. For example, marijuana use with a peer group may win an adolescent the social acceptance he or she desires and could not find in other ways. In other words, risk behaviors are a means of coping with issues such as social anxiety and frustration (Jessor).

In conceptualizing risk and protective factors, Jessor (1991) believes that researchers need to look at risk and protective factors together, and his research has shown that risk factors such as sexual acting out and drug use are interrelated and should not be looked at as discrete issues. Jessor prefers to describe risk as psychosocial risk, whereas risk behaviors are a social adaptation to an adolescent problem. According to Jessor, researchers should devote time and energy understanding what he calls the psychosocial antecedents or determinants to risk behaviors.

Blum et al. (2002) posit that protective factors are complex in that they cut across several contexts and work differently, given the context. Blum believes that adolescents have predispositions that create vulnerability, and, at the same time, some adolescents have protective factors that help to moderate these vulnerabilities and help to stop what Schorr (1997) calls “rotten outcomes.” Blum et al. (2002) describe vulnerability as interactions between the social contexts in which youth live and other factors (family structure, demographics, environment); these vulnerabilities then place the adolescent “at risk” of various poor outcomes (adolescent pregnancy, substance abuse, etc.). While not
specifically addressing LGB youth in their research article (Blum et al., 2002), it is clear that LGB youth is one context of which little about protective factors is known.

**Social Support and the Buffering Hypothesis**

It is helpful to conceptualize the methods in which social support works using Cohen and Wills’ (1989) research review on the ways in which stress is mediated by social support. Cohen and Wills examined two models regarding how social support works, the buffering model and the main effect model. The buffering model views social support as working for people who are currently under stress, thereby “buffering” the effects of stress. An example relevant to the current study could include the buffering effect a close peer connection could have on a LGB adolescent being harassed at school. In assessing this model, Cohen and Wills (1985) measured the perceived availability of social support and the perceived responsiveness of those providing social support. Their study was based on the reviews of several other studies examining these constructs. The samples interviewed were primarily adults, which should be considered when interpreting the results because developmentally, adolescents may not view social supports in quite the same way. For example, having a parent who keeps track of the whereabouts of their adolescent child, to an adolescent, may not be perceived as being supportive.

The second model described by Cohen and Wills (1985) is known as the main effect model. This model purposes that social support is beneficial for everyone, regardless of whether or not they are currently experiencing life stressors. The notion is that overall well-being is related to having positive and socially rewarding relationships and that these relationships in turn promote self-worth. This model was supported more in studies that assessed the degree to which participants were integrated into a social
network. Although not specifically examining high schools in their study, given that high schools are the primary place that adolescents form social relationships, high schools can be viewed as a social network.

In their examination of these two models (buffering and main effect), Cohen and Wills (1985) found that both models were effective at reducing stress. Cohen and Wills argue that the debate should not be over which model works more effectively, but rather how the models work for specific individuals or groups. Given that the majority of LGB youth move through adolescence with relatively few issues (D’Augelli, 1996; Saewyc, 2011) and that other LGB youth have poorer health outcomes (Coker et al., 2010) than their heterosexual peers on a number of measures, both buffering and main effect models are useful in conceptualizing LGB youth.

**Examining Individual Protective Factors**

Examining data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (NLAH), Needham and Austin (2010) found strong links between social support from parents and overall adolescent health. As this and other studies (Blum et al., 2002; D’Augelli et al, 1998; Moak & Agrawal, 2009; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz & Sanchez, 2009; Santrock, 2011) continue to show the benefits of social support for the general adolescent population, understanding how social support works in the general adolescent population has been an appropriate first step in determining which and how social supports might work for LGB youth.

**Parental and Family Support**

Needham and Austin (2010) examined differences in perceived parental support between LGB youth and their heterosexual peers and found that parent support fully or
partially mediated associations between LGB youth and a number of risk factors including depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts and drug use. Santrock (2011) found that having a strong supportive relationship with an adult is one of the strongest predictors of long-term adjustment in the general adolescent population. Although this is also true for LGB adolescents (Needham & Austin, 2010), there may be barriers to establishing such relationships. Moak and Agrawal (2009) found that physical and mental health outcomes are far better for adolescents with higher levels of social support. This is troubling as Safren and Pantalone (2006) also found that LGB individuals perceive less social support compared to their heterosexual peers. Stone (2003) notes that for GLB students, traditional support from friends and family, clergy, and teachers may not be available.

Having caring parents has been shown to be a protective factor for adolescents, according to research by Blum et al. (2002) and Resnick et al. (1997). Homma and Saewyc (2007) found that among LGB Asian-American youth, those who believed that they had caring families showed lower levels of emotional distress. Using the NLAH data set, Resnick et al. (1997) found that parental support or connectedness is related to higher levels of psychological well-being, lower levels of interpersonal violence, later onset of first sexual activity, and lower levels of alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use. Family connectedness has also been associated with lower levels of adolescent pregnancy (Saewyc, Poon, Skay et al., 2008).

An increase in poor health outcomes has been associated with this lack of support for LGB youth (Needham & Austin, 2010). This knowledge may be especially damaging as we know that coming out at a younger age has been associated with LGB youth being
more comfortable with their sexual identity (Floyd & Stein, 2002). However, when compared with coming out as an adult, these youth have increased levels of family rejection and harassment at school (D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). Youth who have disclosed their sexual orientation to their family have higher rates of physical and verbal abuse as well as higher suicide attempt rates (D’Augelli et al., 1998; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz & Sanchez, 2009).

Family rejection can have devastating consequences for LGB youth. Family rejection has been associated with higher rates of suicide, substance abuse, and unprotected sex (Rosario, Schrimshaw & Hunter, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009) and contributes to the disproportionate number of homeless LGB youth (Coker et. al, 2010). Needham and Austin (2010) lend further support to the importance of parental support for LGB adolescents. They found that parental support fully mediates depressive symptoms for LGB women and only partially mediates suicidal ideation and drug use. For gay men, parental support partially mediates the association between gay identity and suicidal ideation. Learning how to improve relationships between LGB youth and parents will be vital. In addition to improving parental relationships when possible, and in the absence of parental support, it will be essential to help LGB youth develop supportive peer connections (Needham & Austin, 2010).

Peer Connections

Peer connections are critical to adolescents. Eccles et al. (2011) found, after completing 13 interviews with gay adolescents, that gay adolescents view themselves as similar to heterosexual adolescents in that most adolescents move further from family and place more importance on peer connections. However, they also found that peer
interaction was the area in which LGB adolescents felt most different from their heterosexual peers. Eccles et al. (2004) used a quote from a participant to sum up their findings in this area,

I would say that, um, gay adolescents are a lot more cautious about who they choose to hang out with and trust probably takes a lot more time to develop than individuals who are straight…in that sense it takes a long time for gay adolescents….Developing trust can take years. (p. 425)

As only gay adolescents were interviewed for this study, it will be important to determine if adolescents identifying as lesbians feel similarly. Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, and Bukowski (1999) found that LGB youth who had at least one friend were buffered from the effects of harassment and peer victimization, supporting the idea that the Buffing Hypothesis, presented earlier by Cohen and Wills (1989), works similarly for LGB adolescents.

In their examination of cross-orientation friendships (n = 422) using instruments designed to measure friendship status, internalized stigma regarding sexuality, and friendship qualities, Baiocco, Laghi, Pomponio and Nigito (2012) found that gay and lesbian adolescents who had cross-orientation friendships reported less internalized stigma regarding their sexual orientation. This finding lends support to prevention efforts such as gay straight alliances, where cross-orientation friendships are fostered. One concern with the generalizability of this study is the research sample, lesbian and gay adolescents recruited from gay-focused community organizations. In addition, Baiocco et al. (2012) found that lesbian and gay adolescents are less likely to have a best friend when compared to their heterosexual counterparts. This finding should be investigated
further, but the authors propose that this finding could be related to the stigma associated with disclosing sexual orientation to a best friend or a desire on the part of lesbian and gay adolescents to keep peers at an emotional distance. This assertion is supported by the previously mentioned research of Eccles et al. (2004), stating that it takes time for LGB adolescents to trust peers.

**School as a Protective Factor**

A growing body of research has shown that school environments can be a contributing factor in the success of adolescents in general (Blum et al., 2002; Saewyc, Poon, Skay et al, 2008) and LGB adolescents in particular (Bos et al., 2008; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001). Family connectedness, school connectedness, and feeling safe at school have been linked to lower levels of suicide attempts (Borowsky et al., 2001; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Rostosky et al., 2007; Saewyc et al., 2007), as well as lower teen pregnancy rates (Saewyc, Poon, Skay et al., 2008); and school connectedness has been show to lower the odds of having emotional distress and depression for all adolescents (Resnick et al., 2007). Schools are an important place for adolescents to connect to positive adult role models. As Blum et al. (2002) found, non-familial adults who care about a student can also serve as protective factors and these adults most likely come in the form of teachers, coaches, counselors, clergy, and so forth.

Specific to LGB students, Bos et al. (2008) and Russell, Seif and Truong (2001) found that LGB youth who feel safe at school and believe they have caring teachers have better academic outcomes. In Bolch and Murdock’s (2005) study, LGB youth reported that support from teachers at their school contributed to a sense of psychological
belonging. GSAs have also proven to be a protective factor for LGB youth (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Goodenow, Szalacha, L., & Westminster, 2006; Griffin, Lee, Waugh & Beyer, 2005; Heck et al., 2011; Szalacha, 2003) in schools and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. The good news for educators and service providers is that Resnick et al. (1997) found that school connectedness is a variable that responds well to intervention.

**Religiosity**

Religiosity has been found to be a protective factor against health risk behaviors (Rostosky, Wilcox, & Wright et al., 2004). Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, Rostosky, Danner and Riggle (2007) found that religion and spirituality were shown to be a protective factors only for heterosexual adolescents. According to Smith et al. (2002), over 50% of youth in the U.S. participate in religious activities regularly, so religion could be a viable source of social support for many. Specifically, religiosity lowered rates for alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use, while Blum et al. (2002) found a belief in a higher power other than oneself to be a protective factor for adolescents in general. Resnick et al. (1997) found that, among all adolescents, the more importance adolescents ascribed to religion and prayer, the later the onset of their first sexual experience.

In their research with bisexual adolescents, Saewyc et al. (2007) found mixed results related to religiosity as a protective factor. In their work using data sets from 1992 through 2001 in Minnesota and Western Canada, only bisexual boys in the 1992 Minnesota survey, and bisexual girls in both the 1998 and 2001 Minnesota surveys
reported lower mean scores related to feeling supported by church or religious leaders when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Saewyc et al.).

There is some evidence suggesting that religiosity complicates the coming out process for LGB adolescents (Schuck, & Liddle, 2001). Rostosky et al. (2007) found that not only do LGB youth perceive religiosity as a lower level protective factor, LGB youth report significantly lower levels of religiosity. Hillier et al. (2004) found that religion can be a source of tremendous pain for many LGB youth. Many LGB adolescents report having to make a painful choice between their sexual identity and their church, and some adolescents who chose the church reported increased self-hatred as a result. As Rostosky et al. (2007) point out, religious beliefs may not be positive for a number of sexual minority youth depending on their religious tradition, and it will be important for future research to examine religiosity as a protective factor in a more detailed way as there are some religions that may serve as a source of support and even affirm sexual minority youth.

**Protective Factors and LGB Adolescents**

Some evidence that protective factors work similarly for LGB youth does exist. Safren and Heimburg (1999) found that protective factors serve an important mediating effect regarding suicidality among LGB youth. Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) used a resiliency paradigm (family connectedness, teacher caring, other adult caring, and school safety) to examine suicide ideation and attempts among LGB youth. Both LGB boys and girls were less likely than non-GLB youth to be in the top quartile for each protective factor. In their study, they found that LGB youth had odds of suicide attempts 1.60 to 2.63 times higher than their non LGB peers. When the four resiliency paradigm
protective factors were added to their regression model, LGB youth were still higher than non LGB peers, but were depressed 1.5 to 2.16 times more (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006).

Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that family connectedness and the presence of other caring adults at school were significant protective factors for LGB adolescents, and those participants with higher levels of either of these protective factors were half as likely to be at risk for suicide. Underscoring the important role of the family as a support system, Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that family connectedness accounted for more variance in the model than did sexual orientation or the other protective factors. As the largest amount of variance in the study was left unexplained, the need for further investigation exists. (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006).

Several researchers have identified personal traits and characteristics that LGB youth, as well as adolescents in general, access in their environments that serve to protect them (Borowsky et al., 2001; Hillier et al., 2004; Resnick et al.; 1997). Higher levels of self-esteem, which do not develop in a vacuum, have been associated with lower levels of emotional distress (Resnick et. al., 2011). Developmentally, most adolescents do not wish to be different. Resnick et al. (2011) have identified four individual risk factors that seem to add to support this statement; looking older than classmates, looking younger than classmates, having same-sex attractions, or being held back in school are all risk factors that have been associated with negative health outcomes. As characteristics of individual research participants are difficult to describe using quantitative research methods, this is one area where qualitative methods might be most appropriate.
LGB Specific Protective Factors

Although there is a gap in the literature when it comes to examining how protective factors might work differently for LGB youth, several LGB adolescent specific protective factors have been identified, such as involvement in the gay community (Rosario, et al., 2004), the presences of Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) in high schools (Goodenow et al., 2006; Griffin et al, 2005; Heck et al., 2011; Szalacha, 2003), and support from counselors (Goodenow et al., 2006). In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that growing up in an urban or suburban area might also be a LGB specific protective factor (Cohn and Hastings, 2010; Yarbrough, 2003).

Involvement in a LGB Community

In their 2004 investigation, Rosario et al. found a curvilinear relationship between alcohol and marijuana use and involvement in the gay community in their longitudinal study. LGB youth who *came out* and became involved with LGB social and civic activities initially reported an increase in alcohol and marijuana use, but at 6 and 12 month follow ups, use decreased. Rosario et al. (2004) offer three plausible explanations for this initial rise in use: One, that the initial coming out process is anxiety-provoking, and adolescents may use alcohol and marijuana as a means to relieve this stress; two, when youth decide to come out, there is a sense of release from social boundaries until their new sexual identity is integrated into other parts of the life; and, finally, that often LGB related activities are social in nature, often in bars, allowing increased access to alcohol and marijuana.

Although this research (Rosario, et al., 2004) points to the possible benefits of increased involvement in the gay community, it also points to an area in need of further
research. If involvement in gay related activities is a social support as this research suggests, it will be beneficial to know how this type of support is accessed and, if possible, learn why initial involvement in gay related activities increases alcohol and marijuana use. In addition, it is essential to note that many LGB youth in rural and suburban areas of the country do not have access to a gay community.

**Gay-Straight Alliances**

Several studies have shown the benefits of GSAs for schools and students (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Goodenow, Szalacha, L., & Westminster, 2006; Griffin, Lee, Waugh & Beyer, 2005; Heck et al., 2011; Szalacha, 2003). Conducting a statewide study in Massachusetts, Goodenow et al. (2006) found that youth in schools that had a GSA were half as likely to report missing school because of the fear of violence, threats of bodily harm, or dating violence. In their evaluation of the Massachusetts safe schools program, Szalacha (2003) found that students were twice as likely to hear faculty and staff make comments regarding LGB individuals that they deemed supportive. Similarly, Szalacha (2003) also found that adolescents in those schools with GSA’s felt that adults in the school were more supportive of them, when compared with schools in which a GSA was not present. Goodenow et al. (2006) found that schools that have GSAs were also more likely to have anti-homophobia training for staff and strong anti-homophobia policies, and report less harassment and fewer suicide attempts.

Heck et al. (2011) surveyed 145 LGBT college youth regarding their experiences in high schools with and without GSAs. Recognizing confounds associated with retrospective research, they limited the age range of their participants to 18-20. Several of their findings are promising and support previous research regarding GSAs. They
used seven ANCOVAs with those schools with GSAs and those without served as their independent variables. They found that LGB youth reported significantly higher rates of school belongingness in schools with GSA’s, less at school victimization, better outcomes related to alcohol consumption, and better outcomes related to psychological distress and depression. Several of the effects were practically significant. According to the authors, these findings suggest that GSA’s may serve as a type of mediator to other risk factors.

In the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN; 2007) research briefing regarding the role of GSAs in creating safer schools for LGB adolescents, four major findings regarding the effectiveness of GSAs were presented. The first finding was that schools with GSA’s send a message to the entire student body that harassment and hurtful language is not acceptable. The second finding included that LGB adolescents find schools with GSA’s more accessible. The third finding was that adults in school can play a powerful role in making LGB students feel welcome and increasing academic achievement. The final finding was that access to GSA’s or other supportive LGB student groups in the United States is limited, often by geographic region or community type. For example, LGB students in the Northeast are 24% more likely to have a GSA in their school than those in the South, and schools in suburban areas are 21% more likely to have a GSA than students in small town or rural areas.

**Support from School Counselors, Administrators and Teachers**

Support from school counselors can be a vital resource to LGB youth. According to research by Goodenow et al. (2006), support from school counselors serving in a role other than academic counselors has also been linked to lower harassment and suicidality
rates among LGB youth. GLSEN (2007) reported that students in schools where they could identify supportive staff members felt safer and more supported.

