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Narratives from the Closet:
Stories of LGBTQIAP+ Youth

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Abstract

LGBTQIAP+ youth are living in unprecedented liminal spaces. While positive changes related to the acceptance and recognition of this community have occurred in the United States, youth who are questioning, coming out, and navigating their sexual journeys remain socially, emotionally, and in other ways vulnerable in their environments. Drawing from narratives of youth who live outside of the normative structures of sexuality, we weave a tapestry of stories to highlight the challenges and struggles, as well as the strengths and protective factors, of LGBTQIAP+ youth. We found cohesion in the themes that emerged from the narratives; yet, at the same time, we acknowledge that each queer youth's story has its own cultural specificity based on their lived experience in their particular environment. Finally, we offer suggestions for supporting the health and well-being of all young people in their varied environments, highlighting those that particularly provide space for questioning and coming out youth.

Keywords: LGBTQIAP+ youth, narratives, ecological perspective, resilience, vulnerability

Introduction

Figure 1. Poetic representation of the narratives of LGBTQIAP+ youth

i've known i was different all my life
after years of hiding
i'm ready to come out of the closet
         the closet was a safe space for me
         until a teacher outed me
         telling everyone my secret
my secret kept me invisible
the deepest darkest secret
i could ever imagine
         imagine days and days of bullying,
         harassment, taunting, name-calling,
         shoving, hitting, pushing
pushing back against constant assaults
misunderstood as angry
finding my voice, i speak
         i speak one last message before i jump
         if people are no longer treated the way i was
         i can rest in peace
peace comes in celebrating my strengths
my humor, my kindness, my intelligence
my mad musical talent
         my musical talent is a gift i bring to the world
         i'm much more than just a "homosexual"
         the same god who made me musical made me gay
gay people are also made in god's image
this message i hear every sunday
shouldn't we all be loved and accepted
         loved and accepted by my parents for 15 years
         until i transitioned from male to female
         i'm still the same person; i am me
i am me. i am loved as me. i didn't need much.
i just wanted someone to look me in the eye
and say "you're okay"

This opening poem (Figure 1) was drawn from the narratives of LGBTQIAP+[1] youth represented throughout this manuscript. We chose to represent the data poetically because we believe with Bell (2010) that "the arts provide a way to engage body, heart and mind to open up learning and develop a critical perspective" (p. 17). Poetic representations move the reader beyond the words of the narrative, acknowledging the "mutual importance of *how* something is said along with *what* is said" (Madison, 2012, p. 239). Borrowing specific quotes from the data, we include the poem as a way to invoke a commitment to the representation and wellbeing of LGBTQIAP+ youth.

LGBTQIAP+ youth are living in unprecedented liminal spaces. While positive changes related to the acceptance and recognition of the LGBTQIAP+ community have occurred within the past decade, youth who are questioning, coming out, and navigating their sexual journeys are likely to experience whiplash due to widely disparate messages. For example, as we write this, marriage equality is the law of the land in the United States, while at the same time, there is renewed advocacy for ex-gay therapy programs and reduced funding for AIDS-related research. Additionally, in the Obama Administration, the unofficial Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy of the U.S. military was repealed, but in the Trump Administration, transgender individuals were banned from participating in the military. Media portrayals of LGBTQIAP+ youth are more positive than ever; yet, young LGBTQIAP+ people around the world continue to experience increased violence and bullying.

In these uncertain times, Denzin (2003) calls on researchers to engage with narrative performances to "construct, perform, and critically analyze" stories in ways that are "political, moving people to action, reflection, or both" (p. xi). Too often, research remains compartmentalized within specified domains that are either siloed or are ignored altogether. For example, while data related to school discipline often notes disparities in school suspension rates for students of color, LGBTQIAP+ youth are also suspended at rates higher than their peers; however, these trends are often omitted from research (Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015). Narratives allow us to "access social, political, and ethical dimensions" that are often "controlled out" of our research (Smith & Paul, 2000, p. 11). In this research, we collect and present narratives of LGBTQIAP+ youth that have been published in both traditional print and social media outlets. These narratives privilege the perspectives of youth who are courageously telling their stories.

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[1]LGBTQIAP+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, plus any other way a person chooses to identify. While LGBTQIAP+ youth express great vulnerability, we also hope to highlight their resilience and honor their unwillingness to limit the terms they use to define themselves. We acknowledge that the acronym, LGBTQIAP+, is a wide umbrella and encompasses terms that refer to sexual orientation and gender identity, terms that are often inaccurately conflated. We believe sexual orientation is a continuum, not a binary, and refers to whom one is sexually attracted, while gender identity refers to a person's identification of their gender, which may or may not match the gender assigned based on sex characteristics at birth. Consistent with a critical queer theory approach, we have intentionally chosen to use the extended acronym, LGBTQIAP+ throughout this manuscript.

In order to understand the ways in which power and privilege influence the experiences of LGBTQIAP+ youth in their environments, we draw on a critical approach to queer theory. As we unpack these stories, we intentionally resist the binaries that serve to marginalize and disenfranchise young people (De Lauretis, 1991). This theoretical framework allows us to recognize the complex experiences of LGBTQIAP+ youth who are demanding representation in the process of discovering their various identities. We found cohesion in the themes that emerged from the narratives; yet, at the same time, we acknowledge that each queer youth's story has its own cultural specificity based on their lived experience in their particular environment.

Methodological Framing

Our methodological choices were guided by our commitment to narrative theory, a desire to engage in creative, critical approaches to research, and an ecological perspective on the identities of youth. Educational and social research traditionally assumes that "sexuality is essentialist and biologically constructed, and that it can be considered from some external reference point—which is based on a preferred morality" (Vicars, 2013, p. 249). This framework perpetuates oppressive structures for LGBTQIAP+ youth by limiting the possibilities of experience; in contrast, narrative research resists such reductionism, privileging experiences and the ways in which they are constructed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories hold the potential for "challenging the presumptions of heterosexuality routinely embedded in our language, explicit/hidden curriculum, and pedagogies" (Vicars, 2013, p. 250). By exploring narratives of youth, we approached this project with a commitment to presenting counter-narratives.

Further, we brought a commitment to the creative, believing that "the aesthetic experience of stories told through visual arts, theater, spoken word and poetry, can help us think more creatively, intimately and deeply about racism and other challenging social justice issues" (Bell, 2010, p. 17). Thus, as we gathered narratives, our aim was to weave a tapestry of stories, highlighting the challenges and struggles, as well as the strengths and protective factors of LGBTQIAP+ youth. Adding a critical component to our methodological framing, we come to this work to challenge heteronormative exertions of power and control (Madison, 2012). Within critical approaches to narrative research, "stories operate on both individual and collective levels" helping us "connect individual experiences with systemic analysis" to demonstrate the ways in which power and control show up in our narratives (Bell, 2010, p. 16).

Not only do stories help us to "make the abstract concrete and accessible" (Paul, Christensen & Falk, 2000, p. 17), they serve to enable multiple constructions of the intersectional self, which include, but are not limited to gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, and economic status. The layered identities of LGBTQIAP+ youth of color, for example, may lead to multiple experiences of oppression and marginalization (Craig, Austin, & McInroy, 2014; Snapp, Hoenig et al., 2015) In the face of these oppressions, an ecological awareness also enables us to embrace a narrative of youth that eschews a deficit framework and acknowledges the strengths and contributions they make to our

world (McAdams, 2008; Harper, Brodsky, & Bruce, 2012). Citing Bronfenbrenner (1979), Newman and Fantus (2015) outlined the microsocial, exosystemic, and the macrosocial influences that contribute to the development of both risk and resilience factors for youth. Microsocial interactions among youth or between youth and adults, exosystemic factors such as the community and mass media, and macrosocial indicators such as laws, religion, and social mores all intersect to create both vicious cycles of violence, depression, and bullying as well as resilience, a positive sense of identity, and a resistance to negative stereotypes (Harper, Brodsky, & Bruce, 2012). An ecological framing challenged us to resist a reductionist view of the experiences of LGBTQIAP+ youth, highlighting the complexity of their experiences.

Stories become theories about the meaning of life; the ways in which we tell stories illuminate and discursively construct the self. Although they are drawn from data representing the lived experiences of youth in their varied environments, these texts do not simply represent the narratives of LGBTQIAP+ youth; they "call us to respond, to stand up and say something, and to imagine utopian alternatives" (Gabriel & Lester, 2013, p. 6).

Methods

Data Collection
The lived experiences represented in this article originate from multiple sources, such as YouTube videos, Tumblr feeds, books, or scholarly articles collected over our years of working with LGBTQIAP+ youth in different environments. We began with the research question: How do LGBTQIAP+ youth narrate their own stories? It was important to us that we collect those stories from the places where youth are most likely to tell them; thus, as we began data collection, we searched both print and online sources, privileging their unsolicited stories over structured interviews.