Although evidence exists that social support is helpful to LGB youth, there is other research which concludes that support is not universal. According to survey research by GLSEN (2007), 60.8% of students who had been harassed or assaulted did not report the harassment to school personnel because they believed nothing would be done about it, and 31.1% reported that when they did report to school personnel, nothing was done. And, Satcher and Leggett (2007), based on their examination of homonegativity among school counselors, believe that school counselors with negative attitudes about LGB students will be less likely to advocate for and appropriately meet the needs of LGB students.

**Geographic Location**

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that geographic location could be viewed as both a risk and protective factor. Yarbrough (2003) conducted a qualitative study with eight LGB young adults in areas designated as rural, and three themes emerged that are particularly salient to the current study, including feelings of isolation, the benefits of supportive teachers, and the resiliency of LGB youth. In a literature review by Cohn and Hastings (2010), they noted three issues that are concerns of lesbians in rural areas: conforming to gender norms, affective distress, and feelings of isolation.

**The Internet**

In recent years, the Internet has become a relatively new tool that has helped LGB youth overcome obstacles that are related to geography and isolation. Recently, a study by Harper, Bruce, Serrano and Jamil (2000) identified four primary purposes that gay
adolescent males used the Internet for related to their identity development including: (a) exploration related to their sexual orientation that was anonymous, (b) posting in chat rooms, (c) having conversations with other gay and gay friendly people and, (d) arranging real life meetings with others. During interviews with these adolescents, information shared or contacts made could be classified into three areas allowing LGB youth to, “(a) learn about and explore their sexuality and the gay community, (b) connect and socialize with other gay and bisexual peers, and (c) gain self-acceptance and share their sexual identity with others” (Harper et al., 2000, p. 320). This study points out some ways that LGB youth, particularly those in rural or isolated areas, can explore their sexual identity and reap some of the possible benefits of connecting with an LGB community (Rosario, et al., 2004), even if one is not physically available

**Problem or Health-Altering Behaviors**

Discussions of risk, resilience and protective factors are not complete without discussing the problem or health altering behaviors with which they are associated. Jessor (1992), in presenting problem behavior theory, argues that risk behaviors such as drinking and drugs are not random, but “functional, purposive, instrumental, and goal-directed” (p. 598). Jessor states that for each problem behavior there are any number of causes or protective factors that could be associated with them and that they vary by individual. Jessor offers a “web of causation” with five domains (biology/genetics, social environment, perceived environment, personality, behavior). Each of these domains has risk and protective factors that are associated with risk behaviors or lifestyle choices that lead to possible negative outcomes. The model was expanded by Blum et al. (2002) to include school and peers as a specific domain.
Further expanding Jessor’s model, Turbin et al. (2006) presented and tested an explanatory model of adolescent health-enhancing behavior. This model places emphasis on individual, social, and contextual risk and protective factors. The model purposes that protective factors have moderating effects on risk. In other words, many protective factors can overcome risk. One of the most encouraging findings of the study is that protective factors accounted for much more variance than risk. The authors believe that much more attention should be paid to enhancing protective factors because they not only promote adolescent well-being, but buffer against risk.

Why do protective factors work to guard against some health risks and not others? Blum et al. (2002) give three suppositions regarding how protective factors might work. First, protective factors are contextual and what is protective for one individual in one environment might not work with another individual in another environment. Second, protective factors vary across domains of functioning. For example, being engaged in rigorous coursework may buffer against dropping out of school, but may do nothing to lower substance abuse. Third, some protective factors protect for one risk and not others. Protective factors can work in two ways: they can eliminate a risk altogether or they can protect, buffer or mediate a risk (Blum et al. 2002). In short, the relationships between risk and protective factors are complex and contextual at the individual and environmental levels (Blum et al., 2002). This complexity may be part of the reason LGB identity development, risk and protective factors, and environment have received so little attention in the literature. Several other reasons for limited research in this particular area are presented below.
Critiques of Research

There are several critiques of the research regarding LGB youth in the past two decades put forth by Savin-Williams (2005). First, most of the research regarding LGB youth has been conducted looking backward or retrospectively, and so is based on what these participants “remember.” As Silverman (2010) notes, it is not that research participants lie, they just may view the past through a different lens. Secondly, many researchers investigated atypical behaviors such as suicide or rejection, and very little research has been done on what typical LGB adolescent development looks like. Next, as noted earlier, little research has focused on how resilient LGB youth can be; instead the focus has been on bullying and harassment. Finally, Savin-Williams (2005) points out that one can learn much about LGB adolescents by knowing about their heterosexual peers, as LGB adolescents may be more like their heterosexual peers than previously assumed.

The criticisms presented above are not meant to say that prior research is unimportant or not useful. There may be a number of reasons more positive focused prospective research has been put off until now, including access to LGB youth because they have yet to identify as LGB, lack of permission from parents to work with this population, and limited funding availability for research of this nature, as well as political and societal pressures.

Summary of Salient Risk-Protective Factors

Given the above findings, it is clear that the absence of social support, particularly from the family, may be an important risk/protective factor for further examination. In fact, most risk and protective factors are related to some social context (Resnick et. al.,
Research in the past three decades has shown that connections to others integral components in the lives of LGB youth (Jessor, 1991; Savin-Williams, 2005) across several domains (home, school, peers). Although it is imperative to be mindful of individual risk concerns such as substance abuse, mental health and suicide concerns (Hershberger & D’Augelli, 2000), it is just as important to remember that these are not individual concerns, but psychosocial reactions to underlying issues that, if not resolved, could impede future development (Jessor, 1991). It will also be important to identify which protective factors are modifiable (Needham & Austin, 2010).

It is worth repeating, however, that despite all of evidence that LGB youth have more risk factors and fewer protective factors than their heterosexual counterparts, most LGB adolescents continue to do well and are resilient (Garofalo & Katz, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2001). Many studies regarding LGB youth population and resilience fail to take into account individual differences (Savin-Williams, 2001). Savin-Williams (2005) states that he believes adolescents may be moving to a “post-gay” state in which their sexual orientation is not a primary identifier. I would argue that although some adolescents are beginning to feel this way, they are not leaving high school or college and moving into a world that is “post-gay.” In fact, the number of ballot measures to stop same-sex marriage in states around the county, the recent rash of high profile suicides among LGB adolescents, and the continued fight to allow LGB individuals to serve openly in the military are just a few contemporary examples that prove otherwise. The message that social support is needed and wanted is beginning to take hold as evidenced by the recent success of Dan Savage’s It Gets Better Project, a website where LGB adults and allies from all walks of life post inspirational messages to LGB youth.
It is an exciting time for LGB researchers as well, as we begin to move away from research models that paint a picture of LGB youth as troubled, harassed, suicidal, and at risk. Whereas this is true of a small number of LGB youth, these youth are so much more. LGB youth are resilient, creative, resourceful, proud, and even more visible than they have been in the past and we know very little about what makes them so. According to Savin-Williams (2005), referring to LGB youth as resilient acknowledges assets amassed throughout their lives, and, although risk factors associated with being an LGB youth have been documented, we still know very little regarding protective factors. In Eisenberg and Resnick’s (2006) study of LGB protective factors, the largest amount of variance was left unexplained. It is important that LGB research moving forward strives to explain this variance.

Qualitative research methods may be most appropriate to learn more about these individual differences in protective factors (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006). Saewyc et al. (2011) agree and add that qualitative studies should be paired with population based studies that have large enough sample sizes to examine differences among LGB youth who may be part of other minority groups. Saewyc (2011) notes that data regarding LGB youth protective factors is limited and, “more studies are needed on youth who do well, despite having experienced enacted stigma, in order to identify ways to help them to not just survive, but to thrive” (p. 267).
CHAPTER 3 METHODS

Prospective, and in particular, prospective qualitative research with lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents continues to be rare and research that has been completed most often examines issues faced by LGB adolescents (Coker, et al., 2010; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Saewyc, et al., 2007), not healthy adolescent development. This chapter details the rationale for studying LGB youth using phenomenology as my qualitative approach as well as the specific methods and procedures used to determine which protective factors are most salient for gay and bisexual adolescents and how gay and bisexual adolescents come to recognize or seek out social support.

Rationale for the Study and Using a Phenomenological Approach

Consistent with Cresswell’s (2007) recommendation, I aimed to be as reflexive as possible throughout this chapter by detailing my personal biases, how research decisions were made, and discussing my worldview. This process, often referred to as bracketing assumption, is not a process that was only completed once. I journaled my thoughts about interviews throughout the process and discussed those thoughts with colleagues as a way to remain aware of my personal biases. This was done in an effort to keep my biases as separate from the data analysis process as possible. I begin by discussing my approach below.

I approached this research, and life in general, from a constructivist or interpretivist lens. According to Hansen (2004) this means that truth is constructed in the mind of the individual. In counseling terms, truth is a perspective, and depending how you view the world or your place in it, your truth may look very different from another truth. A phenomenological qualitative research approach is consistent with my
constructivist world view that knowledge is not a single known entity, but rather is constructed individually and collectively in the minds of participants and the researcher (Ponterotto, 2005). As the researcher, it is important that I have an understanding of my philosophical assumptions and how they may be reflected in my results. Having experience with the phenomenon first hand as an adolescent and in my current work as a school counselor in the public school system leaves me well situated for this investigation.

I chose phenomenology over other qualitative approaches because (a) phenomenology is appropriate when little information is available regarding a given topic (Moustakas, 1994), (b) it was my desire to accurately represent the lived experiences of LGB adolescents and, (c) I am not trying to quantify a truth, but rather discover variations that may exist within the individual lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of LGB youth. In addition, there were practical reasons for using a phenomenological approach such as limited access to potential research participants. It is not my aim to generate theory or develop consensus among researchers regarding the phenomenon as are goals of grounded theory and consensual qualitative research respectively (Hays & Wood, 2011).

According to Merchant and Durprey (1996), phenomenological qualitative research is an interactive process between researchers and participants that allows researchers and participants to jointly construct meaning (Ponterotto, 2005). As a qualitative researcher, it is my responsibility to understand the lived experiences of the research participants, and this most often involves more prolonged contact with smaller sample sizes (Cresswell, 2007; Elliott, Fisher & Rennie, 1999).
Murdock and Bolch (2005) hypothesized in their study that social support from parents and friends might buffer against the effects of bullying and harassment that LGB youth experience in school, but their hypothesis was not supported. They were surprised by this finding and therefore did a person-centered analysis that gave more information about the environments experienced and the combination of supports and stressors at an individual level. The cluster analysis suggested that it is the combined effect of negative school environment and poor support that matters. Conducting qualitative interviews from a phenomenological perspective, I was able to shed some light on how this “combined” effect might work. In addition, researchers often cite the need for continued research on how protective factors might work with LGB youth populations (Resnick et al., 2004; Blum et al., 2002).

Operating from this paradigm, I interviewed seven gay or bisexual adolescents for a longer duration, not seeking to quantify the truth, but rather to use phenomenological methods to uncover several perspectives of the participants (Cresswell, 2007; Elliott, Fisher & Rennie, 1999) and identify themes (Cresswell, 1998), or the essence of meaning. Furthermore, as Merchant (1997) notes, as a professional counselor, my training is a good fit for researchers wishing to use a phenomenological approach. My research questions (see appendix B), constructivist in nature, are well suited to investigation using a phenomenological approach (Silverman, 2010).

**Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Consistent with Morrow’s (2005) discussion of objectivity in qualitative research, I begin by acknowledging that I am part of the research and, although I will strive to remain objective, objectivity is not something that can be achieved. There are several
methods described by Morrow (2005) that were used to establish rigor and
trustworthiness, some of which are described in other sections in this paper noting that
rigor and trustworthiness are concepts that are incorporated throughout the qualitative
research process. The first, credibility, as described by Lincoln and Guba (2000) refers to
the quality of the data gathered. The primary concern of credibility is that research
results reflect the experiences of the researchers’ and participants’ (Corbin et al., 2008).
Consistent with a postmodern viewpoint, findings are not presented as the only
interpretation of the findings, but as one possibility (Ponteroto, 2005). As noted by
Singh and Shelton (2011), it is extremely important to build credibility and
trustworthiness checks into qualitative designs and even more so with oppressed groups
because of the danger of perpetuating that oppression. As with any research, it is open to
misinterpretation and it is important that this be minimized.

In a recent content analysis of LGBTQ qualitative research, Singh and Shelton
(2011) noted that often the research method or paradigm was not articulated. I began by
articulating my research paradigm (phenomenological inquiry) and my rationale for the
approach (see page 46). Morrow and Smith (2000) also state that the quality of the
research is based upon the choice of research paradigm and the standards with which it is
associated. In their guidelines for qualitative research, Elliott et al. (1999) recommend
that researchers own their perspective and that this should be done by detailing the
research paradigm and methodology, as well as an explanation of the researcher’s
personal assumptions. This has been done by bracketing my assumptions, consistent with
Cresswell’s (1998) recommendation.
As recommended by Creswell (1998), I attempted to bracket my assumptions and predispositions about the phenomenon in a number of ways. First, I asked a colleague to conduct an interview with me to help me arrive at and clarify my biases regarding LGB youth and risk and protective factors. The results of that interview were used to help detail these biases, in writing, as part of my research methodology. This was not a once and done process. Throughout data collection, analysis, and writing I conferred with colleagues and supervisors regarding biases or unexpected reactions as they arose. From the onset of the research, I began journaling my thoughts regarding the project, readings, discussions, and intuitive reactions to the study consistent with the suggestion of Creswell (1998). Journaling also continued throughout the study. I recorded and discussed with colleagues my reactions to interviews as well as the participants in general. Biases and assumptions based on the results of the interview conducted by a colleague are presented below as part of the researcher background section.

**Researcher Background**

Consistent with Creswell’s (2008) recommendation and to provide context to the reader, my interest in the current topic and personal background and biases are presented here. Like many researchers, my interest in studying LGB youth stems from my own experiences. I describe myself as a gay man who has successfully negotiated my own adolescent development. I attribute successfully negotiating my own adolescence, in-part, to social support I have received from teachers, family and friends in my life.

As a high school counselor, I work with a number of students, both LGB and heterosexual who are struggling with identity development. I believe that the struggle for adolescent identity development is universal. I believe that LGB youth are more
similar to their heterosexual peers than they are different. I believe that traditional adolescent social supports may not always be available to LGB youth and that LGB youth are incredibly resilient.

As a school counselor, I have chosen to explore resiliency and social support because I believe it is often more effective to offer support than change life circumstances that might be beyond the control of the adolescent. This belief has, in part, been shaped by my work as a school counselor over the past eight years. It is my desire to discover ways that LGB youth seek help so that other counselors can provide assistance in this search.

A school counseling colleague conducted an interview with me regarding my possible biases before beginning this study. Several biases arose during my interview with a colleague. It became clear that I most often view established religion as a detriment to healthy LGB adolescent identity development, but I also believe religion can serve as an important social support for LGB youth as well. Related to this bias, it is clear that I associate religious establishments that are the most intolerant of LGB individuals as being from the southern and Bible Belt areas of the United States as well as specific religious denominations. It has also been my experience that urban areas are more supportive of LGB youth than rural areas. Growing up in rural North Central Pennsylvania has shaped these beliefs. Throughout the study, I continued to journal my thoughts as they arose and discussed potential biases with colleagues. During data analysis, I asked colleagues to challenge my thoughts about data interpretation whenever necessary.
Research Questions

It is recognized that the majority of LGB youth lead happy, healthy, and productive lives (Garofalo & Katz, 2001; Savin-williams, R.C, 2001), but what is not known is how and which protective factors make this possible. The first question to be addressed in this study is which protective factors are most salient for LGB youth. Specifically, the interviews will aim to determine what types of social supports have served as protective factors for LGB youth. Secondly, provided social supports are identified as protective factors, it will be important to learn how LGB youth came to recognize or seek out these types of support. As the purpose of this study was to illuminate the lived experiences of LGB youth, research questions served as a rough guide for the interviews.

Participants

As recommended by Cresswell (1998) a group of between eight and ten LGB adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 were identified via purposeful sampling (Silverman, 2010), however seven adolescents were interviewed as redundancy had been reached, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Because of the nature of the phenomenon being explored, smaller sample sizes may be more appropriate as locating large numbers of LGB youth and getting parental consent may not be feasible (Moradi, Mohr, Worthington & Fassinger, 2009). Of the ten students initially identified for the study, seven eventually scheduled interviews. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that participants that were selected were selected based on their experience with the phenomenon in question (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2010). In the case of the present study, purposeful sampling criteria included self-identifying as LGB, being between the
ages of 14 and 18, being currently enrolled grades 9-12, having a parent or guardian that consented to allow their child to participate in the study, and being willing to agree to an interview. As the goal of qualitative research is to elicit rich descriptions of the phenomenon, not generalizability, purposeful sampling is appropriate (Silverman, 2010).

The age of participants was not chosen at random. Several recent research findings were used to determine age range criteria, principally, the work of Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000), who found that youth typically become aware of their developing sexual identity between the ages of 8 and 11 and typically self-identify between the ages of 15 and 17. I chose to extend the age range criteria from 14 to 18 to include those students who are typically enrolled in high school. This is purposeful in that the majority of research on LGB populations in the past has been done with college aged youth.