As we searched published memoirs, books of collected stories by LGBTQIAP+ youth, newspaper articles, social media postings, and the It Gets Better Project[2] videos, we compiled the narratives, storing images, videos, and stories for each of the youth represented in our study. Over the course of several years, we collected the narratives of 43 youth within the United States, some from single sources and others from multiple sources. Acknowledging that the stories we gathered represent only a small segment of the experiences of LGBTQIAP+ youth, we encourage readers to continue to attend to the stories of these young people.

Data Analysis
Initial analysis included reading through the entire data set to get a sense of the various narratives. We spent time discussing and understanding the meaning of the stories represented in our data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Drawing on analysis techniques identified by Hatch (2002) and Coffey and Atkinson (1996), we wrote summary statements and identified specific quotes for each youth in the study. The summaries and the quotes were tagged with potential codes, such as silencing,

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[2] See https://itgetsbetter.org/ for videos and information about the It Gets Better Project.

invisibility, family, etc. After all of the narratives were coded, we went through the entire data set again, collapsing and clarifying those codes.

As the analysis continued, we organized the codes into categories, paying attention to quotes that had similar concepts. Those collapsed codes were then identified as themes, each of which acknowledged both the vulnerabilities and the resilience of LGBTQIAP+ youth. Using the language of the initial coding, we developed these six themes: *Stories of Coming Out, Being Outed, and Invisibility; Stories of Bullying and Pushing Back; Stories of Speaking Out and Being Silenced; Stories of Celebration and Mourning; Stories of Acceptance and Judgment;* and *Stories of Restoration and Rejection*. As we collated our findings using the developed themes, we selected specific data sets that supported each theme and identified representative quotes that aligned with those themes.

Positionality
Throughout this project, we drew from our interactions with youth who live outside of the normative structures of sexuality. We brought our different perspectives— one author is an educator and one is a social worker with experiences in restorative justice, special and general education, and law—as well as our unique family and faith experiences, realizing the ways in which our own histories, knowledges, and assumptions influence our work (Ellis, 2009). In addition, as white, queer/lesbian, cisgender women, we recognize our intersecting locations of privilege and oppression that are always being negotiated and reconstructed (Fine, 1994). In our work in school environments, both of us have journeyed with youth who have felt the agony of rejection from family, peers, and faith communities. While we grew up in a different generational space from the youth represented in this article, we have experienced similar struggles of coming out in communities that were less than accepting. We have also witnessed the amazing gifts that LGBTQIAP+ youth bring to this world.

Findings: Learning from the Narratives

Stories of Coming Out, Being Outed, and Invisibility
While positive changes related to the acceptance and recognition of the LGBTQIAP+ community have occurred in the United States, youth who are questioning, coming out, and navigating their sexual journeys remain socially, emotionally, and in other ways vulnerable within their varied environments. For many LGBTQIAP+ young people, finding someone with whom they can positively identify is a challenge. They live in a heteronormative world where they often hear implicit and explicit negative messages about their identity. Justin Lee, organizer of the Gay Christian Network, talks about his experiences of being closeted as a teenager:

> *It was, I thought, the worst secret in the world. It was the deepest, darkest secret I could ever imagine having, one that I could never tell anyone, not even my parents or best friends. It was the secret I would take with me to my grave* (Lee, 2012, p. 19).

Too often LGBTQIAP+ youth are accepted and celebrated for being wonderful, talented young people until a decision to come out or an outing by someone else serves to erase all other aspects of their identity, marginalizing them for this one aspect of who they are. Dismissal of identity not only creates an environment where ostracism is encouraged, increasing the likelihood of bullying, but it serves to disengage young people (Snapp, McGuire, et al., 2015). In an interview study asking queer-identified students what they would have liked their teachers to know, a lesbian-identified student wrote, "All I really wanted was to be looked in the eye and told: 'You're okay'" (Imber, 2005, p. 11).

In her memoirs about identifying as transgender, Katie Hill described the social ostracization that she experienced at camp after being outed:

> *Two days later my brief time as 'just Katie' came to an end. One of the counselors told everyone in her cabin that I was trans, and those people in turn told everyone in the entire camp… Everyone immediately started treating me differently. Kids pointed, stared, laughed, or came up to me and asked inappropriate questions such as, 'What do you even have down there? A penis or a vagina?' I spent the remaining few days of camp crying alone in my cabin* (Hill, 2014, p. 135).

Sharing about her life before she transitioned, Corey Maison discussed the internal struggle of deciding when it was and was not okay to play dress up:

> *Hi. I'm Corey. I'm 14 years old. I might look happy now but I haven't always been. I've known I was different all my life. When I was little I loved to play with dolls and play dress up. I loved painting my nails too. Wearing my mom's high heels was my favorite! But only in the house. NEVER outside. Because I was born a BOY* (Maison, 2016).

Katie had the self-determination and courage to come out and live her life as "just Katie" but remained vulnerable to ostracism and marginalization when her identity was outed by a counselor at the camp she was attending. Whether that person was well-meaning or not, the implications for Katie were devastating and isolating. Like Corey, LGBTQIAP+ young people have to make frequent decisions about who they will be out to as they navigate every unique environment.

In her memoir, *Straight Walk*, Patricia Velasquez (2014) also talked about the difficulty of navigating places where it was safe to be out and those that were not:

> *I'm such a weirdo, I'd say over and over in my head, as I pushed my heart rate higher for the workout. I felt desperate, like a complete outsider in my own home among the people I was closest to. I didn't belong anywhere. The door to my mother's home was like a transformation tunnel: walking through it meant shedding the real me and becoming the perfect, successful, loving, and straight daughter. I'd smoke and drink coffee and alcohol, trying not to feel anything. Life was blurry, almost on purpose. My life was just about me*

> *going and going, running from my truth whenever I could* (Velasquez, 2014, p. 149).

Fear of or knowledge about how someone will react to this aspect of their identity can cause some young people to protect themselves by seeking invisibility, remaining closeted in situations where they know they will not be accepted. This is reinforced in school settings when policies penalize non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality. The trauma of rejection puts a young person in flight or freeze mode as a self-protective measure, especially if the risk of discovery could lead to the loss of family, friends, their home, and/or their safety.

Stories of Bullying and Pushing Back
Research thoroughly documents the verbal harassment, physical assault, inaccessibility to LGBTQIAP+ sensitive healthcare and information, and decline in physical and emotional health and well-being for LGBTQIAP+ identified or questioning youth (Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014; Greene, Britton & Fitts, 2014). Like most young people in the United States, LGBTQIAP+ identified or questioning youth spend a significant amount of time in school where they begin to discover their own interests and ideas. Peers typically begin to have a greater influence during these years and social isolation based on acknowledged or perceived identity can put a young person at greater risk for bullying (GLSEN, 2016).

For example, early on the morning of April 15, 2012, Kenneth "Rodney" Weishuhn, Jr. hung himself after being constantly bullied at school after coming out as gay (Queer Voices, April 17, 2012). Shortly before that, he told his mother, "Mom, you don't know how it feels to be hated," characterizing his experience as "aggressive," "merciless," and "overwhelming." He is not alone. Similar stories of suicide, prompted by endless bullying at school, can be heard from 15-year-old Jadin Bell, who hung himself on an elementary school playground structure (Queer Voices, February 4, 2013), and 13-year-old Asher Brown, who, prior to shooting himself, reported that other students harassed him by "performing mock gay acts on him" during his physical education class (Freeman, 2010). These stories point to physical spaces where vulnerable students are most at risk (i.e., gym class, the bus, and other less supervised areas) and the need for further supports in those spaces. Without systemic change, however, structurally supported inequality continues (Payne & Smith, 2013).

Further, the intersectionality of identities, like sexual orientation, gender identity, race, immigration status, religion, class, and ability, can increase the vulnerability to oppression and marginalization (Duke, 2010; Jamil & Harper, 2010). Alexander "AJ" Betts, Jr. was 16 years old when he committed suicide, reporting that he had experienced intense bullying for being both gay and mixed race (Queer Voices, July 29, 2013). Likewise, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover was 11 years old when he hung himself after being bullied for being gay (James, 2009). An African-American, Walker-Hoover was also a football player and a Boy Scout; his mother had repeatedly confronted school authorities and was on her way to the school again when she found him hanging by an extension cord in their home. Some youth

recognize that the bullying is the problem of others, but for many youth, like Carlos Vigil, the bullying is internalized, leading to self-hatred and depression. In his suicide note, 17-year-old Carlos wrote, "The kids in school are right, I am a loser, a freak and a fag and in no way is that acceptable for people to deal with" (LGBTQ Nation, 2013).