There are several acceptable methods used to identify research participants as LGB, although measuring sexual orientation in adolescence, and the general population, has always been difficult (Saewyc, 2001). The LBG Youth Sexual Orientation Measurement Work Group (2003) has recommended that sexual orientation be measured using a minimum of two dimensions (attraction, identity, and behavior). Most studies use just one measure of sexual orientation and most often the measure used is either attraction or identity through self–labeling or via some indicator that sexual orientation is anything other than heterosexual (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Russell & Joyner, 2001) and I believe this is the most appropriate approach for the current study. I have chosen to use self-labeling over other methods because the construct under examination, social support among LGB adolescents, is more likely be present in adolescents who have self-
identified and are open about their sexuality. I chose to interview openly LGB adolescents who have sought social support. In addition, I chose not to use behavior as an indicator of sexual orientation as I am studying adolescent populations and it is developmentally appropriate that they may not have engaged in sexual activity.

Developmentally, adolescence is a time of physical and cognitive development, especially surrounding issues of sexuality, that complicate this process even further (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Hunter & Exner, 1996; Patton & Viner, 2007; Rosario, Meyer-Bahlburg).

Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter and Braun (2006) found that LGB youth go through a period of conflict and experimentation before self-identifying. Assuming this is the case, considerable emotional energy has been expended before adolescent choose to self-label. Rosario et al. (2006) and Diamond (2000) found that adolescents who self-label as gay are consistent with their labels over time and of those who changed, the majority moved from bisexual toward a more same sex orientation. Put another way, youth who initially identify as LGB are overwhelmingly consistent in this identity and many youth who initially identify as bisexual, later identify as lesbian or gay. There are also social and cultural factors that can affect the labels youth choose to use (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007) and these cultural and social factors may be too nuanced and variable to be detected using survey type measures.

When adolescents have been asked to label themselves, they describe sexual and romantic attraction to someone of the same sex as their primary definition of an LGB sexual orientation (Austin, Conron, Patel & Freedner, 2007; Diamond, 2000; Friedman et al., 2004). Given the consistencies of self-labeling over time, the emotional energy
expended by youth who self-label, and my desire to use a phenomenological approach to the research question, it seems only fitting that I will use the self-labeling approach in the present study.

Many arguments have been made regarding labeling, measuring and operationalizing of the variables for LGB youth. Savin-Williams (2005) put forth the argument that the measurement of sexual orientation as a construct researchers use, should depend on the research question. For example, if you are examining safer sex practices between men who have sex with men, it might be best to use that phrase as your label, thereby not excluding potential participants because they do not self-identify as LGB. On the other hand, if you are trying to examine harassment or discrimination based on LGB identity, self-labeling might be the most appropriate choice, as those who have self-identified are more likely to experiences those phenomenon.

**Recruitment**

The original plan was to recruit adolescents via their parents or guardians at PFLAG chapter meetings as well as a community *It Gets Better Event* held in Central Pennsylvania and sponsored by a local GSA. Contact information for the PFLAG group in central Pennsylvania was gathered from the PFLAG website ([www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)), although no participants were recruited in this manner. Three participants were recruited at the *It Gets Better* event and the others were referred via snowball sampling from the original three participants. Participation required active consent of one parent or legal guardian and the LGB adolescent to participate. An attempt was made to recruit adolescents of both genders to help ensure a more balanced view of the types of supports that are available. I had initially planned on interviewing parents as a form of
triangulation for the study, but after meeting youth, they were hesitant about me interviewing their parents, so I did not. After initial phone contacts, students and parents were asked to complete consent forms before being provided a demographic questionnaire. Parents and students were given a description of the study that included purposes and necessary consent forms.

Once both consent forms were returned, I contacted the adolescents using their preferred contact method, which was phone or e-mail to schedule an interview at a location convenient to them if possible. Most interviews were conducted in person at a study room at a local library and two were conducted at a local school as the participants did not have transportation. Participants were given 15.00 in cash as an incentive for participating.

**Pilot Study**

Before beginning the interviews for this study, a pilot study was conducted and the data collected as part of the pilot study, coupled with an extensive review of the literature, was used to inform the interview questions (Silverman, 2010). From the literature review and pilot interviews, a list of questions was developed and used as a semi-structured interview guide, as recommended by Patton, 2002. I chose to use a semi-structured interview format, based on a review of the literature and my own experiences interviewing adolescents whereby they have needed some direction. In addition to predetermined questions, I found it necessary to encourage LGB adolescents to say more about particular topics discussed or to introduce new topics should they not come up during the interview. As Morrow (2005) notes, this type of flexibility in the interviews allows researchers to be more sensitive to changing patterns in the data.
Those students selected for the pilot interviews were students with whom I currently work who are aged 18 or older. Before participating in the pilot interviews, student consent was required. Only student consent was required for the pilot interviews as those participants were either 18 or older. These students were familiar with the current adolescent vernacular and therefore also helped prepare me, before continuing the interviews for the remainder of the study. It was theorized that these students would be open to providing honest feedback based on previously established relationships.

Before being interviewed, participants were briefed regarding the research protocol, informed of their rights as research participants and warned of the risks associated with participation in the study. Steps that have been taken to ensure confidentiality were discussed and participants were given the opportunity to use a pseudonym if they so chose. Limits to confidentiality were discussed along with their rights to discontinue their participation in the study at any time. In addition, safeguards such as referrals to counseling services and national hotline numbers were provided to all participants.

Pilot interviews informed the remainder of the study in several ways. First, the manner of questioning was more specific as those participants interviewed for the pilot study needed prompting regarding several of the questions. Second, because participants were hesitant about me talking with their parents regarding their sexual orientation, I have decided to interview only the students. Finally, the pilot interviews helped me to expand the scope of some of the questions to include support from any adults, not just parents, teachers, and counselors.
Data Collection

I audio-recorded all interviews. As Patton (1990) notes, the validity of data was not be based on the volume of data or number of interviews, but rather on the richness of the data. The exact number of interviews was dependent upon the data gathered. As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I gathered data until the point of redundancy, meaning no new information was coming from additional interviews. In the case of the current study, seven interviews were completed. Interviews were approximately forty-five minutes in length based on my previous experience interviewing adolescents and as suggested by Cresswell (2007) who believes the long interview format gives adequate time for in-depth questioning that explores the everyday lives of participants. Eliciting in-depth or thick descriptions from GB youth was challenging and I, as the researcher, needed to prompt youth to expand upon their responses.

I transcribed the interviews using Dragon Naturally Speaking speech recognition software. The transcription process ensured that I was immersed in the data, as recommended by Morrow (2005). Transcribing interviews as soon as possible after each interview helped inform, change, and formulate questions for the next interview. Consistent with Moustakas’ (1994) recommendations, I went back to the recorded audio files to check the accuracy of the transcriptions upon completion. At the completion of each interview, I recorded my observations in a reflexive journal so that these observations could serve as another data point for triangulation of the data as recommended by Morrow, 2005. In keeping with ACA ethical research guidelines (2006) audio taped interviews will be stored in a secure location for five years after the interviews are concluded.
In addition to data gathered from interviews and observations with LGB youth, I had hoped to provide an open ended survey to the parents of LGB youth, with questions similar to those asked of the youth. These questionnaires were intended to serve as additional data points that may shed light on some of responses made by youth and also serve as a means of triangulation of the data (Morrow, 2005). I chose not to survey parents based on hesitant responses of the adolescents interviewed.

Data Analysis

The concept of trustworthiness is present throughout the qualitative research process, including data analysis (Morrow, 2005). As with all phenomenological qualitative research, data analysis and interpretation was ongoing. As Cresswell (1998) notes, data analysis is recursive in that it is continuously being both gathered and analyzed and that analysis informs subsequent interviews. As data were examined, it was not done with the broader research questions in mind, but rather organized around themes in the data as they emerged, consistent with the recommendation of Silverman, 2010. I assembled a team of colleagues consisting of school counselors and a professor of English, in addition to my faculty advisors to serve as a sounding board throughout the analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Having a team to discuss themes and interpretations was important to improve the trustworthiness of the findings (Patton, 2002).

Yeh and Inman (2007) refer to the process of data analysis as deconstructing evidence which they describe as, “an examination and reexamination of the data, refining, and modifying the data at multiple levels of complexity (individual, group) in order to locate the main essence or meaning underlying volumes of data” (p. 389). In doing this, I started with reading and rereading interview transcripts to become further
immersed in the data (Morrow, 2005). As transcripts were read for the second and subsequent times, notes regarding potential themes that were emerging, hunches and ideas were written down (Yeh & Inman, 2007). During the data analysis, I also relied on the use of analytic memos as suggested by Strauss & Corbin, 1990. The memos or notes about what I thought might be happening or data gathered from other sources such as comments by parents during recruitment were kept in this format and became another data source used to bolster credibility or trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005).

Coding was done using a process called horizontalization, described by Moustakas, 1994, where each statement in participant transcripts was treated the same. A list of statements regarding LGB youth protective factors or supports were compiled and arranged into clusters or themes (Cresswell, 2007). After the process was completed, themes were organized in clusters with verbatim participant statements that illustrated the theme or category being described (Yeh & Inman, 2007). Data were also displayed in table format. Hunt (2011) states that using specific quotes helps to give participants a “voice” in the research process. As noted earlier, this may be even more important for marginalized groups. According to Yeh and Inman (2007), this graphical display can serve both as a data reduction strategy and to allow the data to be seen as a whole.

Demographic surveys collected prior to interviews were used to inform discussion regarding themes. For example, were those youth from rural areas more likely to list Internet chat rooms as a source of support?

Two member checks (Silverman, 2010) were built into the research design. First, completed interview transcriptions were provided to participants to ensure their words were accurately captured. Changes that may be made to the transcripts were treated as an
additional data source. Second, the list of themes developed was given to each participant to be sure that they accurately reflected the information they were trying to convey. Helping to ensure rigor, care was taken to include the actual words of participants in the write up, helping to balance the interpretations of the researcher and the participants (Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Conclusion

Researchers investigating LGB adolescent concerns are calling for more research examining what is going right with LGB youth (Savin-Williams, 2005; Saewyc, 2011) and I am certainly excited to be part of this type of research. It will be important to keep in mind that meaning is constructed at the individual level, and that individual is not the researcher, but the collective knowledge of research participants and the researcher. And, as Silverman (2010) notes, individuals present themselves differently, depending on the audience and this will also be the case in this study. We are all different, and framing an investigation of protective factors that support LGB youth from Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological perspective and Savin-William’s and Diamond’s (2005) differential developmental trajectories theory of identity development, acknowledges these differences and is consistent with a qualitative investigation. Researchers are hopefully moving further and further from a world that pathologizes LGB youth and future research agendas need to do the same.
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) adolescents who are currently enrolled in high school and to address gaps in the literature surrounding protective factors, such as social support, and how those protective factors may be utilized by LGB youth. Interviews were conducted with seven high school aged students who are currently attending high school in central Pennsylvania and who self-identified as gay or bisexual. Four of the students attended a school classified as small (<500 students), while three were from a large high school (>1600 students). Student ages and grades ranged from 16 to 19 and eleventh and twelfth grades respectively. Six of the seven students were males who self-identified as gay and one student was a female who self-identified as bisexual. Six of the seven students identify themselves as Caucasian and one identified as other.

Two research questions were developed and served as a guide for the interviews. The purpose of the first question, which protective factors are most salient for LGB youth? --was designed to determine if and which social supports were accessed by LGB youth. The second question --how are social supports accessed or utilized by LGB youth?, was designed to determine who LGB youth turn to for social support and how they determined that those individuals would serve as a social support. Interviewees were asked to share their perceptions of social support across various life domains including school, home, work, church, and involvement in athletics.

Consistent with a phenomenological approach, the ideas and experiences of gay and bisexual (GB) adolescents summarized in this chapter were done so in an attempt to capture the meaning of the lived experiences of these individuals. Keeping with the
phenomenological approach to data analysis, the research questions served only as a
guide and no attempts were made to organize responses by research questions, but rather,
responses reported here have been organized by themes as they emerged from the data,
consistent with the recommendations of Cresswell, 2007. In addition to the major themes
presented as they emerged from the data, responses to two specific interview questions
are also presented as the responses to those two questions provided valuable data. Those
two questions included what advice would you offer other LGB adolescents and which
other groups of individuals within the school system are marginalized?

Although a set of interview questions was developed (see appendix A), these
questions served only as a guide for the interview as it was my intention to allow
flexibility during the interviews to discover the individual experiences of the adolescents.
When quotations have been presented, they have been used verbatim from transcripts of
the recorded interviews. No attempts have been made to correct grammar, as it was my
desire to represent the participants as accurately as possible. Actual names of participants
have not been used throughout this study; however, pseudonyms and gender specific
pronouns have been used to humanize the words of the participants and for the ease of the
reader. Pseudonyms and gender specific pronouns were also used for specific teacher
names when referred to by participants and have been placed in brackets when used
inside participant quotations. When necessary, brackets have also been used to provide
context to the reader.

Five major themes emerged as interview transcripts regarding the lived
experiences of high school aged LGB youth were analyzed: (a) fear of judgment, (b)
recognition of social support, (c) GLB specific forms of social support, (d) advice to
others, and (e) other students are marginalized. Themes a, b, and c have been organized as they emerged from the data. Themes d and e arose in response to specific interview questions.

In addition to these major themes, two other minor themes were also of note. These themes included the belief that geographic location (rural, urban, suburban) plays a role in how supportive of LGB others may be and the belief that those who are more educated, in general, are more supportive of LGB students. Discrepancies between what students said in response to a question and what they mentioned during the course of the interview were also noted. For example, when asked about bullying or harassment at school, students reported that they were not the victims of such behaviors, but when asked later if peers ever came to their aide, they reported information like yes, when another student called me a faggot, they stuck up for me. In addition, some data has been categorized by interview questions as a means to organize information that did not fit into a specific theme. Table 1 below provides a summary of the major themes to be presented.
### Table 1

#### Major Themes and Theme Descriptions Regarding Social Support Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Judgment</td>
<td>GB students were fearful that when they disclosed their sexual orientation to parents, teachers, counselors, or peers that they may face rejection. Students were concerned that teachers would no longer be helpful, that their friends would no longer be their friends, and that parents would not accept them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of Social Support</td>
<td>GB youth have various way of determining who may offer support ranging from ascertaining political party affiliation to listening for cues in the classroom. In some instances actions taken on behalf of one LGB student let other LGB students know that the adult was supportive. Students also identified specific characteristics such as education level and geographic location that were also deemed as supportive or unsupportive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLB Specific Forms of Social Support</td>
<td>Students identified social supports that may be specific to LGB youth including involvement in a gay community, online supports, and membership in a school based Gay Straight Alliance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to Others</td>
<td>When asked what advice students had for others, they were able to offer specific advice for teachers, school counselors, parents, peers, and future LGB youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Students are Marginalized</td>
<td>Students identified other groups of students who are treated similarly to LGB youth including overweight students, students perceived as socially awkward, and economically disadvantaged students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Major Themes

Fear of Judgment

There was one theme, fear of judgment, that served as an umbrella or overarching theme throughout the interviews. Students were fearful that they would be judged on the basis of their sexual orientation, not on their personal attributes. Students were fearful of judgment from others before coming out and after disclosing their sexual orientation and were often fearful of the reactions of their peer groups, family members, and school officials. Students mentioned fears ranging from worrying about whether or not they would be liked by friends to whether or not a teacher would help them with homework when needed. Because of this fear, students were careful to whom they disclosed their sexual orientation. Most youth interviewed viewed their sexual orientation as central to who they are, making fear of judgment even more pronounced.

A number of statements from participants below illustrate these points. Jane said, “Pretty much I couldn’t tell anyone, without feeling judged, so I told someone [a close friend] that I knew would be there no matter what.” Developmentally, adolescents often discuss romantic interests with peers before parents and the fear of rejection experienced by GB students in this study may further complicate the decision to discuss romantic interests with peers and parents. When Brian told his parents he reported, “They [his parents] have very much had a lot of negative things to say, a lot of the Bible says this kind of comments, my dad has repeatedly told me not to come out.” Comments made by students illustrate various levels of acceptance among parents ranging from refusing to acknowledge their child’s disclosure to allowing their child to invite romantic interests to
their home for dinner. In addition, not all family members reacted in the same way, Devin reported that, “She [mom] was ok with it and my step-dad was ok with it and she told my gram and my gram, kind of I guess already knew and she didn’t really care and then my dad found out and he wasn’t as supportive, still isn’t really supportive.” None of the students interviewed reported a particularly positive reaction and used words and phrases like okay and accepted it to describe responses from parents. Jason said, “My mom was just, she was okay with it, but my dad had been in Afghanistan and so my mom kind of told him, so that gave him like a year to kind of deal with it on his own.”

Stuart: “And did you talk to him during that time?”

Jason: “Yes, but we still don’t really kind of talk about it [sexual orientation].”

One student, Sam, who reports being close with his grandfather said, “Like my grandfather, we’re, I’m really close with, I like never really brought it up to him, that never just felt, like comfortable I would say.” Some students reported support from some friends, but not others. Marco said,

They will talk about it and they will give me advice sometimes, depending on the friend and the main part is they don’t judge me, like compared to others would do, like some of my other friends, I’m not friends with because of it anymore.