These messages are exacerbated when adults are silent in the face of such bullying. Many of the stories of LGBTQIAP+ bullying speak to the lack of adult intervention on behalf of bullied youth. The 2015 National School Climate Survey (GLSEN, 2016) found that 57.6 percent of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation with 85.2 percent of LGBTQ students reporting that they had been verbally harassed during the past year due to their sexual orientation and 54.5 percent due to their gender expression. It is even more troubling that 63.5 percent of the students who reported an incident of bullying indicated that school staff did little to respond and/or suggested that the student ignore it. When bystanders, including teachers or other students, do nothing in response to bullying, it can serve to intensify the lack of safety. In the survey, 31.8 percent of LGBTQ students reported missing at least one day of school over the past 30 days due to lack of safety or feelings of discomfort (GLSEN, 2016).

Students who try to stand up for themselves against harassment and bullying are often silenced or punished (Snapp, Hoenig et al., 2015). Students who defend themselves are often placed in special education, diagnosed with mental disorders, or viewed as angry, depressed, or confused (Snapp et al., 2015). Further, they are often viewed as aggressive and confront zero-tolerance policies that serve to punish misbehavior without acknowledging the circumstances and context of their behavior. Little research has been conducted thus far about the intersections of school discipline and the over-representation of LGBTQIAP+ youth in the juvenile justice system, but the research we do have reveals that some of the same patterns that impact other disenfranchised youth also impact LGBTQIAP+ youth (Snapp et al., 2015).

Stories of Speaking Out and Being Silenced
Blake Brockington, an African-American transgender teen, was an advocate for LGBT youth and the transgender community, and stood against police brutality; however, he continued to struggle in his own life and died by suicide in March 2015 at the age of 18 (Hensley, 2015). Leelah Alcorn, a transgender teenager in Ohio, wrote in her suicide note in December 2014:

> *The only way I will rest in peace is if one day transgender people aren't treated the way I was, they're treated like humans, with valid feelings and human rights. Gender needs to be taught about in schools, the earlier the better. My death needs to mean something. My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year… Fix society. Please* (Fantz, 2014).

Even when their own struggles bring them to suicide, many LGBTQIAP+ youth have already left their mark advocating for the rights of others. Blake's advocacy efforts

grew out of the intersection of his gender identity and race. As his North Carolina high school's first openly transgender homecoming king, he actively spoke out and challenged police brutality against his communities. Some youth, like Leelah, make one last dying effort to speak out to pave a better way for those coming behind her.

Jamey Rodemeyer, a New York teenager, identified as bisexual and spoke up in support of other LGBTQIAP+ youth as evidenced in a YouTube video he made (Rodemeyer, 2011). He was just 14 years old in September 2011 when he hung himself after facing severe bullying (Hughes, 2011). Kyler Prescott, a 14-year-old California teenager, was a pianist, an activist for marriage equality, and an advocate for animal rights. Although his family supported his transgender identity, he took his life in May 2015 after being told that because he was transgender, he shouldn't be alive (Brydum, 2015).

Young people who courageously speak out in support of themselves and others can find themselves targeted for the rampant bullying that takes place in far too many U.S. schools. The resiliency of youth cannot distract us from the critical importance of creating policies and practices that are responsive to the specific needs of LGBTQIAP+ youth. The protections of supportive groups and family members are essential, but fail to completely counteract the deleterious effects of persistent and pervasive harassment and discrimination. Yet, even when they feel little hope themselves, many LGBTQIAP+ youth try to offer hope to others by empowering them to unapologetically be who they are. Taylor Alesana, a 16-year-old California teenager, said in her YouTube video,

> *This is a video for myself. I've had a very hard last couple of weeks. I had to go back in the closet and dress like a boy. I did this for my own protection. I was being bullied a lot at school. It got me to a point where I didn't feel safe at my school at all. I did not feel safe walking through the halls. I did not feel safe anywhere around my school. And that's the same thing for the streets* (Tan, 2015).

Silence can be indicative of many things; it should not be presumed to be passivity. To call silence passive is to diminish agency in the attempt to survive. Sometimes silence is about strategic navigation, not being ready to give voice to one's feelings. Sometimes it is about not being given a chance to speak, not being asked to share one's story of identity. Sometimes it is active resistance, refusal to share until others are willing to truly listen. Sometimes it is an act of survival.