And, although the students interviewed for the current study were out to several individuals in their lives, many other high school students, may choose not to share information regarding their sexual orientation with anyone for fear of being judged by peers, parents, and adults at school. The decision whether or not to come out to parents and peers is tied closely with this fear of judgment.
Regarding coming out. Students interviewed for this study were asked to whom they were “out” and whether or not that varied across domains (home, school, work, etc.). Each of the seven interviewees indicated that they were “out” across all domains. One student, the lone female in the study, was not out to her mother because, “She [mom] has no idea, simply because she’s Catholic and I have a feeling I would be out of her view if she knew.” Her parents are divorced and she and her dad have not shared information regarding her sexuality with her mother. Once students came out, it often took some time for parents or guardians to adjust to the reality of having a gay or bisexual son or daughter. Marco said, regarding his coming out, “But after a while, he [foster dad] eventually said, if you are going to live like this we might as well prepare you for it and he got a lot better about it.”

Most students believed that coming out was necessary for them. Marco describes his feelings this way, “yeah, I had to, it was like really, really, really, really messing me up just hiding it every single day or putting effort into hiding it” and when asked if he thought coming out was a good or bad decision he replied, “good, I never felt better about it, even with people going against it, it felt much better just to be myself.” Sam discusses how his mom found out on MySpace and coming out, “wasn’t as bad, like they could mentally prepare themselves for it.” Initial reactions from parents were not typically positive, suggesting that parents may need time to adjust to the reality of having an LGB son or daughter.

Recognition of Social Support

Students interviewed for the study had various opinions regarding methods of recognizing those who may be able to provide social support ranging from specific
actions that have been taken on their behalf to ascertaining political party affiliation.

Several categories within this theme have been presented here. Methods used by gay and bisexual youth determine who is supportive and ways that social support is provided have some overlap. For example, when a student hears a teacher reprimand another student for using offensive language directed at an LGB student, that behavior could serve both as an indicator of support and a supportive act. Although subtle, this difference, after discussion with colleagues was noticeable. In the example just mentioned, a differentiation was made based on who the comment was directed toward.

Throughout the interviews it was often necessary to prompt students to elaborate on responses and ask students to respond regarding specific life domains (home, school, work) and themes and these responses, when appropriate, have been grouped by domain and the role of the supporter. Colleagues and I agreed that this grouping, within themes, is helpful for readers and adults serving in specific supporting roles. However, methods of support used by teachers may be equally appropriate and effective when used by coaches.

**Social support at school.** Gay and bisexual students have various methods for identifying adults at school who may be able to offer them social support, which are often unique to individual students. One student, who also self-identifies as a cross dresser, had a very different take on support when compared to the others interviewed for this study. He stated,

> Getting people through life, I mean we find support in the simplest things. I find support in my writing because it is my skill, so you can find support in anything, you shouldn’t really have to reach out to get support, just find it.
This comments and others suggests that those working with LGB students must not assume that support works similarly for all LGB students, each student has unique circumstances and may require individualized support. However, most students recognized a need for social support and actively sought out those who may be able to provide such support within the school system.

**Teachers.** Teachers are often the adults within the school system with whom students have the most regular contact and consequently were often those individuals from whom LGB students sought support. Sam said,

Well for [Ms. Smith], she comes from like New York City and she’s like very supportive and she has gay friends, she travels all the time, she travels around the world, she’s like very accepting and she’ll talk to me about anything. She’s very open with me and she’ll be just like Sam, don’t be stupid, she’s just very accepting and she’s a very cultured person, unlike what you would normally find in Central Pennsylvania.

When asked how you know someone is supportive, Jonathan replied, “hyperobservancy [sic], that is basically it.” Jonathan continues, “[Mrs. Smith] is always supportive, always, no matter what, as long as she hears something…..she will turn around and tell you [any student making derogatory remarks]” and regarding another teacher, Jonathan said, “[Mr. Jones] was weird and awkward, but he listened, and he gave good advice a lot.” Sam also said, “I think just because she [one of his teachers] is not narrow minded, she’s a very open-minded person I guess and she comes from a, just like a younger generation, I guess her generation isn’t so close minded about that sort of aspect [referring to sexual orientation].”
Comments made by Jonathan regarding “hyperobservancy” in determining which teachers from whom it is safe to seek support highlight the importance of projects such as LGBT safe zone posters or stickers that some schools and teachers use to identify themselves as an ally of LGBT individuals could prove helpful and eliminate the need for “hyperobservancy” among LGBT students. Student comments also highlight the need for consistency among teachers in addressing derogatory remarks directed at LGBT students.

School counselors. School counselors were generally described as accepting by interviewees. Some students operated under the assumption that all counselors are accepting because they are counselors. If this is the case for LGB students, counselors must be prepared to meet these student expectations. Others got to know their counselors a bit before making any assumptions regarding the level of support they could expect. Jason said, “counselors in the high school are mature, I guess they have to be as a counselor…..they know how to talk to students, I guess they are a counselor for a reason, whether it’s about being gay or not.” Sam, a high school senior, wanted to start a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) and decided to ask his counselor to be the advisor because, “I was like, counselor, in my mind, I think counselors, they have to be accepting of everything, she’s not gonna tell me no…..and I felt like a counselor is a safe resource, I feel like they can’t be biased.”

To determine if his counselor was supportive, one student simply asked his counselor if she would describe herself as liberal or conservative, democratic or republican as part of his decision making process regarding whether or not she was safe to talk to. The counselor responded that she considered herself a conservative and after
learning that his counselor considered herself conservative he decided to discuss his sexual orientation with her anyway and stated that she was,

   OK with it [his sexual orientation] and I do not know to what extent, we didn’t go into detail about it because I didn’t want to make my guidance counselor uncomfortable, but I know she is accepting of other things because she doesn’t mind talking about it and she will give me information on things.

Counselors should be careful about self-disclosing information that could be deemed as unsupportive by LGB youth. In the current example, the student believed that those who considered themselves conservative will not be supportive of LGB students, but disclosed anyway. Other students may have received this disclosure and determined that their counselor may not be someone that would be supportive and choose not to seek their assistance.

   There were however instances when students did not feel comfortable going to their counselors. Devin reports, “When I did have problems, I didn’t really go to the counselor to talk about it. I usually just talk to my friends and I remember, like if I ever talked to a counselor, it was usually about school.” When asked what he thought prevented him from talking to a counselor versus friends, he reported, “When I was younger I didn’t talk to anybody about it, like adults and I didn’t want them not to like me because of something I couldn’t change, I didn’t want them to feel weird around me.”

Again, the fear of rejection manifested itself throughout the interview process. Marco reported that he was also concerned about making his counselor uncomfortable because, “You could say the wrong thing and they treat you differently.” Jonathan found his counselor helpful, but reported, “She has done what she could, but they [school
counselors] have kind of limited amounts of power.” Students have a very keen understanding of the various roles adults play within the school system, including the non-disciplinarian role of the school counselor. These comments underscore the importance of collaborative relationships between counselors, principals, and teachers to meet various needs of LGB students.

**Coaches.** Students had varying opinions regarding high school athletics. Sam, a swimmer, said this regarding how he feels as part of the swim team:

I feel very, like I feel safe there [on the swim team] it is like my busy comfort zone for me in the water, like I’m fine, my teammates they are all like, they kid around with me, they are not like walking around the locker room like oh my God he's gay, they are not like that, they're very open with me, they treat me like an equal, they don't treat me like I'm different or anything you would see with other people, like, and some other teams like football they, like, probably wouldn't like me too much, but I feel very, like very comfortable with them enough-in the safety zone and if one of them [his teammates] made a stupid comment it would hurt more just because I would hope that they wouldn't be like that just because they've been around for so long because some most people I've been swimming with since, like I was eight, so it's just one of those, that's another place that I feel really safe besides school.

When asked if he believed the coach had anything to do with making the swim team a safe place Sam replied, “he’s like, if you have a problem with any of the guys, just let me know and I will take care of it” and “he’s not going to put up with people being stupid and everyone knows we need to have mutual respect for each other.”
example above, familiarity with teammates may have helped the team be more cohesive, but the coach set expectations that provided an environment of support. Coaches have the ability to create environments that are safe for LGB students as this coach has, tactics such as these can work within the classroom to create similar supportive environments.

Another student, Jason, reports being athletic, but did not like playing sports. A third student, Brian, had very different experiences with sports. He played football briefly and was told by one of the coaches, “why don’t you just cheerlead for the football team.” Brian was asked to leave the team after two weeks and was told that he couldn’t be on the team because it was, “creating unrest and disunity in the players and they couldn’t have that this year because they were going for a title or something or the other so they do [did] not want that thorn in their side.” Brian was told by a social studies teacher who was also a coach, “thank you for your enthusiasm, but it is better for you and the team if you stop playing.” Jane noted that she used to play softball and she didn’t really notice any differences in the way people were treated based on sexual orientation. Finally, Matt stated that he is very athletic, but did not want to represent his school because he feels as if the school wouldn’t want him representing them and said, “I wouldn’t represent a place that would resent it through ignorance.” Matt does not have a sense of belonging or feel connected to his school, something that hopefully can be rectified via his school’s GSA. Athletics, for many adolescents, provide a strong connection to school that may not be available to LGG youth.

Social support at home.

Parents. Determining whether or not parents were supportive was not the same as determining if school personnel would be supportive. LGB adolescents do not have
the opportunity to seek parents who are supportive, they instead must seek support within their current family structure, as was the case with the students interviewed for the current study. Students who choose not to disclose to their parents are not represented in the current study, as parental permission was required for participation. Exceptions were noted in the current study when parents were divorced; students told the parent from whom they believed they would receive the most support. Students reported both positive and negative experiences with their parents and their reactions have varied from supportive to hostile.

Brian reported that although he has come out to his parents on three separate occasions, it is something they choose to ignore and it is not discussed in their household and that his father, “He’s kind of ostrich in the ground.” Devin reports that his father is not very accepting and he believes,

I think he [his father] just wants the best and he doesn’t think being gay is the best, so we don’t really talk, so I don’t really know if that is support or not, but we don’t really talk, haven’t talked for a while.

Brian reported a response that he found to be hurtful from his parents and described the response as follows,

My brothers and I got in a fight about something, it was something stupid like whose turn it was to unload the dishwasher and he called me a fag and I snapped……my parents were like just deal with it and I snapped, so I got my car keys and I left and I called my aunt.

Brian stated, regarding his parents comments that he was going to hell,
The first time, that was the first time I actually cried in front of them, it was like you don’t say anything, and a couple of times everyone [he and his parents] would just walk away angrily, then I actually got a little bit more used to it, I know it sounds terrible, but I got used to it.

Reactions of GB youth in this study to the above comments illustrate the resilience of GB adolescents interviewed for this paper. Students reported that they got used to hurtful comments and learn to ignore them. I would argue that these youth have developed internal coping and defense mechanisms to negotiate family relationships.

Sam’s parent’s view is, “they don’t like it, but they’re gonna, they love me, so they support me with whatever I do.” Later, he stated that, “um, I can talk to my mom about like anything and she holds the same views as my step mom, like she loves me, she just really doesn’t support my lifestyle or like my choices.” Sam says that although he is grateful for the support of friends, he would like a lot more family support because,

But they’re [friends] not like, they won’t always be there, so where like family, family will always be there so I think, like a stronger foundation of family support would’ve been like amazing. But I guess it is half my fault because I should have felt comfortable enough to tell them and then because obviously, like they were okay with it, but I wish I would have told them a little bit earlier.

This concept of family support was important to all of the students interviewed. This concept is important for school and social service agencies to address. Often school based interventions do not address family issues, which is an area that student believe needs to be addressed. This may be even more important for those LGB students not represented in the current study, as they may have parents that are not as supportive as
those in the current study given that parents of students in the current study gave their children permission to be involved in the study.

Sam believes his father is supportive because,

I have brought it up to my dad when I had problems about kids making fun of me and he’ll go right to the principal and he’ll bring it up, so they will address it, but I wouldn’t bring up anything about my boyfriend.

He further states, “I wouldn’t feel comfortable [discussing his boyfriend with his father], it would be a, like it’s weird I guess for a dad to have this conversation with his son.”

**Extended Family.** Extended family often plays a supportive role. Having an older sibling or relative who identifies as LGB was described as helpful. Brian reports that he has a lesbian aunt that he can talk to, who understands, but he describes her type of support by stating that, “She teaches people to swim by throwing them in the pool, that is the kind of person she is.” Furthermore, he says she is a fixer and, “she’s been very, if there is a problem and we can fix it, let’s fix it, if you just need to grow a thicker skin, grow a thicker skin.” As attitudes regarding LGB individuals continue to change and more and more individuals, in all walks of life, in various geographic locations continue to come out, perhaps more and more families will have openly LGB family members that can serve as role models for LGB youth.

When speaking of support from his grandmother Devin reports, “like my gram, like the other day she said ‘I don’t even care that you are gay, I just think about how you are doing in school’.” He also reports that she is supportive because, “she listens all the time.” Jonathan states, “Yes, like I would go to my friends with just about the same
amount I would go to anyone. Now my family, I would limit to just about nothing, I do not share things with them.” Students did not report that grandparents were any less supportive than other younger family members and two students reported that their grandparents were the most supportive family members. This finding supports the idea that individuals should not make assumptions based in age or generation regarding the availability of support.

**Peers.** Consistent with adolescent development models, friends were consistently mentioned as a form of social support in every interview. Often a peer was the first person that GB youth entrusted with information about their sexuality. Devin said, “like, I’ve been out since I was 15, so your friends either accept it and move on with you or they don’t and they leave and that’s fine, that’s them and they have their beliefs and I have mine.” Jonathan first came out to a friend over the summer between 7th and 8th grade and some were and some were not supportive of him. Although Devin reported that it was “fine” if friends did not accept him, his demeanor during the interview led me to believe that this was not entirely true. Friends played various roles for each student, but there was a great deal of consistency in the responses of individual interviewees; support from peers is important.

One student, Brian, reported that he has a friend who disagrees with him being gay, but he calls her supportive because she can disagree with him, but they still find common ground to form a friendship. Marco, when he thinks of social support, thinks of “friends who are gay, who are in the situation, liberal people normally, politically it is liberal democratic type people, I don’t get as much support from my conservative friends or family members.” Marco, regarding gay friends, “gay friends understand a lot more,
so they are more willing to talk about it.” To Sam, support means, “They [friends] love me and will talk to you about different things going on with my boyfriend and that sort of thing, like the gay aspect of my life they are fine with.” Friends were most often the first to whom interviewees disclosed their sexual orientation.

Students mentioned that they felt most comfortable talking with LGB peers or adults regarding issues related to their sexuality as they understand the issues they are experiencing. Finding ways to connect LGB youth, especially in rural areas, may prove to be a useful method of providing social support. In addition, positive LGB role models could also prove useful.

Providing social support. Social support has been provided to gay and bisexual adolescents in this study in a number of ways ranging from someone taking action on their behalf to verbal assurances from peers and adults. Sometimes adolescents had to advocate for themselves to get social support and sometimes social support was provided without asking. Students consistently reported that that only wrong action taken on their behalf was inaction. GB students interviewed did not want a specific action to be taken for each incidence of harassment, but instead, were appreciative of any action was taken on their behalf. Counselors and other educators should not be afraid of offending a student by an action they take, but rather by inaction.

Taking action. Students reported feeling supported when others took action on their behalf. Whether or not the action resulted in any significant changes, students were grateful that action had taken place. For example, Devin was being taunted on the way home from school and when he got home, he told his mom. Devin reports,
My mom actually got in her car and she was like, were going to the kids and, [in mom’s voice] we’re gonna teach them a lesson, and we went back and we never found them, but I don’t know, she kind of held her ground I guess, for her son.

Marco reported that it was helpful if friends stand up for you when you get teased because,

It is more effective if someone else does it because it seems like a straight person has more respect for a straight person than a gay person, if that makes sense, I don’t know, it just seems like it works that way.

Marco’s comment stresses the important role that allies can play in the lives of LGB youth. School based programming or intervention efforts that only target LGB youth may not be as effective if heterosexual allies are not involved.

Jonathan stated,

Mrs. Smith talked to Daniel about it [name calling] and she doesn’t even have the kids in our class, but actually talked to them about it, but went to find them and talked to them about it, so I guess that’s another thing [referring to ways teachers have been supportive].

Each student commented in one way or the other regarding responses from teachers or administrators to incidences of harassment at school. The following are examples of responses of school officials:

Devin: “a girl at school called me a faggot, um, over and over again and teachers took care of it, and she doesn’t do it anymore.”

Stuart: “And they took care of it how?”
Devin: “They suspended her for harassment I think, I don’t’ really know what they suspended her for, they suspended her and they talked to me about it and I”

Stuart: “So the teacher reported it to a principal? “

Devin: “Yeah”

Stuart: “And they handled it that day or later?”

Devin: Later, they told her to stop and she didn’t stop, so they told her to stop again and she didn’t stop and then they called the corrective officers, and they came in and took her in the hall and she came back after they were done talking and called me a faggot again. Oh, and then I got upset and I walked home and I told my partner and he called the school and told them what happened, then they took care of it the next day.

Devin’s experience highlights the need for comprehensive school policies for addressing issues of harassment of LGB students. In this instance, it was only after the offending student continued to harass the gay student that any consequences were assigned. In this particular school, students who made offensive comments based on race were immediately suspended, leading LGB students to believe that harassment based on sexual orientation is not taken as seriously.

Sam reported, that there was on incident where he was being harassed and threatened at school and online that he did not feel was handled appropriately by school officials. Eventually school officials called police regarding the harassment and the police told him that neither they nor the school could do anything about it. He further said, “I felt like it should have been like a bigger deal, I felt like he was threatening me and like nothing was happening there.” School administrators offered to switch the other
student out of his lunch and any classes they had together, but he believed as if the threats were not taken seriously. He reported that the police were hesitant to get involved citing jurisdiction issues. In this case, the student went to a trusted teacher and told her about what was happening and she helped him research laws related to cyber bulling, which the student then took to the principal.