Stories of Celebration and Mourning

Statistics consistently illuminate higher incidences of self-harm and/or suicide, increased use of alcohol and drugs, higher prevalence of sexual assault and physical dating violence, homelessness, and a greater likelihood of incarceration among LGBTQIAP+ youth (Ahuja et al., 2015; Kat, 2014; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012; Zaza, Kann, & Barrios, 2016). Non-affirming narratives often point to these statistics as evidence that something is inherently wrong with the youth themselves. But when youth are supported and

celebrated for being who they are, within their families and/or at their schools, those statistics change (Biegel, 2010).

Before killing himself, Zander Mahaffey, a transgender high school student, posted a suicide note on his Tumblr blog on February 15, 2015 (Mahaffey, 2015). The note described sexual trauma and bullying by family members, and alluded to plans for taking his life:

> *I know there's going to be people hurt and devastated by this. And I'm so, so, sorry about that. I don't know what else to say. I'm just so tired, I'm so tired and I just want to go to sleep* (LGBTQ Nation, 2015).

The exhaustion that Zander spoke about has severe cognitive, emotional, and physical ramifications. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Van der Kolk (2014) notes the way that trauma impacts our bodies, our minds, and our brains, compromising our physical health, our cognitive processing, and our ability to engage in healthy relationships. While trauma may come in the form of assaults, bullying, or other forms of physical violence, Van der Kolk and other trauma psychologists agree that rejection and chronic verbal abuse can also result in traumatic experiences for youth. For many LGBTQIAP+ youth, trauma leads to drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and too often, suicide. For others, it may result in academic failure, lack of self-regulation, and illness.

However, despite these potential implications, a completely different set of outcomes is possible when LGBTQIAP+ youth are provided with support, when they are acknowledged for the gifts they bring, and when they are celebrated for who they are. These types of supports work to build resilience for young people, who are then empowered to become advocates for other LGBTQIAP+ youth. For example, Sameer Jha is the founder of The Empathy Alliance, which "works with students and educators to help make schools safer and more welcoming for LGBTQ+ students" (www.theempathyalliance.org). As a 15-year-old, Sameer serves on the Youth Board of the GSA Network for Northern California and facilitates workshops to explore intersectionality around gender and sexuality. He writes:

> *As a queer person of color who traces my heritage to a country in which homosexuality is punishable by death, I want to use my privilege as an American citizen with a supportive family to raise awareness and fight for the people who can't* (Dupere, 2017).

GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network, supports a National Student Council comprised of 18 members who act as LGBTQIAP+ youth activists committed to social justice for sexual minority students. These young people are leaders in their schools and communities, working to create safe and affirming school experiences for LGBTQIAP+ students. When Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), Safe School Organizations, and other LGBTQIAP+ support systems are in place, schools become locations of celebration, advocacy, and empowerment.

This type of celebration in the face of discrimination can completely change the trajectory of the lives of LGBTQIAP+ youth. Therefore, we hold in tension both the celebration and the mourning. We celebrate those youth who with great resilience rise up and make a difference in this world, even as we continue to mourn those LGBTQIAP+ youth who suffer without support and grieve the loss of those who have died prematurely. Among the many strengths of those lost youth were creativity, intelligence, motivation, musical talent, humor, and kindness. Their families, their communities, their country, and their world will never reap the benefits of their potential contributions.

Stories of Acceptance and Judgment
The primary objections for recognizing same-sex relationships in the United States are grounded in religious beliefs (Franck, 2011). While some faith communities are welcoming and affirming, there are also those who freely judge and reject LGBTQIAP+ youth. Many young people express feeling guilt and shame, pleading and bargaining with God to make them "normal" because the message they have received is that their identity, orientation, and expression are abnormal, unnatural, and sinful. For example, country music singer, Chely Wright, wrote about the fear she faced navigating being gay in a church that did not approve:

> *By my teens, I was looking hard to find anyone who was like me. I didn't fit the stereotype of a gay woman, but I knew my sexual identity was outside the norm. I hadn't heard many discussions about homosexuality, but what I heard in church was enough for me to realize that the church did not approve. Faced with the possibility of life as an outcast, I tried hard to develop feelings for boys, with no luck* (Wright, 2010, p. 41).

When God is used as a way to condemn others for who they are, the ripple effects can be catastrophic with lasting impacts. Marginalization and rejection by one's faith community can have long-term repercussions impacting an LGBTQIAP+ person's desire and ability to form a positive, loving relationship (Frost & Meyer, 2009). Whether or not an LGBTQIAP+ person decides to pursue a relationship, emotions of shame and guilt related to an individual's upbringing can negatively impact one's self-acceptance (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Leavy & Lo, 2013; Suhbi & Geelan, 2012).