Stuart: So you felt like you sort of had to push it to get that far?

Sam: Yeah and it wouldn't have been an issue or wouldn't have gone as far as it did if he had not or if I had not gone to my teacher and listen, like, I know you know she doesn't know so where is the information to show him

In this case, Sam was not feeling supported by school administrators and his concerns may have been ignored or the harassment could have escalated if he did have the support of Mrs. Smith, both an advocate and someone in whom he could confide.

**Verbal support.** Students commented that they appreciated verbal support, the more explicit the better. Jason reports, “My mom tells me every night that she loves me no matter what, she will always be there for me.” Jason continued, speaking of his grandmother, “I sometimes reach out to my Gram because my Gram knows how to talk to me and give me good advice.” Jane described, with a smile on her face, that one of her teachers is very explicit in her support, when I asked how so, she replied, “She has told me that everyone has their own preference and she can’t judge me upon that and that she will be there for me no matter what.” Another teacher jokes around with her and her girlfriend in the hallway and asks how they are doing when together, which she views as a sign of support. Students seem to appreciate more explicit and direct forms of verbal support, alleviating any doubts students might have that a teacher is supportive.
Reprimanding others. Sam, discussed knowing his teacher is supportive because, when someone, “comments or that type of thing [derogatory remarks regarding sexual orientation], like she would be like stop, she obviously doesn’t tolerate people making fun, especially about being gay, she does not tolerate that.” Jonathan talks about a teacher who always addresses derogatory remarks saying, “[Ms. Smith] is always supportive, no matter what, as long as she hears something, always.” When I asked how she responded to these students Jonathan said, “She is kind and respectful about it, more respectful than me, which is saying a lot because I am usually respectful.” Consistency is key in proving this type of support. Teacher and other adults must strive to address derogatory comments each time they occur. By addressing these comments, students may feel a greater connection to their teachers and school as a whole.

Listening. Devin, regarding support from school counselors, “they help by always being there for you and accept you for who they are and giving you advice on how to react in some situations.” Brian reported how supportive his school nurse has been by saying,

I went and I was like I need an aspirin and she was like, what’s wrong and I’m not normally a person to sit down and share and I was like, do you have a minute and I sat down in her chair and I started telling my story and she was like, I don’t have time now, come back after school and I sat in her office until 4:45 that afternoon telling my story, and we have been friends ever since.

Jonathan, regarding a school paraprofessional, “he listens, he doesn’t’ make false claims” and “if he says he’s going to do something, he will do it. If he forgets, he’ll let you know, but then he will do it.”
Devin said,

They’re [friends] always there for me um, I talk to them, I can tell them anything and they’re not, they don’t get angry and they help me through situations by giving me, like the best advice, not and I don’t really, I don’t really think it dawns on them, like I don’t think that they like, um, they don’t care that I am gay, they don’t care that, I mean they care how I feel and stuff, but they are not, I don’t really know the word, they’re not rude, I don’t know.

The previous comments illustrate the need for training for all adults within a school system. In this case the school nurse and a paraprofessional served as support for this student. Just as school support staff can serve as support for LGB youth, they may also inadvertently hurt LGB youth. For example, while in one of the schools attended by students interviewed for this study I overhead one cafeteria worker say to another to, “stop being such a faggot”. This comment, overhead by a vulnerable student, could be very damaging. Again, there is a need for training related to LGB adolescents for all school personnel ranging from school counselors and teachers to bus drivers and school administrators.

Unsupportive Behaviors

Teachers. Just as students were able to determine which teachers would be the most supportive, they were also able to pick up on cues both subtle and not so subtle that teachers were not someone from whom they could seek support. Jane stated, “She [a female teacher] seems a little off about it, but then again not everyone is going to accept, so that, I have to deal with that.” When asked how she knew the teacher was not supportive, Jane replied, “Just the looks she gives me, there are those teachers that you
can tell right off the bat.” Another student, Marco, discussed how a relationship with a teacher changed after his disclosure, “now they don’t talk to me as much and they will avoid conversations. They [his teachers] don’t do the same long conversations they used to do and, uh, when that does come up [sexuality], they normally busy themselves with something else.” Marco continued that one teacher, “she told me, even before she figured out that I was gay, she was like well, according to my religion, homosexuality is a sin, so I pretty much knew from that point on that that’s not the teacher to talk to.”

Teacher training and school district policy regarding disclosures of this type must be implemented. In this instance, if the student went to the principal about this comment, how the issue may have been addressed would be unclear without appropriate policies in place.

**Harassment and physical assault at school.** Although each of the seven students interviewed indicated that school is the most supportive place in their lives, each mentioned that they had been harassed on one level or another. Three of the seven mentioned some form of physical violence and they and the others all reported some form of verbal abuse. Jonathan describes an incident on the bus,

He decided [another student on the bus] to shoot a rubber band directly into my left eye and I went blind for three days, my Gram made a big deal about it and called up to the school because it was like a health hazard, um, and they went to [name of a police officer] to check if was a weapon, which obviously it was, but they never even got back to her or anything, they just kind of pushed it under the carpet.
Another student, Marco, describes getting randomly attacked while out for a walk like this, “yeah, I was walking through the city and yeah, it was random from behind and I just got attacked and they started saying stuff and names, you know, the usual and they eventually walked away.”

Various coping strategies were also described by students. Devin, “Yeah, my nervous system just says get out when something goes bad.” Jonathan, “When I’m walking in the hall, I will blast music to drown stuff out, then in class, it kind of comes in handy.”

Stuart: “You literally have an IPod or whatever that you listen to?”

Jonathan:

Yeah, I use my phone though, I literally blast music because if I hear it [derogatory remarks], it will stick and I’m pretty good at picking up whose voice it is and I would probably turn around and say something, that I would rather not.

Marco states that in his school, “someone can walk down the hall and call someone a faggot in a heartbeat and they get away that.” He also said, “you can tell a teacher and the teacher will be like he is allowed to, some teachers not all teachers, express his opinion and in our state there is not law that protect that and stuff like that.” He continued saying, “I know Pennsylvania is not exactly on the top of the list for gay rights, but I know people are not allowed to verbally abuse each other.” The need for support extends beyond the classroom. School personnel need to be in the hallways between classes and address derogatory comments whenever they are heard. Again, training for staff that is backed up by appropriate school policies is needed to protect LGB students.
**Treated differently.** Gay and bisexual youth are aware that they are treated differently by adults in school. Jonathan said, “I have to seek it out [social support] and even then, it doesn’t go through the same channels as everyone else.” Several students describe what they believe to be subtle bias. Devin reported,

> If I asked for something, like if I asked for a pencil because I forgot to bring it or I don’t know, sarcasm, I felt like, I don’t know, I felt like they were harder on me, like if I tried to do extra, I felt like it might be out of the question.

Jonathan describes what he describes as bias in the classroom as, “yeah, in math class, she doesn’t even come over to our table and even help us [referring to Jonathan and his group of friends].”

**Absence of names/violence as support.** Several students mentioned the absence of name calling or teasing as support and one student commented about how he disagrees with another student on this topic. Brian states that,

> There are people in my school who have the ability to push me into a locker, but they haven’t, no one has ever screamed faggot down the hallway, no one has ever left me a malicious and anonymous note anywhere, it is funny cause I view that as support, [name of another LGB student] and I talk about this because he doesn’t, because, to him that is hate, to me that is support.

Another student, Devin, when discussing what it means to be accepted, he said, “to not get made fun of for differences or sexual orientation because it is just sexual orientation.” When asked for further clarification, if not getting made fun of was support he said, “I think, I think, it is support because they are not, they are not, hmmmmm…I don’t know,
maybe not, I don’t know.” When prompted with, “there are no right or wrong answers” he said,

Yeah, I think if they are not making fun then they are either understanding it or they are trying to understand it, so [pause] yeah, they’re either understanding or they are just trying to, I feel like if they don’t understand it or not.

Devin’s comment illustrates a point that was made by other students, that LGB students are not expecting that peers, teacher or counselors address every issue perfectly, only that the issues get addressed. He summed up his remarks with, “you don’t have to go to gay pride or anything to show support.”, underscoring the notion that providing support need not be complicated. Although developmentally appropriate, for students to view not being harassed or teased as support gives school personnel some insight into the way LGB youth view school.

**Religion.** Interviewees have had negative experiences with religion. Most viewed religion as something that their parents or other have used against them to condemn their sexual orientation. Some students delayed or have not told their parents about their sexual orientation based on their perception that the religious beliefs of their parents would lead to rejection. None of the students interviewed regularly attended church and those reasons can be summed up by the words of Jane, “it just feels like more weird because I know that it’s not allowed, so to walk in there, I would feel out of place.”

Jonathan, who lives with his grandmother puts it this way, “I live with my gram so it is like generation blockage, plus she is hard-core Christian so religious blockage.” Jason states, “um, because I know, I see their [his parents] views, I know obviously it is the view of the church, that’s what they are taught.”
Many of the students were previously involved in the churches attended by their parents, but as they became more aware of their sexuality, have decided not to attend. Another student (Marco) discussed what church leaders told him after he came out and was still attending church. He said,

Yeah, like what did they call it, you need to recant your ways or pray or something to fix it and I was like, it is not something to be fixed and it is me and eventually the church said, well if you are not going to even try to fix yourself then why come? And since then I haven’t gone.

Devin said, “I don’t go to church anymore because, I don’t think, I don’t’ think I’d be accepted at the church I used to go, so I don’t [long pause], I don’t know.” Brian, whose parents are former ministers, “They [his parents] felt that I was, they felt that, and I’m quoting, dangerous because they had given me the tools to confuse the lesser equipped Christians and befuddle their spirituality and so I, we, stopped going to church for a while.”

Religion is viewed as a social support for many, but not the GB students interviewed for the current study. However, students did express a desire to be supported by a religious community. Providing links to churches or pastors known to support LGB individuals could serve as an important form of social support. Counselors need to exercise caution in making referrals to churches and particular pastors, providing brochures with a number of helpful resources may be more appropriate to avoid a possible conflict of interest.

At home. Students report that their parents can also be unsupportive at times. Unsupportive behaviors by parents ranged from disowning the student to refusing to
accept the reality that their child identifies as gay or bisexual. One student, Jonathan, discussing when his parents gave up custody of him to his grandmother said, “They wrote a letter disowning me and signing it at the bottom saying for homosexuality, drug use, [and a host of other behaviors]”. Devin points to incidences where his father refuses to accept that he is gay saying, “oh, she, that girl right there, you could go ask her out.” Counselors, teacher and others working with LGB youth need to be cautious about recommending that students come out to their parents or other family members. Students have become homeless or been met with physical violence after disclosing their LGB status to family members. Students remain the best judges regarding the reaction of their parents and decisions about coming out should not be made without careful consideration.

**GLB Specific ofrms of Social Support**

Students discussed several forms of support that have been categorized as more specific to LGB students. The fist, GSA’s, would ideally be viewed as a social support for all, but based on comments from the students interviewed for the current study, this may not necessarily be the case.

**Gay Straight Alliance’s.** All of the students interviewed attend a school that had an organized GSA. Opinions varied regarding their experiences with GSA’s. Some students believed that the club could do more, some were frustrated that others students viewed the club as a gay club and others were proud to be a part of something like that in their school. Three students, although attending a school with a GSA, were not members, but spoke on what the presence of the club means to them. The following comments from each of the participants illustrate the various opinions: Brian said,
I’m operating from a different point of view then [name of another student], I’m not complaining about him, he has always been I’m going to bear my flag and die on the highest hill I can find, whereas I was, I’m gonna hunker down and survive and eventually I’m going to leave.”

Brian was very concerned that by joining this club, peers would view him and others as stereotypes. He was worried that if the club did not serve a purpose and plan events, that it would “do more harm than good.” Devin viewed his school as more supportive because they have a GSA. He said,

They have gay pride like on bulletin stuff and I think it helps the school understand more about gays and GBT or whatever it’s called or whatever, I don’t really know what it is, it helps them [the student body] understand that were just people, were all people.”

This student is involved in a number of school activities and although he does not attend GSA meetings, believes it helps make his school a more affirming place for all students who may be different.

Jason remarks, “yeah I do [consider GSA a support] for people that are in it and the people that support it, now I’ve heard people say I’m not joining GSA, I’m not gay, you don’t have to be gay to be in GSA.” Jason continued regarding starting a GSA and hosting a successful advocacy event, “it made me proud to know that we accomplished it and we hopefully opened some people’s eyes, it made me proud.”

**Online support.** Advances in technology have helped shape support for the students interviewed. Nearly every student interviewed mentioned some form of online social media such as Facebook at some point during their interview for various reasons,
most often related to coming out.” Marco reported that, “I put it [his sexual orientation] on Facebook and everyone found out that way and he [foster dad] didn’t really use Facebook, but he did eventually spy on my Facebook page and figure it [his sexual orientation] out. One student noted how the advisor of the school GSA has a Facebook page that she uses to share information with interested students regarding LGB issues.

Brian said,

I thank God for the Internet, um I did a lot of, I didn’t, I heard LGBT keep going around and I had no idea what it stood for again, PFLAG, rainbow flag, I didn’t even, freshman year of high school I did not understand rainbows were gay, I didn’t understand that they were legitimately gay.

Students want a safe and reliable source of information. One student (Marco) mentioned that when he was searching for information on the Internet, “I noticed when I tried to do that [look for support online] I found a lot of sites that were actually in opposition and I would read them, get upset, and then I wouldn’t want to look.” School officials should be proactive and provide brochures or links to appropriate websites on school websites that are available to students and parents who might be seeking information.

**Advice to Others**

GB Adolescents were asked a few questions regarding social support needs and advice they might have for others. Students were asked: What types of support they could have used in the past?, What type of support they could use in the future?, and what advice they might have for other students coming out in high school. Questions regarding advice were interpreted several ways by students. Some gave general advice in
the form of hopes for the world and others gave specific recommendations for teachers and other LGB students.

**Teachers.** Jonathan, after being asked if he could think of anything school personnel could do to be more supportive, “no, not really, besides listening” and then added this advice for teachers, “I mean just not closing their ears would have been better, like listening for what was going on in the classroom alone would have been good.” Jonathan, “the easiest way they could support is to notice what is happening and try and be a little more separate from their social aspect versus their job obligations.” Several students mentioned teachers who shared their views on the subject of sexual orientation in the classroom. Jonathan believes that bullying prevention efforts regarding sexual orientation would be better if, “they tried sooner or early enough or enforced it enough, yes, to be honest I do [believe that more and earlier enforcement would help].” Sam, regarding advice for teachers,

I think if kids come up and say like that’s gay, that’s queer or fag, if they [teachers] will say, like stop, I feel like that’s like using a racial comment with a black person, it feels like that would be taken more seriously. People don’t know, like I think the word queer or faggot, I hate that, I don’t care if you are talking to your friends, but to me that’s offensive and I don’t think teachers realize, like, okay, just cause it’s not like talking about someone else, I think it’s very offensive and they should know about it.

Often those teachers who shared their views regarding sexual orientation were not supportive and cited their religious beliefs or upbringing for their views. Counselor education training programs include lessons about the use of self-disclosure in the
counseling process, including pros and cons. I am not aware that teacher education programs discuss this issue and the ramifications for students. Perhaps information about self-disclosure would be appropriate as part of professional ethics coursework for educators.

**School Counselors.** Students had a number of practical suggestions and concerns regarding their school counselors. When asked what counselors could do to be more supportive the responses included Jane, who said, “I think [pause] be there, not even just with school, home, everything [continuing] I mean put it out there that you are willing to talk about anything I guess I should say.” Jane and Marco really wanted counselors to be more direct. Marco said,

I wish she [his school counselor] would have asked I guess, before when she suspected that I was [gay] I wished she would have just asked instead of waiting for me to tell her because it was kind of hard to tell her because she was conservative and from older, well older school, but I wish she would have asked. I know that would probably offend some people, but I would’ve been okay with it, it would have been kind of nice.

He continued, “I know it is a difficult boundary line for some, I know it is different for different people. Me, I would have preferred to have been asked.” Counselors will need to find ways to be more explicit regarding their willingness to assist LGB students. Counseling offices should create brochures listing any number of issues that counselors are willing to discuss, explicitly listing LGB issues, among others. Posters or other symbols which can be viewed as affirming of LGB students should also be displayed within counseling offices.
Brian made a comparison between his current counselor and one that he had in the past saying,

The biggest thing I have against her [previous counselor] is that she doesn’t listen when talked to, she will let me get twelve words of whatever I’m saying and she will have something to say and . . . Mrs. Smith [his current counselor] will actually let you talk and not just, she will interject and ask questions and make comments, but she will listen to my story, to my complaints, whatever, to its’ completion.

Marco was also concerned about confidentiality between himself and his school counselor,

Confidentiality is a little difficult because I wanted to tell my guidance counselor before I told other people, but I was afraid she was going to tell home or something and I didn’t know if confidentiality here was real or not because I have heard they [school counselors] do call home in some cases, so I didn’t exactly feel safe telling an adult for a long time.

Counselors will need to be direct and up front with students regarding the limits of confidentiality within their particular work setting (community or school) as well as the limits to confidentiality that may be imposed by specific state and federal legislation.

**Future LGB students.** Advice offered to future LGB students was also varied and thoughtful. When offering advice for future LGB youth Jane said, “Pretty much the high school is a big place, it is full of judgment, I can honestly say that everything, you get judged on.” Jason encourages others to “just filter what you say” and Jonathan says,
“Keep your eyes open for anything that you would be able to kind of hold on to, that’s about it.” Sam gives advice for seeking social support to future LGB students by saying, Like you kind of got to test the waters, like what I did freshmen year, I kind of saw, this teacher seems accepting when people say this or that, I like trial and error some teachers and say okay, no, I would not identify or confide in them so, like it takes time and although they might not have someone then, it will get better in high school, you will find you are going to find a teacher that, like, this teacher will understand.

Other Students Are Marginalized

Although the interviewees could identify and describe times when they have been harassed and teased at school, they could also point out others who received similar treatment. Marco states that,

Social status has a lot to do with it at this school anyway, as in not verification, like moneywise, economic status I guess you could say. Depending on how much money you have, really it depends on what you dress in and what you dress in depends on who you can be around normally to start with at least. Ah [long pause as he thinks], there is not very much racism here because there is such an equal mass of students and racism would cause such a big fight that it would be bad and the racism that there is, the people keep it discrete and they are just bitter, um women, so when it comes down to women, I would say close to equally here, some more elitist or conservative kids look down on them [women], but they don’t really get far with that. So, if it comes down to who is treated the worst [sic], it is probably either the poor or the gay, here anyway.
Jason described what he noticed,

Specifically, this one girl, she’s a 10th grader, she’s relatively heavier and she came up to me and [asked him to go to a movie and lunch] and I just felt so bad and I told her that I would go with her and I know people talk about her because she is heavy and like some of my friends and like look at Amanda, she’s so big and I am like guys, stop it, come on, so I know, I know people pick on her or say things and make her feel hurt.

Sam stated,

Well, actually yes, I come from like a very pretty school, if you don’t dress a certain way or you don’t look a certain way and obviously, you are not like cool or accepted for that, when I think of it, that, that kind of mold people from very young and you kind of like.

Stuart: “So that would be more like socioeconomic status you think?”

Sam: “Yeah like I mean like we, everyone judges everyone for how they look, like oh you’re not rich or poor”

Devin reports,

The people that aren’t social or understood by people, like smarter people that focus on book work more than like socializing, I feel like they don’t get accepted as much because social people don’t understand that and people probably pick on them or because I know because they want them to be social they don’t understand that that's who they are. People just don't understand that everyone's different I guess that’s why people make fun of other people cause were different.
Devin, regarding other people that aren’t accepted, “probably obese people or people that are larger, people make fun of them because of how big or small they are [pause] being healthy is great, but they’re not gonna be any healthier if you make fun of them.”

Knowing that LGB youth are not the only students who experience bullying in high school based on differences, real or perceived, school officials should appropriately finds ways to address bullying issues that focus on respect for all. Comments presented below regarding GSA’s also lend support for more inclusionary practices.

**Minor Themes**

Two minor themes emerged as a result of the question, what makes some people more accepting than others? Minor themes are those themes that were not mentioned by a majority of the students interviewed, but may have been mentioned by only two or three students. Students had opinions about what makes other accepting of LGB individuals ranging from the size of a school to the area of the country to the generation in which someone was raised. Throughout the interviews students believed that those from particular areas of the country, those in more urban areas and those who were more educated were more accepting of LGB individuals.

**Geographic location.** Generally, students believed that people from more urban areas were more accepting and hypothesized why this was the case. Devin believed that, “I don’t think they [people in rural areas] have the information about it [sexual orientation], I think they understand, I think if they understood, they wouldn’t be……” and when he discussed comparing teachers from a small school versus a large school he said,
“Maybe because there are a lot of people who were raised in the country [at the small school], I don’t know, country people seem to get more weirded [sic] out by it, but it may be because they don’t have a lot of understanding, they know who, what it is like, like they maybe don’t understand it so it’s probably harder for them to accept something they don’t understand.

Brian said, “I just feel like big cities, they are, not necessarily here, but my aunt was in high school in [big city name] and before she came out she went to the gay youth center.”

Marco also believes big cities are more accepting because, “they [those who live in big cities] have to interact with so much more people and they have seen it [LGB individuals] so many times and they understand that these people are just people.” Jonathan, “California is pretty open, but I think that has a lot more to do with the amount of different cultures that are there. So, any place that has like already a mixing pot there, isn’t really going to care or notice differences that much.”

Devin, “I think the more people that are in it [a particular school] it make it more supportive because there’s different types of people and I feel like the smaller schools, they don’t have as much information about certain things because there aren’t that many people there.”

Brian, “They grow up in (small town a) go to college in (slightly larger town) and then move back to (small town), that’s how it was and I feel like that’s how a lot of small towns are run.”

**Level of education.** Students believed both formal and informal education helps make others more accepting. Sam said,

Yeah, I think more, [education] like yeah, honestly, I think they’re [parents of students at his school] more educated on things, not even just like school wise, but
political or social aspects of like some people just have no common sense when it comes to that, like how to be like polite, or they can be like rude and so it is just like different aspects, like. Devin, “if they know more about it than others, I don’t know, I think the people who know more about the topic are more accepting than people that aren’t or don’t’ know about the topic.” Both education and geographic location may give individuals increased opportunity to interaction with LGB individuals, which may be a plausible explanation for perceived differences mentioned by interviewees.

The future.

Students were able to discuss their hopes for future support of themselves and others. Marco would like,

More people to talk to, professionals, yeah, I guess I don’t know why it seems like most adults in my life are not okay with it, I don’t know if it is because they are older or because I don’t know enough adults that closely, yeah, I guess people to talk to would be nice.

Many of the students expressed disappointment in religion and Brian voiced his hope for the future,

One of the things that I really wish I could have changed, there were no pastors, um, that even helped, they didn’t even, okay let’s talk about it, I don’t agree with you but I’m going to try to help you with it, they all, I think, so the biggest thing that I will fight for when I get older, the thing that is going to be my battle is that, church. The church kids are so much more, gay teens in general are at risk and are very susceptible to peoples criticisms and comments, but if you, like church
kids, especially pastors children, and children who are raised in church, I feel like the gay kids start off a mile behind and church kids start off that much more, um and that was my biggest, if anything I could change that would be it.

Opportunities for LGB adolescents to interaction with positive LGB role models are needed. Openly LGB guest speakers as well as LGB adults within the school system should make themselves available to students as they feel comfortable. School district anti-discrimination policies can help create environments where LGB adults may feel more secure in making these connections.

**Atypical Cases**

Although not themes that were present throughout interviews, two of the cases examined for this paper were atypical of the others. The first, was a student who identified as gay that has been in foster care throughout much of his middle and high school years. His interview made it clear that he relies more heavily on social support that is available in school, and, based on his interview, seeks information online and wants to know more about community based resources.

Another student who identifies as gay, who also self-identified as a cross dresser, did not believe that typical avenues for social support are available for him and that he did not have a place to belong. He said, “if you cross dress or anything, you are set aside from the gay community completely.” He believes the majority of other LGB individuals, “they separate themselves from [those who cross dress], I’m not saying all of them, but the majority of them, would say no, I’m over here because you are weird, even for us.” Knowing about the individuals needs and circumstances of students in middle and high school is important to appropriately meeting their individual needs. For
example, considering the intersecting identities of LGB students who are in foster care and may also be considered a racial minority give a more complete picture of the needs of that student.

**Reflections Regarding the Phenomenological Process**

Various methods to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness when using a phenomenological approach including journaling and member checks were employed, as suggested by Cresswell, 2007. In addition to bracketing my assumptions on page 49 of this study, I maintained a journal in which I reflected on my observations and reactions throughout the process. These reflections gave me the opportunity to revisit thoughts with research team members who in turn, helped to serve as a check for bias. As I reflected, often when I noticed strong reactions, they were related to my work as a school counselor and my disappointment in the reactions of fellow educators and parents toward the adolescents in the study. I also noted that from time to time it was difficult to separate my role as a professional school counselor and that of a researcher. When students made comments that they got used to hurtful remarks from parents and peers, I found myself wanting to challenge them and take that conversation deeper and examine those feelings.

A process of triangulation was also used to enhance the validity of the data. Students were asked to review transcripts of their interview for accuracy and to add information that they believed was not evident in their interview. Discussions with colleagues served as an important part of the triangulation process. For example, discussion regarding the concept of a teacher or school administrator reprimanding a student for derogatory remarks directed toward LGB individuals. Was this behavior an
indicator to LGB youth that a particular individual could be a form of support or was it an action taken on behalf of an LGB student? We agreed that this particular action could be both a form of support as well as an indicator of support.

As I began interviews it was also my desire to focus on positive aspects of social support and to frame the overall tenor of the interviews positively. As the interviews progressed, this became very difficult as students could recall difficult times in their lives with great details as these experiences were attached to strong emotion.

**Summary of LGB Students Experiences with Social Support**

No two experiences of the LGB students interviewed for this study were alike, as was expected, but similar themes were discovered. Five major themes emerged as interview transcripts regarding the lived experiences of high school aged LGB youth were analyzed: (a) fear of judgment, (b) recognition of social support, (c) GLB specific forms of social support, (d) advice to others, and (e) other students are marginalized. These findings are consistent with Savin-Williams and Diamond’s (2000) differential developmental trajectory model of LGB adolescent development as well as Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of development which describes adolescents developing in a number of successively larger and interconnected systems that include the biological self, family, friends, school, political systems and public policy.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Major Findings

Regarding social support for gay and bisexual adolescents while enrolled in high school, five major themes and accompanying sub-themes emerged during the data analysis for the current study. Themes included (a) fear of judgment; (b) recognition of social support; (c) GLB specific forms of social support; (d) advice to others; and (e) other students are marginalized. Summaries of these major themes have been provided herein and discussed as they are related to the current literature regarding LGB social support and social support for adolescents in general. In addition, implications for those in various roles such as teachers and school counselors will be discussed along with study strengths and limitations. Finally, implications and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

The age of the students who volunteered for the current study ranged from 16 to 19 at the time of the study and had first disclosed their sexual orientation to others between 6 months and a year preceding the current study. This was similar to the work of Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) who found that youth typically self-identify between the ages of 15 and 17. Seven adolescents in total were interviewed, six of which self-identified as gay males and one female self-identified as bisexual. All students were enrolled in high school.

Fear of Judgment

Across all domains, home, school and among peers LGB adolescents were fearful of judgment. This fear of judgment manifested itself in a number of ways ranging from choosing not to disclose their sexual orientation to specific family members to deciding
not to discuss issues related to sexual orientation with a school counselor for fear that it would change the relationship between the student and the counselor. Although the students interviewed for this study initially overcame such fears, enough to disclose their sexual orientation, there are others who undoubtedly are not comfortable with such a disclosure based on these fears, which could have potentially harmful effects on the long term development of LGB youth. As Cooley (1998) noted, physical and verbal harassment does not have to be experienced first-hand to terrify LGB students. LGB students need only to see what is happening to others to see what they might experience if it were discovered that they were gay. However, consistent with the findings of Grafsky et al., (2011) and Savin-Williams and Dube (1998), students in the current study reported that disclosing their sexual orientation was overall a positive experience.

The coming out process, in the context of this study, was an important first step for gay and bisexual adolescents seeking social support. As previously noted, Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) found that youth typically become aware of their sexual orientation between the ages of 8 and 11. If it is accepted that youth are self-aware long before they publically self-identify, perhaps it is fear associated with disclosure that prevents them from coming out and my consequently prevent LGB students from seeking social support.

**Recognition of Social Support**

Given that Hillier, Turner, and Mitchell (2005) found that LGB youth have various ways of protecting themselves both physically and emotionally, it is reasonable to expect that the students interviewed for this survey were judicious about from whom they seek social support. In the general adolescent population, Blum et al. (2002) found that
good family relationships and supportive friends served as protective factors. The
relationships described by students in this study imply that these supportive relationships
work similarly for LGB youth.

**Teachers.** Students were able to identify teachers who were supportive in a
number of ways, some subtle, some not so subtle. Responses ranged from ascertaining
political party affiliation, and knowing where a teacher grew up to listening for subtle
cues in the classroom. The work of Rainey and Trusty (2007) lends support to the notion
of ascertaining political party affiliation as they found political views to be a predictor of
attitudes toward lesbians and gays. Although students became good at identifying those
who may be supportive, it may be helpful to follow the suggestion of GLSEN (2007) and
others to institute a safe zone program in schools. LGB youth already have difficulty
identifying social support at home, hopefully, over time, the teacher that is seen as
someone whom students cannot turn to for support will be the exception. Since 1988, the
National Education Association (NEA) has passed resolutions affirming the rights of
LGB students and went so far as to recommend that school districts provide counseling
services to LGB students (Savage & Harley, 2009) as students may not have access to
community resources and to address the higher incidence of a number of mental health
issues among LGB adolescents.

**School counselors.** Throughout the interviews, school counselors were viewed as
someone from whom LGB students could seek support. Often, counselors were deemed
supportive by virtue of their title. Students believed that as a school counselor, being
accepting of all students is one of the job responsibilities. Although that sentiment has
been expressed by these students, it is not necessarily the case that all counselors are
accepting or supportive. In Fontaine’s 1998 study, it is important to note that the four counselors with the most negative attitudes toward LGB youth reported never having worked with LGB youth, suggesting that LGB youth are able to determine if their school counselor is a supportive resource. Fortunately, students in the current study had more than one school counselor in their respective schools and could seek help from whomever they felt most comfortable.

Research by Ruebensaal (1996) found that school counselors who felt uncomfortable working with LGB students were more likely to refer to outside counseling agencies and to make these referrals it was sometimes it was necessary to breach confidentiality. When outside agencies are involved, parents are also involved, which was a concern raised by a student in the current study regarding the limits of confidentiality with school counselors. This practice further marginalizes students who may not have the financial means to support outside counseling. Satcher and Leggett (2007), based on their examination of homonegativity among school counselors, believe that school counselors with negative attitudes regarding LGB student will be less likely to advocate for an appropriately meet the needs of LGB students.

The American School Counselors Association’s (ASCA) Ethical Standards for School Counselors make it clear that school counselors have an ethical obligation to meet the unique education, personal, social and career needs of all students, including those who identify as LGB. The preamble to ASCA’s (2005) ethical standards states that,

Each person has the right to be respected, be treated with dignity and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates for and affirms all students from diverse populations regardless of ethnic/racial status, age, economic
status, special needs, English as a second language or other language group, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity and appearance. (pg. 142)

Fontaine (1998) surveyed over 350 school counselors in Pennsylvania and found that over one half (51%) of high school counselors reported having worked with students with LGB concerns. It is interesting to note that 21% of elementary school counselors reported working with LGB or questioning students as well. Alderson, Orzeck, and McEwen (2009) found that the more school counselors knew about GLB individuals, the more positive their attitude toward GLB individuals.

Students interviewed for the current study routinely mentioned the importance of supportive adults in their lives. This support has come in variety of ways and from a individuals in various roles ranging from athletic coaches and club advisors to parents, extended family members and peers. In some instances, individual acts of support were described by students, but often support was described in terms of an environment that has been created in a classroom, as part of a club or organization or part of an athletic team.

Coaches. Athletic coaches can play an important role in the lives of LGB youth and in the current study, students had various opinions regarding the role of athletics in their lives. Some viewed their involvement in sports as a form of support and others found sports to be exclusionary. The policies and beliefs of the coaching staff appeared to make the difference. Coaches who welcomed LGB youth explicitly and communicated those expectations to the team, created sportive environments, while other coaches convinced LGB youth that perhaps they should rethink being part of the team.
This finding is consistent with the work of Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) who found that the presence of caring adults serves as a significant protective factor for LGB youth.

**Parents.** Students in the current study often received mixed messages regarding support from their parents. Often parents told students that they loved them, but did not support their lifestyle, choice, or sexual orientation. Counselors reported in Fontaine’s (2008) study that fear of family rejection was one of the primary concerns for LGB youth seeking counseling. Rosario et al. (2004) found that LGB youth are often not raised in homes that support their identity development. Mixed messages regarding love and support from parents for only part of the identity of LGB youth could have devastating effects. As Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found, family connectedness can partially mediate suicidality and Blum et al. (2002) found that good family relationships served as protective factors in the general population while Needham and Austin (2010), using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, found strong links between social support from parents and overall adolescent health. Fears of parental reactions may prevent students from disclosing their sexual orientation to family members which is cause for concern since Floyd and Stein (2002) found that LGB youth who disclosed their sexual orientation at an earlier age were more comfortable with their sexuality.

**Extended family.** Members of extended families often played a supportive role for gay and bisexual adolescents in the current study. Students mentioned supportive roles played by siblings, grandparents as well as aunts and uncles. Having an older extended family member who also identified as LGB also appears to be supportive for adolescents in the current study. In some cases, providing them with a role model in whom they can emulate. This finding is similar to the work of Turbin et al. (2006) who
discuss the protective role that appropriate LGB role models can play in the lives of LGB adolescents.