EricJames Borges, a gay California teenager, made an anti-suicide video for the It Gets Better project, but his life ended in suicide at the age of 19. In addition to significant bullying, which began in kindergarten and continued through high school, Borges also described his traumatic experience of coming out within an "extremist Christian household." Reporting that his parents did not accept his sexuality and kicked him out of his home, "My pain is not caused because I am gay. My pain was caused by how I was treated because I am gay" (Queer Voices, January 29, 2012).

Homophobia and hatred are supported in many faith communities, fueling acts of covert and overt oppression and discrimination. In insulated communities where counteractive messages of acceptance and love do not reach, LGBTQIAP+ youth are

incredibly vulnerable. Their isolation leaves them at even greater risk of homelessness and/or suicide. At the same time, there are many whose faith traditions promote a message of love and acceptance. Welcoming and affirming faith communities provide a safe haven for those who have been denied membership within their own churches, synagogues, and mosques (Blauch, 2004). For example, Irshad Manhji is the founder of the Moral Courage Project at New York University, advocating for the LGBT community within the Islamic faith.[3]

Stories of Restoration and Rejection
Young people who have the same minority status as their family members often receive significant guidance and support; however, for LGBTQIAP+ youth, coming out to their family can mean further isolation, abuse, or even homelessness (Shpigel, Belsky, & Diamond, 2015). After coming out to his parents and experiencing the violent backlash that comes for many LGBTQIAP+ youth, Vicars (2013) recalled, "this was the last time my sexuality was ever mentioned. It was tiptoed around like I had some terminal illness that if named would rear up and consume us all" (p. 261). He went on to say:

> *In giving voice to what lay on the inside, I had created myself as I wanted to be seen and heard. In my parents' silence, they were unseating that creation and hoping for an erasure of its possible existence* (pp. 261-262).

Families play a significant role in the socialization of youth, particularly around gender identity, gender norms, and relational patterns (Wells, 2015). When LGBTQIAP+ youth violate those norms, they are often met with fear, silence, rejection, insults, or violence. Van der Kolk (2014) notes that trauma, even in the form of ongoing rejection, can cause us to block off parts of ourselves, resulting in long-term cognitive, physical, and emotional consequences. Like Vicars noted above, his parents' silence was experienced as a form of alienation and rejection.

By contrast, Zoey Luna, a 17-year old Latinx transgender activist whose story was documented in the film, *Raising Zoey*, brought attention to violence against transgender women of color. Her transition was facilitated by the support of her family, particularly her mother, who actively advocated for her daughter in the face of school bullying. She noted that "Zoey isn't special because she's transgender. Zoey's special because she's my daughter" (Reichard, 2017). The commitment of family members can create spaces for restoration of a sense of identity and purpose.

Supportive parents who create openings for youth to explore and question, without fear of rejection, build strong attachments with their LGBTQIAP+ or questioning youth, attachments that promote a healthy sense of self (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Unfortunately, the support of family is often not enough to counter the abuses that LGBTQIAP+ students experience at school. In February 2015, despite his mother's support, Ash Haffner, an active blogger, musician, and poet, took his life after

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[3] For more information, see https://moralcourage.com/.

enduring years of bullying, which reportedly worsened after his transition to identifying as male. In his blog, he wrote:

> *Please, BE WHO YOU ARE… Do it for yourself, Do it for your happiness. That's what matters in YOUR life. You don't need approval on who you are. Don't let people or society change who you are just because they're not satisfied with your image* (Garloch, 2015).

Implications and Concluding Thoughts

One of the implications of this study is an acknowledgment of the need for further research that embraces non-traditional approaches to data gathering. By including multiple forms of data, we highlighted the voices and experiences of young people who are using their voices in very public and courageous ways, but in ways that are not always valued by the research community. Even youth who experienced tragic incidents of bullying and pain demonstrated amazing strength in the midst of those experiences, sometimes, simply by continuing to show up as their authentic selves. We encourage researchers to engage in more narrative research that invites youth to speak on their own behalf. Further, we hope that research will take up the critical lens that allows for critiques of systems and structures that disempower marginalized youth. Critical theory pushed us to examine issues of power and privilege by considering heteronormative policies and practices that impact the daily realities of LGBTQIAP+ youth; ecological theory challenged us to resist monolithic identities and simple cause-and-effect relationships within the environments of LGBTQIAP+ youth.