**Peers.** Every student interviewed reported having a least one friend that they can turn to for social support. Students were remarkably consistent in their remarks regarding wanting and appreciating social support from their peers. This is consistent with adolescent development theories such as Erickson’s (1950) stage model and Marcia’s (1966) theory of identity achievement. Interviewees did not report specifically seeking out friends in whom they knew they could trust, but rather, based on friendships that were currently established, made decisions about disclosing their sexual orientation, consistent with the work of Eccles et al. (2011) who found that adolescence is a time when LGB youth seek deeper friendships that are more emotional in nature. These disclosures were sometimes met with acceptance and at other times rejection. Research by Eccles et al. (2004) has shown that adolescents in general value their relationships with peers. Eccles, et al. (2011) found that LGB adolescents describe their development as similar to their non-gay peers in nearly every area, except peer interactions. As of yet, it is unknown why this is the case, but the current findings indicate that a fear of being judged by peers and feeling uncomfortable discussing the topic with peers may contribute to this difference.

**Providing Social Support**

Social support, no matter how provided, serves to strengthen bonds between LGB adolescents and adults. Adolescents in the current study described multiple ways in which support was provided. Support ranged from verbal support to reprimanding others for derogatory comments regarding LGB individuals. GLSEN (2007) found that when
students could identify supportive school personnel, they felt safer and more supported. Bolch and Murdock (2005) found that supportive teachers contributed to a sense of belonging among LGB adolescents and Russell et al. (2001) found that those LGB adolescents who had a stronger sense of belonging at school had better academic outcomes.

**Taking action.** Students felt supported when others took action on their behalf. This feeling of support regarding action taken, crossed all domains. Examples of action steps taken by others included teachers reprimanding students for derogatory comments (whether or not they were directed at anyone specific), principals suspending students for harassment, parents going to school on behalf of their child after an incident of harassment, or a mom getting in the car to look for students who harassed her son on the way home from school. Students feel supported when action is taken on their behalf, whether or not the action led to a specific result. One teacher mentioned in this study provided information regarding upcoming activities that may be of interest to LGB youth via her Facebook page, which students viewed as a method of support.

Students in this study, for the most part, believed action would be taken when they sought help from school personnel, although this belief was not universal in all situations and sometimes students believed they had to advocate for themselves to ensure something would be done to address their concerns. This finding is contrary to findings by GLSEN who found in 2007 that 60.8% of students who had been harassed or assaulted at school did not report the harassment to school personnel because they believed nothing would be done about it and 31.1% reported that when they did report to school personnel, nothing was done. There may be a number of factors contributing to this discrepancy.
including the current sample which includes students who attend a school with an active GSA, students who were courageous enough to be out in high school and students who have social support across at least two life domains.

**Verbal support.** Students reported feeling valued when they were given explicit verbal support from friends, teachers, counselors, parents and family members. Based on interview transcripts, it appears that the more explicit and direct the support is, the more powerful the message. For example, when teachers directly addressed a student regarding their sexuality, students responded that it made them feel valued. GLSEN’s (2007) survey of over 6,000 LGBT youth validates the importance of this support with over 75% of students reporting that they have at least one teacher that they can talk to and from whom they feel respected.

**Reprimanding others.** Although not explicitly directed at individual LGB students, students repeatedly reported perceived support from teachers who did not allow students to make comments like, “that’s so gay” to go unchecked in the classroom. Friends were also a source of support when the corrected other students who were using offensive language. GLSEN (2007) points out that there has been little research regarding the overall effectiveness of reprimanding others.

**Listening.** Again and again the importance of having someone to talk to who would listen was a source of support for LGB students. Students often reported that they had friends who would just listen, grandparents who listened, teachers who listened, counselors who listened, and in one case a school nurse who simply listened. This finding is consistent with a survey by GLSEN (2007) which found that LGB talk with school personnel. In surveying over 6,000 LGBT students, GLSEN found that 49% of students
have talked with a teacher, 55.2% a school counselor, 21.7% a coach and 35.5% a school nurse.

**Advocacy.** Overall, students did not seem to be aware of much advocacy that was taking place on their behalf, but a few examples of advocacy were present in the data. For example, a teacher who helped a student find resources online to prove that verbal harassment was not protected under free speech rights and a counselor who helped students negotiate school board policies to get a GSA started at their high school.

**Unsupportive Characteristics**

**Harassment and Assault.** Although it was my intention to focus on positive aspects of LGB adolescent identity development and social support, it was also my desire to accurately capture the experiences the gay and bisexual adolescents who were interviewed. Coker, Austin and Schuster (2010) found that LGB youth were more likely the targets of violence in every setting including school, home and on athletic teams. Although not a comparative study, students interviewed for this study reported similarly. Each student interviewed has been the victim of some form of harassment at home and at school, and some had those experiences on athletic teams.

**Religious Beliefs.** Consistent with the research of Schuck and Liddle (2001), the current study found that religion complicated the coming out process for LGB youth at best, and at worst, was a source of pain, similar to the findings of Hillier et al. (2004). Parents in the current study routinely and repeatedly let their children know that their sexual orientation was a sin. In addition, members of clergy were also deemed to be unsupportive by interviewees. Similar findings by Rostosky et al. (2007) who found that
religiosity was a protective factor only for heterosexual adolescents and that LGB adolescents report lower levels of religiosity support the current findings.

**GLB Specific Forms of Social Support**

**Gay straight alliances.** Each of the seven interviewees attended a school with an active GSA and report this affiliation as a positive experience, whether or not they were currently members or actively attending meetings and events. Szalacha (2003) found that in schools that have GSA’s students were more than twice as likely to hear faculty and staff make remarks in support of LGB students. Goodenow et al. (2006) found that schools that had GSA’s were more likely to have anti-homophobia training for staff as well as strong anti-homophobia policies. In the case of the Central Pennsylvania schools represented in this study, neither had such trainings or policies.

**Online resources.** Online social media is a growing source of support for LGB youth and to some, a growing source of pain and harassment. Facebook was mentioned as way for students to come out to others in a passive way. Adolescents also described the Internet as a means to connect with other LGB individuals, learn about LGB related community events, and to learn about gay culture. In 2000, a study by Harper et al. also confirmed that LGB youth are using the Internet to explore their sexual orientation, often anonymously.

**Advice to Others**

Students were able to articulate advice for adults in their lives as well as future LGB youth who may be coming out in high school. Students would like teachers to listen for harassment in the classroom as they believe it often goes unnoticed. Students
also mentioned the need for teachers to separate personal beliefs regarding sexual orientation from job responsibilities.

**School Counselors.** Several practical suggestions were made by students for school counselors. First, students would like school counselors to be more direct in their conversations regarding sexuality, making it clear that sexual orientation is a topic that can be discussed in the counseling office. It would also behoove counselors to be more explicit regarding confidentiality. Students had concerns that information regarding their disclosure of sexual orientation would be shared with parents. Also, students would like counselors to serve as information resources regarding sexual orientation suggesting that counselors discuss with them the pros and cons of coming out and gauging parent reactions. In addition, as students often turn to the Internet for help, it was suggested that counselors provide a list of approved, appropriate, and affirming websites to students.

**Parents, Friends and Family Members.** Students offered little advice to friends and family, other than a plea to be loved unconditionally and to be treated the same as others. Students spoke with relatively little emotion regarding hurtful comments that have been made by parents. Students used phrases like, “you get used to it”, when discussing these comments. Bandura (1979) said that adolescent development is an adaptation to environment and it seems as if these students have done just that, adapted to hearing hurtful remarks from parents.

**Future LGB Youth.** Advice regarding social support to future LGB youth was offered by adolescents in the current study. Advice to others included urging future LGB students to reach out to others for support and to find ways to determine who might be supportive. It was interesting to note that none of the adolescents interviewed
encouraged others to keep their sexuality to themselves. Students also believe that other students are harassed, just as LGB students are. Other groups specifically mentioned included students who were overweight, socially awkward, and poor. These assertions made by adolescents in the current study are consistent with the work of Resnick et al. (2011) who found that being perceived as different from peers is associated with negative health outcomes.

**Minor Themes**

**Education.** Students in the current study believed that those who are more educated and those who have more familiarity with LGB individuals were more supportive. This assertion is supported by the work of Rainey and Trusty (2007) who found that, among counselor trainees, positive attitudes regarding lesbian and gay individuals was related to the quality of previous relationships with lesbian and gay individuals. The work of Anderson et al. (2009) also found that increased knowledge regarding LGB topics correlated with positive attitudes toward LGB individuals.

**Geographic Location.** Adolescents in this study and others have noted their belief that geographic location plays a role in making some people more accepting than others. Research by Cohn and Hastings (2010) seems to support this finding as they found growing up in an urban or suburban area to be a LGB specific protective factor. Students in the current study believed that urban areas are more supportive as well as Northeastern parts of the United States and California. One student also noted that the United States is far more accepting than much of Africa, Asia or the Middle East. Current findings are similar to the work of Yarborough (2003) who found that young adults in rural areas felt isolated. Perhaps the relatively densely populated parts of the
United States such as the Northeast, California, and urban areas help to explain this finding. Research by GLSEN (2007) seems to support conjectures made by gay and bisexual adolescents in the current study as they found that schools in the Northeastern United States were 24% more likely to have GSAs than those in the southern portions of the United States and those in urban or suburban areas were 21% more likely than those in rural areas.

**Strengths**

As with any study, there are a number of strengths and limitations. First, the design of this study is a strength in that those interviewed are students who are currently living as open LGB adolescents enrolled in public school. This design allowed participants to be interviewed prospectively, allowing me to get the high school perspective as it is experienced as opposed to respectively, as much of the research to date has been done with this population. In addition, the students identified for the study were not “atypical” in that they were not part of a group for homeless GLB teens or those with addictions, but were considered representative of typical, “out” GLB students.

The phenomenological approach used here, which included flexibility in the interview format, allowed nuanced information to be captured. For example, one student who was in foster care throughout much of his childhood relied much more heavily on school based support and was an active seeker of information via the Internet and wanted more information regarding community based resources. Another student, a self-identified cross dresser, felt as if he really had nowhere to turn for support because even the gay community was not supportive of his cross dressing. Consequently, he often referred to social supports from a more internal perspective.
Limitations

The need to receive parent permission was a limitation of the study. Even students who were out to their parents were often uncomfortable asking for permission to be part of a “gay” study. Those who did receive permission from their parents were not comfortable with them completing a survey which was intended for triangulation, as this was initially part of the design of the current study. When completing studies that are examining the needs of LGB populations, and perhaps even more so with LGB youth, it is not possible to arrive at the needs of a population that cannot necessarily be identified. For this study, it is a certainly a limitation that I was only able to interview adolescents who were out in each of their life domains. As students from one small school discussed, there are a total of three out LGB youth at their school. Given the statistics regarding the prevalence of an LGB sexual orientation in the general population, it is clear that not all students are comfortable being “out” in high school and their voices are not represented in this study. In addition, Rosario et a. (2004) found that African American and Latino youth differ significantly from their majority counterparts in that this population often publically discloses their sexual orientation later in life. This finding, coupled with my own participant recruiting experiences, illustrates the difficulty in recruiting non majority population LGB youth, who may have very different experiences. In addition, the experiences of males and females may be very different and in the current study, only one female was interviewed. This study, qualitative in nature, represents students from a predominately rural area of Central Pennsylvania, which can be viewed as a strength and a weakness as studies of this nature are most often completed in urban areas. At the same
time, Central Pennsylvania is a politically and geographically isolated area, which could impact findings.

**Implications for Support**

The current study has been framed using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of development whereby adolescent development occurs within a number of successively larger and interconnected systems that include the biological self, family, friends, school, political systems and public policy. This model is useful in conceptualizing implications from the current study for supporting LGB adolescents. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model also works well with Diamond and Savin-William’s (2000) more contemporary differential developmental trajectory model of LGB adolescent development. Viewing LGB adolescent development as Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) have done, as similar to heterosexual peers, impacted by variables such as geography, and unique to the individual fits well with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model.

Keeping these models in mind, the suggestions presented here are done using a top down approach starting with the broadest system, the political system in the United States, funneling down to suggestions and interventions at the individual level. And, although presented here under specific headings, the interconnected nature of these systems is acknowledged.

**Political Support.** Differences in the treatment of LGB adolescents should not vary from state to state, school to school or classroom to classroom. LGB adolescents in the current study noted such differences as they moved between school in various regions of the United States and within their individual classrooms. Comprehensive national public policy can help to ensure that this does not happen. Comprehensive national
legislation has the power to make changes in the treatment of marginalized individuals. Legislation similar to the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act of 1990 and its predecessor, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 could yield similar results for LGB students. These two pieces of legislation have drastically changed the way in which individuals with disabilities are educated. Legislation that is currently being proposed in Congress that could serve to support LGB youth includes the Student Non-Discrimination Act and the Safe Schools Improvement Act, both of which received the support of President Obama in the 2012 legislative session. Legislation that recognizes LGB individuals as a protected class similar to race or religion could yield similar results.

**School.** D’Augelli (2006) points out that parents and school personnel need to be more aware because LGB youth are coming out earlier, when they are still living at home and enrolled in school. Those in a position to shape school system policies should be made aware of this change and be lobbied to make school discrimination and disciplinary policies more comprehensive. National and state policies that support such initiatives are crucial and will aide individual school systems as they strive to create an environment that is supportive of LGB youth. Anti-discrimination policy statements can help LGB students feel supported and give rise to opportunities to train school personnel related to school district policies. Established anti-discrimination polices for students and faculty can also serve to support other school based efforts such as the establishment of Gay Straight Alliance’s. LGB adolescents in the current study expressed the desire to have LGB adults with whom they could discuss issues related to their sexual orientation. Anti-
discrimination policies such as this may also help LGB school district employees feel more comfortable to serve as positive role models and mentors for LGB youth.

School counselors, administrators, teachers, and supportive parents should be encouraged to start GSA programs in their schools if one does not already exist. GSA’s are school clubs where both gay and straight adolescents can meet to discuss issues related to stereotypes and stigma. GB adolescents in the current study spoke of the sense of connection they felt to their school and their club advisors as a result of being involved in their school’s GSA and believed their schools to be more supportive because such clubs existed. Many GSA’s also provide educational training regarding related issues to both faculty and students (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006).

Teacher and counselor educator training programs could also serve an important role in addressing the needs of LGB youth. Faculty and higher education accrediting bodies should incorporate training regarding the needs of LGB youth and other marginalized populations into their curricula. Educators should be trained to serve as advocates for the students they serve, including LGB youth. Educators who are trained and understand the needs of LGB youth and advocacy procedures will then be hired in school districts throughout the country. Again there is a need for national, state, and local policies to support such efforts.

**School counselors.** School counselors can not only play the role of a trusted adult for LGB youth, but serve as advocates on behalf of LGB youth. LGB youth in the current study consistently thought of school counselors as individuals from whom support could be automatically expected. Stone (2003) details 18 recommendations for school counselors to help LGB youth. Many of Stone’s suggestions were mentioned by
other authors (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Cooley, 1998; Fontaine & Hammond, 1996; Satcher & Leggett, 2007), but I have chosen to detail Stone’s list because it is the most comprehensive. Consistent across counseling disciplines is the first of Stone’s recommendations, consulting with other counselors to develop strategies to reduce harassment. Stone’s other strategies are as follows:

- develop relationships with allies to strive for systemic reform, a group is more effective than an individual
- send legal briefs to school administrators and school board members to update them on recent legal decisions that may influence them to change school district policies
- work to have sexual orientation expressly written into school anti-discrimination policies
- use local Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) as a local resource, including advertising there meetings and services on school bulletin boards
- use inclusive language throughout school curriculum and be sure to challenge students using hateful speech
- put pink triangles or other symbols on doors of supportive faculty and staff members;
- find ways to discuss sexuality with student in non-threatening ways
- practice unconditional positive regard
- help students to include their parents in discussions about sexuality
- seek out professional development
- develop and implement school wide respect diversity campaigns
- involve parents whenever possible
• work to help be sure LGB related materials are in the school library and integrated into the school curriculum
• provide resources for students in school counseling offices
• Support national, state, and local legislation related to LGB student issues
• work with other professionals to coauthor manuscripts to help other counselors develop expertise

Peers. When there are problems with parents, LGB youth turn to friendships, similar to their heterosexual counterparts (Savin-Williams, 1998). According to Hillier et al. (2004) most LGB youth first disclose their sexual orientation to a peer and report getting support from those peers. Interventions aimed at peer groups cannot be ignored, as they are often first to learn that a friend identifies as LGB. This is both encouraging and upsetting as in Hillier’s study, three-quarters of all LGB students who experienced harassment by peers did so in a school setting. Given this information, schools are an ideal setting for intervention with peers. Students in the current study believe that the presence of billboards with positive messages regarding LGB students and other non-majority students help improve the school climate. School officials can help by incorporating LGB issues into the curriculum when appropriate; school sexual education course work may be an appropriate first step.

Community. Cohn and Hastings (2010) suggest that community professionals such as doctors and counselors should identify themselves as community resources for families seeking information and community support. This may be even more important in rural communities such as those examined here, where supports may be limited. Parents of LGB individuals can be of tremendous support to each other and should be
encouraged to join or start chapters of groups such as Parents & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG) even if they do not feel they personally need support, as they may be able to offer support to others. Increased promotion of groups such as PFLAG could prove particularly beneficial to LGB adolescents and their families in rural areas, as several of the students in the current study were unaware that a local PFLAG chapter existed.