Additionally, this study informs theory by highlighting the need for those who work with youth to be more aware of the ways in which they can more fully support the positive development of LGBTQIAP+ youth in their particular environments. As we analyzed the stories of LGBTQIAP+ youth, we were reminded of their pain and their resilience, the struggles and the strengths of living into their identity, the moments of hope and the moments of tragedy, times where identity was celebrated and times of mourning, experiences of being accepted unconditionally and experiences of being judged, narratives of restoration and narratives of rejection. Unlike traditional research that prioritizes trends and generalizations through statistical measures, narrative research allows for the unique and varying experiences of these youth.

Furthermore, the stories gathered here remind us that all of our policies, our research, our religious teachings, and our politics cannot exist in a vacuum, nor can they be disconnected from the actual lives of young people. The youth themselves teach us how to advocate for their well-being and support their positive development. Social workers, educators, and other professionals can provide ongoing support for LGBTQIAP+ youth and their families as they navigate their evolving sexual landscapes. Facilitating conversations, providing resources, and ensuring safety and support are essential for promoting health and stability. Additionally, concerned professionals can actively engage in advocacy efforts by promoting policies and practices that address the unique needs of LGBTQIAP+ youth. While we acknowledge that great progress has been made in support of

LGBTQIAP+ youth, much more remains. In Table 1, we outline specific suggestions for supporting LGBTQIAP+ youth in their varied environments.

Acknowledging the marginalization and pain that LGBTQIAP+ youth experience, while also celebrating their strengths and resilience, we deeply mourn the loss of those listed in this article and those unnamed whose gifts will never be fully realized in this world. Feeling a sense of urgency to stop these irreplaceable losses and support all youth, we encourage readers to engage in further research, searching for ways in which they can begin immediately to support youth who are excluded due to their gender and sexuality. May we do better.

Table 1. Suggestions for supporting the positive development of LGBTQIAP+ youth

Be vocal	The narratives in this study highlight the need for supportive adults in the lives of LGBTQIAP+ youth. Make your support widely known. Being a good ally means challenging homophobic remarks whenever possible. Support self-efficacy by creating safe environments for youth to advocate for themselves. Support inclusive clubs, like gay-straight alliances (GSAs).
Be visible	Display a rainbow flag and/or safe space sticker. Hang photos that show diversity. Stock books that are inclusive and diverse. Look at the curriculum; are there texts that not only represent LGBTQIAP+ youth, but celebrate them? Provide role models through curriculum, guest speakers, and supportive organizations to help alleviate isolation.
Be respectful	Listen to the language young people use to describe themselves and use that language with them. Honor their name and pronoun choices as well as their freedom to change them. Respect their chosen identities. Be careful with your language, avoiding gender specific terms like girlfriend and boyfriend.
Honor confidentiality	Be mindful of the significant risks LGBTQIAP+ youth face. Being outed, under any circumstances, can cause deep harm as was seen in several of the narratives in this study. Do not disclose a young person's identity/ identities without their permission even to people you believe are supportive. Make resources readily available and easily accessible. Recognize the value of hotlines and online resources that can offer support for young people who are not ready to come out. Work with them to identify interventions which with they feel comfortable.
Be trauma-informed	Read about trauma and the impacts of trauma on learning, on cognitive and emotional functioning. Help youth understanding the ways in which trauma is impacting them. Promote trauma-informed practices in schools, clinics, and other places where youth are.
Listen carefully	Many LGBTQIAP+ youth have been quieted or judged harshly without ever being asked to share their stories, so having a safe space to talk is powerful support by itself. Unless safety is an immediate concern, allow the young person to guide the conversation. When questions are asked, be careful not to reinforce heteronormativity or the gender binary. For example, think about the difference between asking "Do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend?" and "Is there someone special you like?" Read about the experiences of members of the LGBTQIAP+ community such as those listed in this article. Practice self-awareness and self-reflection and identify biases and assumptions that may hinder working effectively with LGBTQIAP+ youth.
Educate yourself and others	Become knowledgeable about definitions and differing identities. Know the difference between biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation and do not conflate them. For more information, consult resources that are readily available. Organizations such as the Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN: http://www.glsen.org/), Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network: http://gsanetwork.org/), Human Rights Campaign (https://hrc.org/resources/topic/children-youth), Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG: http://community.pflag.org/), Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER: http://www.transstudent.org/), the Trevor Project (http://www.thetrevorproject.org/), and the It Gets Better Project (http://www.itgetsbetter.org/) provide online resources, ongoing training, and support for youth, their families, and communities.

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