**Family.** Social support and family concerns are consistently listed as both sources of conflict (Stone, 2010) and sources of support (Moak and Agrawal, 2010) and the current study was no exception. Improving these relationships between LGB youth and their parents is important for the health and well-being of LGB youth (Blum et al., 2002), but very little is known about how to improve that relationship. In the current study, one student mentioned that his mom told his father while he was working out of the country, giving him the opportunity to come to terms with the disclosure before a face-to-face meeting and another student described how it was helpful that information was leaked to his parents before he told them, again giving them time to adjust. Although school counselors and other educators working with youth may not want to advocate for leaking information, it may be appropriate to prepare LGB adolescents for any initial reaction they may receive from parents. It will be important for services providers to help youth find sources of social support, even if outside the immediate family, as well as negotiate difficulties within the family (Hershberger and D’augelli, 2000). Students in the current study sought social support from peers, teachers and school counselors when support from home was either not available or insufficient.
Specific Implications for Educators from the Current Study

The current study provides further clarification regarding many of the previously mentioned recommendations as well as implications for additional forms of support at an individual as well as a systemic level.

Counselors as GSA advisors. In addition to the previous list, several implications from the current study can be used to improve services to LGB youth. Several authors have previously noted the supportive role that GSA’s can play in schools (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Goodenow, Szalacha, L., & Westminster, 2006; Griffin, Lee, Waugh & Beyer, 2005; Heck et al., 2011; Szalacha, 2003). Students in the current study identified school counselors as a natural choice to serve as GSA club advisors. School counselors in schools that do not currently have a GSA could benefit from training related to facilitating such a group, as they may be asked to serve in an advisor capacity. Resources related to GSA formation can be found on the GSA Network’s webpage at http://gsanetwork.org.

Online Resources. As mentioned earlier, it will be important for service providers to be mindful of context. For example, one LGB specific protective factor found by Rosario et al. (2004) was involvement in LGB community groups. As students in the current study mentioned, community organizations and resources are not readily available in rural communities. As these groups may not be available in rural areas it will be important for service providers to find ways to make those connections. Educators in the current study found ways to make those connections online, specifically using Facebook to connect students to LGB community and online events. Growing Internet
accessibility is helping to change these accessibility issues for many LGB youth as they can find accepting and supportive communities online.

As a student pointed out in the current study, there is a lot of information available regarding sexual orientation online and not all of it is supportive. Students want advice on topics ranging from how to tell their parents they are gay to avoiding sexually transmitted diseases. Students reported finding information related to “fixing” their sexuality online and reported that they often read such information when they found it, making them feel worse. As students reach out to the Internet to find information and support on their own, it will be important for service providers to be aware of online communities and resources that are healthy, supportive and even monitored for safety concerns. Often LGB youth explore their sexual orientation online before telling their parents, which further complicates issues such as parental monitoring of internet activity and the confidentiality needs of LGB students.

**Involvement in a LGB Community.** Rosario et al. (2004) in their research regarding the risks and benefits for youth regarding involvement in the gay community, point to possible benefits, but indicate that future research is needed. Although students interviewed for the current study did not express a specific desire to be involved in a gay community, they expressed a desire to connect with other LGB individuals, specifically peers or helping professionals who identified as LGB. Counselors, educators and parents alike should investigate healthy and appropriate ways to make such connections. A recent, *It Gets Better Project* event, sponsored by one of the GSA clubs associated with this study, is an example of such activities.
Religion as support. As has been pointed out by several researchers (Blum et al., 2002; Rostoksy et al., 2007) religiosity often serves as a social support for adolescents in general. Students in the current study did not view religion as a social support, but expressed a desire to be supported at their respective churches. Educators, clergymen, counselors and supportive parents should find ways to connect LGB students with supportive religious institutions. In central Pennsylvania, an unofficial group of supportive local pastors and church elders meets monthly to brainstorm ways that they can be more supportive of LGB individuals wishing to be part of their congregations. Supporting pastors who are active in this endeavor and finding ways to indicate to youth which churches are supportive could serve as an important resource for LGB youth. In addition, students repeatedly discussed how they believed their parents’ beliefs were a result of their religious views. Parents may also benefit from attending a church that has a supportive pastor or congregation.

Future Research Considerations

Future research in counseling must examine why some LGB students continue to do well, regardless of the obstacles they face (Russell et al., 2001; Savin-Williams, 2005). This may be best accomplished by research that begins to answer how questions. Researchers and practitioners can also benefit LGB youth by determining which protective factors could be changed through intervention (Savin-Williams, 2001). Discovering links between risk and protective factors will help services providers to maximize potential for individuals (Blum et al., 2002). Researchers must also be cognizant of ethical issues regarding LGB adolescent research in general as all research results have the possibility to be misinterpreted and this can be especially damaging to a
previously marginalized group. For example, there has been misuse of data describing higher rates of mental disorders among LGB individuals. The message should not be that and LGB sexual orientation causes mental illness, but rather living with the stigma and societal persecution associated with this minority status increases the likelihood of mental illness (Meyer, 2003; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Although the primary focus of this study was to examine social supports via specific relationships with others, other forms of support were mentioned by participants. Other types of social support such as internal coping skills (listening to music) and intrapsychic strengths (self-esteem, cognitive abilities) were discussed. These forms of support were consistent with the work of Grotberg (2003) and it will be important that future studies examine these protective factor as well, including how they may interact with social support.

Stigma and discrimination are listed as common causes of the higher prevalence of risk factors in LGB youth. Links between exposure to harassment and risk taking behaviors have been well established (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Borowsky et al, 2001; D’Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2006; Saewyc et al., 2007). Blum et al. (2002) even cautions about the use of the term “at risk” to describe youth as the term most often means “disadvantaged” (Blum et al., 2002).

In the future, researchers should be mindful of a number of concerns related to research with LGB youth. Savin-Williams (2005) points out that the largest group of same-sex attracted youth (referred to as LGB throughout this paper) may not be represented in the current literature. For example, it is quite possible that LGB youth in more urban areas that tend to be more accepting of LGB youth may be overrepresented.
Similarly, LGB youth who were not raised within a religious framework that condemned their sexual orientation as immoral might also be overrepresented.

Saewyc (2011), in a review of LGB youth literature, points out that research of the past two or three decades has been dominated by theories of stigma, rejection and social exclusion. Because research on LGB youth often uses convenience sampling, those youth that have been participants in research studies are those who have been termed early identifiers, in that they disclosed their sexual orientation at an early age and are more likely to be gender atypical (Savin-Williams, 2005). It may be helpful to do broader longitudinal studies with LGB youth as they transition from high school to work or high school to college, consistent with the suggestion of Heck, Flentje and Cochran (2011). As LGB youth are self-identifying at an earlier age (Savin-Williams, 2005) this type of research may be more possible.

Students interviewed for the current study have found social support helpful and have also indicated other marginalized groups who may benefit from research designed to uncover social supports for other groups. Qualitative studies such as this one may be an appropriate starting point for such marginalized groups, consistent with the recommendations of Carter and Morrow (2007) and Yeh and Inman (2007). It would also be helpful to further examine the specific needs of sub groups within the LGB adolescent population, which could include those in foster care and those living with extended family members.
References


doi:10.1177/0002764291034004003


Appendix A: Office of Research Protections Approval for Pilot Study
Date: November 11, 2011

From: Jodi L. Mathieu, Research Compliance Coordinator

To: Stuart L. Ros

Subject: Results of Review of Proposal - Expedited (IRB #37954)

Approval Expiration Date: October 30, 2012
“Examining Risk and Protective Factors Related to Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescent Identity Development”

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved your proposal for use of human participants in your research. By accepting this decision, you agree to obtain prior approval from the IRB for any changes to your study. Unanticipated participant events that are encountered during the conduct of this research must be reported in a timely fashion.

Attached are the dated, IRB-approved informed consent(s) to be used when recruiting participants for this research. Participants must receive a copy of the approved informed consent form to keep for their records.

If signed consent is obtained, the principal investigator is expected to maintain the original signed consent forms along with the IRB research records for this research at least three (3) years after termination of IRB approval. For projects that involve protected health information (PHI) and are regulated by HIPAA, records are to be maintained for six (6) years. The principal investigator must determine and adhere to additional requirements established by the FDA and any outside sponsors.

If this study will extend beyond the above noted approval expiration date, the principal investigator must submit a completed Continuing Progress Report to the Office for Research Protections (ORP) to request renewed approval for this research.

On behalf of the IRB and the University, thank you for your efforts to conduct your research in compliance with the federal regulations that have been established for the protection of human participants.

Please Note: The ORP encourages you to subscribe to the ORP listserv for protocol and research-related information. Send a blank email to L-ORP.Research-L-subscribe-request@lists.psu.edu

JLM6jm
Attachment
cc: JerryG. Trusty
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Who is aware of your sexual orientation?
2. In what settings are you “out” and in what setting are you not?
3. When you think of social support, specifically regarding your sexual orientation, what do you think of?
4. From whom have you received social support?
5. Tell me what that social support was like/what form it took.
6. Where do/have you felt the most support [home, school, work, church, athletic organization, community organization, etc.]?
7. Where do/have you felt the least amount of support?
8. Tell me about specific examples of social support you have received.
9. Can you give me an example of a time when someone made you feel that you were valued?
10. Give me examples of when you haven’t felt supported and what that was like.
11. What type of support do you think could be helpful for you in the future?
12. What type of support do you think you could have used in the past?
13. What do you think makes some **people** more supportive than others?
14. What do you think makes some **places** more supportive than others?
Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire/Screening Tool

1. What is your age? _______

2. Year in high school year  (please circle the appropriate response)
   
   Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior

   IF YOUR AGE IS UNDER 14 AND/OR YOU ARE NOT CURRENTLY IN
   HIGH SCHOOL, PLEASE DO NOT CONTINUE

3. Sexual Identity    lesbian    gay    bisexual    straight (please circle
   the response that best describes you)

   IF YOU CIRCLED STRAIGHT TO QUESTION #3, PLEASE DO NOT CONTINUE

4. Name_____________________________

5. How would you like me to contact you? E-mail--- Phone:

6. Parent Name ______________________________

7. Parent E-mail Parent Phone:

8. When is the best time for me to contact you?

9. Would you prefer to make contact with me?

10. Gender    Male    Female (please circle appropriate response)

11. Please list your home zip code    _ _ _ _ _

12. What are your career plans after high school?

13. What is your current grade point average?

14. How would you describe your race?
Appendix D: Informed Consent for those Over 18

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Examining Social Support Related to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adolescent Identity Development

Principal Investigator: Stuart Roe, 100 Roderick Road, Williamsport, PA 17701
Email: slr24@psu.edu; Phone: 570-447-2360

Advisor: Dr. Jerry Trusty, 311 Cedar Building, University Park, PA 16802
Email: jgt3@psu.edu; Phone: 814-863-7536

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to determine what types of social support have been helpful for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adolescents (LGB) and to learn more about from whom and how social support is received.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire which includes questions about your age, sexual identity, gender, and race. You will then be asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked questions about your perceptions of social support you have received regarding your sexuality identity throughout your adolescent years. The interview will be audio recorded for later study by the researcher. Two to Three weeks after the interview, you will be contacted and asked to read the interview transcript, commenting on the accuracy or adding additional information for clarification if needed.

3. Duration/Time: Completing the demographic questionnaire should take approximately ten minutes. The interview portion of the study will last approximately one hour, after your interview has been transcribed, you may be asked to review the transcript for accuracy and to make additional comments if you so choose.

4. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in and responses from this research will be kept confidential. Information obtained from the interviews will be stored and secured at the locked office of the primary investigator in a locked filing cabinet and/or a password protected file. Your information will be coded using numbers that will be written on your demographic questionnaire and accompanying interview recordings. No identifying information will be used on the recording. After the tapes have been transcribed, the interview tapes will be destroyed no later than May 1, 2012. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Your name will not be used in the study. If there is a problem with the study, the
Office of Research Protections (ORP) or IRB may need to have access to data and/or identifiers. Fictitious names will be used in research publications and presentations. Penn State’s Office of Research Protections (ORP), the Institutional Review Board, and the Office of Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this project.

5. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Stuart Roe at (570) 447-2360 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact Penn State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the research team.

6. **Payment for participation:** You will be compensated with your choice of a $15.00 ITunes or Amazon.com gift certificate for your time.

7. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusing to participate or withdrawing early from the study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would be entitled to otherwise.

8. **Benefits and Risks of Participation:** Potential risks associated with this study include being uncomfortable with the questions or discomfort which could be associated with answering questions that are of a personal nature. You could also benefit by learning more about yourself and how you access and use coping skills.
You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

_____ I give my permission to be AUDIO taped.

_____ I do not give my permission to be AUDIO taped.

_____ I give my permission for portions of this interview to be directly quoted in publications or presentations.

_____ I do NOT give my permission for portions of this interview to be directly quoted in publications or presentations.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

_____________________________________________  _______________________
Participant Signature                     Date

_____________________________________________  _______________________
Person Obtaining Consent                  Date
Appendix E: Informed Consent for those Under 18

Informed Assent/Parental Permission Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Examining Social Support Related to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adolescent Identity Development

Principal Investigator: Stuart Roe, 100 Roderick Road, Williamsport, PA 17701
Email: slr24@psu.edu; Phone: 570-447-2360

Advisor: Dr. Jerry Trusty, 311 Cedar Building, University Park, PA 16802
Email: jgt3@psu.edu; Phone: 814-863-7536

9. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to determine what types of social support have been helpful for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adolescents (LGB) and to learn more about from whom and how social support is received.

10. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire which includes questions about your age, sexual identity, gender, and race. You will then be asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked questions about your perceptions of social support you have received regarding your sexual identity throughout your adolescent years. The interview will be audio recorded for later study by the researcher. Two to Three weeks after the interview, you will be contacted and asked to read the interview transcript, commenting on the accuracy or adding additional information for clarification if needed.

11. Duration/Time: Completing the demographic questionnaire should take approximately ten minutes. The interview portion of the study will last approximately one hour, after your interview has been transcribed, you may be asked to review the transcript for accuracy and to make additional comments if you so choose.

12. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in and responses from this research will be kept confidential. Information obtained from the interviews will be stored and
secured at the locked office of the primary investigator in a locked filing cabinet and/or a password protected file. Your information will be coded using numbers that will be written on your demographic questionnaire and accompanying interview recordings. No identifying information will be used on the recording. After the tapes have been transcribed, the interview tapes will be destroyed no later than May 1, 2012. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Your name will not be used in the study. Fictitious names will be used in research publications and presentations. Penn State’s Office of Research Protections (ORP), the Institutional Review Board, and the Office of Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this project.

13. **Right to Ask Questions**: Please contact Stuart Roe at (570) 447-2360 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact Penn State University's Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the research team.

14. **Payment for participation**: You will be compensated with your choice of a $15.00 iTunes or Amazon.com or Starbucks gift certificate for your time.

15. **Voluntary Participation**: Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusing to participate or withdrawing early from the study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would be entitled to otherwise.

16. **Benefits and Risks of Participation**: Potential risks associated with this study include being uncomfortable with the questions or discomfort which could be associated with answering questions that are of a personal nature. You could also benefit by learning more about yourself and how you access and use coping skills.
You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. If you and your parent agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

_____ I give my permission to be AUDIO taped.
_____ I do NOT give my permission to be AUDIO taped.

_____ I give my permission for portions of this interview to be directly quoted in publications or presentations.
_____ I do NOT give my permission for portions of this interview to be directly quoted in publications or presentations.

___________________________________________  ______________________
Participant Signature                           Date

**Parental consent is required to take part in this research study:**

_____ I give permission for my child, _______________________, to participate in this research.

_____ I give my permission for my child to be AUDIO taped.
_____ I do NOT give my permission for my child to be AUDIO taped.

_____ I give my permission for portions of this interview of my child to be directly quoted in publications or presentations.
_____ I do NOT give my permission for portions of this interview of my child to be directly quoted in publications or presentations.

___________________________________________  ______________________
Parent Signature                               Date

___________________________________________  ______________________
Person Obtaining Consent                       Date
Date: December 15, 2011

From: Jodi L. Mathieu, Research Compliance Coordinator

To: Stuart L. Roe

Subject: Research Proposal - Modification (IRB #37994)
Approval Expiration Date: October 30, 2012
(Note: This date reflects the anniversary date of the actual submission approval date.)

"Examining Risk and Protective Factors Related to Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescent Identity Development"

The revision(s) to the above-referenced study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may proceed with your study. Please continue to notify the IRB of any further changes to your study.

COMMENT: Approval of the modification submitted on December 5, 2011 has been granted for the following: (1) an increase in participant numbers; (2) revisions to the inclusion criteria; (3) the addition of a new consent form [Doc. #1002] and (4) addition of the parental recruitment script.

Attached is/are the revised and dated, IRB-approved informed consent(s) to be used when enrolling participants for this research. Participants must receive a copy of the approved informed consent form to keep for their records.

On behalf of the IRB and the University, thank you for your efforts to conduct research in compliance with the federal regulations that have been established for the protection of human participants.

Please Note: The ORP encourages you to subscribe to the ORP listerv for protocol and research-related information. Send a blank email to: L-ORP-Research-L-subscribe-request@lists.psu.edu

cc: Jerry G. Trusty
Stuart Leon Roe

Vita

EDUCATION
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA Anticipated Graduation 8/2012
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Co-Taught (CN ED 524) Counseling Adolescents, Summer-2010
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PA School Counseling Association Conference Registrar (2006-2010)
Lycoming County Counselors Association Treasurer (2004-2009)
AmeriCorps Certificate of National Service (1998)
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