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Educator interaction with sexual minority youth

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Abstract

Sexual minority youth experience a variety of challenges that are further exacerbated by intersectionality and interactions with various educators. Using a directed form of empirical, qualitative research, the authors explored the retrospective school experiences (as part of life stories) of three cohorts of sexual minorities (Stonewall Generation, HIV/AIDS Generation, and Marriage Equality Generation). The aim was to learn how they experienced K-12 education, including interactions with educators. Four major categories were identified from the interview data: (a) unsupportive educators, (b) role of school counselors, (c) supportive educators, and (d) sexual minority teachers. Interactions with educators were either supportive or unsupportive and occurred at either the individual or school (institutional) level. Interactions at either of these levels were (a) explicit—intentional behavior(s) or implicit—chance behavior(s) and (b) related to academic and personal concerns.

Keywords

Bully; counselor; educator; interaction; LGBT; qualitative methods

Sexual minority youth are often vulnerable at school; these youth report feeling unsafe because many schools lack sufficient teacher training, anti-bullying policies, and/or support groups for sexual minority students (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Yet, negative interactions between educators and sexual minorities resulting from inadequate resources and training have been largely understudied (Wood, Smith, Varjas, & Meyers, 2017). This is unfortunate because healthy student-educator interactions are a predictor of academic success (Bishop & Casida, 2011). A search of the literature yields that while there is a body of research on the interaction between educators and sexual minority youth, there is a paucity of research on its theoretical underpinnings. To fill the gap, we use a directed form of empirical, qualitative research to explore how sexual minority adults from three distinct cohorts have come to view their interactions with educators and to learn more about how to improve those interactions. Participants were from three cohorts: (a) those who became adults during the

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Stonewall Rebellion, (b) those who became adults during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and (c) those who became adults when legislation was passed to allow same-sex marriage and gay men and lesbian women in the military. We first delve deeper into the negative experiences of sexual minority youth, beginning with the negative effects of bullying and lawmaking efforts. Against this backdrop, we then consider intersectionality and the impact of being a sexual minority youth as well as a youth of color.

Sexual minority youth and bullying at school

Adolescent suicide has increased over the past decade (Curtin & Heron, 2019), and 8–25 percent of adolescent suicides are among sexual minority youth, many of whom report being bullied (Ream, 2019). Victimization often occurs in schools, including smaller schools with fewer resources and less diversity (Martin-Storey, Cheadle, Skalamera, & Crosnoe, 2015). The stress of being a sexual minority is further exacerbated by attending a school where anti-sexual minority curriculum laws exist (Takács, 2006); these laws prohibit discussion of minority sexuality in a positive light (Lambda Legal, Lamda, 2020). This is concerning because 78 countries criminalize homosexuality (Martosko, 2019). Additionally, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education have withdrawn guidance on best practices for interacting with sexual minorities, and the President of the United States only recently signed an executive order prohibiting workplace discrimination of sexual minorities in schools (Biden, 2021).

Bullying of students by educators

Most of the research on bullying has not examined the interactions between sexual minorities and educators (Wood et al., 2017). However, what we do know is educators include all school personnel who may or may not favor laws and policies that support sexual minorities, and thus they may or may not interact effectively with sexual minority youth (e.g., when sexual minority youth are bullied by peers). Pizmony-Levy, Kama, Shilo, and Lavee (2008) examined the subjective experiences of 300 sexual minority students between 11 and 18 years of age living in Israel, and found half ($n = 150$) reported hearing teachers make homophobic remarks. In addition to homophobic remarks, educators also bully when their negative feelings about sexual minorities affect their willingness to help when they have the time and ability to do so. The expectations of educators who are more comfortable teaching heterosexual students are met (Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012). Educators also may bully sexual minorities because they do not recognize different forms of bullying that occur at different levels (e.g., the individual level versus the group level) (Meyer, 2015). Bullying, for example, can occur one-on-one and/or at the institutional level stemming from lack of or poorly formed policies. As a result, it is important to teach educators how they may intentionally and/or accidentally bully and oppress students. To further increase their understanding, educators should also be taught about the impact of intersectionality, a framework focused on (1) the manifestation of multiple forms of oppression, (2) overlapping systems of oppression, and (3) how systems impact oppressed groups such as sexual minorities who are also racial and ethnic minorities (Crenshaw, 2000).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an analytic framework attentive to the effects of overlapping systems of oppression on one's level of influence and power in relationships (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017). Shelton and Barnes (2016) conducted focus groups with pre-service secondary English education teachers. The pre-service teachers did not bring up the topic of intersectionality. When the teachers were asked about their views on sexual minority issues and race, some opposed equating the two. These individuals viewed issues of race and sexual minority identity as distinct from each other. Further, they did not view sexual minority issues in terms of discrimination the same way they viewed racial discrimination. This is of concern because a power imbalance exists between White, heterosexual educators and both sexual and racial minorities (Altobelli, 2018). Moreover, sexual minorities who are also racial and ethnic minorities may face more stress and have less power than White sexual minorities (Thompson, 2012). Challenges that are faced include, but are limited to, low self-esteem and compromised experiences, expectations, and attitudes (Russell & Truong, 2001). Additionally, sexual minorities who are racial and ethnic minorities may be less likely to seek out help from counselors than White sexual minorities (Holley, Oh, & Thomas, 2019). Educators should teach their colleagues about these outcomes and try to include role models from the communities of their minority students as part of their pedagogy and clinical interventions (Altobelli, 2018; Shelton & Barnes, 2016).

Method

Data come from the Generations Study, a multi-method, multi-institutional study of health, identity, and stress among three generations of individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) in the United States (Frost et al., 2020)¹. Participants were recruited from three cohorts: (a) a Post Stonewall Pride cohort (ages 52–59 in 2015), an HIV/AIDS epidemic cohort (ages 34–41 in 2015), and a marriage equality cohort (ages 18–25 in 2015). Use of this lifespan approach in the context of a directed form of qualitative research allowed us to examine how participants experienced the school-age years differently depending on their age cohorts. Targeted ethnographic non-probability sampling was used (Wolf, Joye, Smith, & Fu, 2016), and participants were recruited within an 80 mile radius of the cities of New York City, NY; San Francisco, CA; Tucson, AZ; and Austin, TX. Eligible participants identified as cisgender men, cisgender women, and genderqueer; LGB or other non-heterosexual orientation; and Black, White, Latinx, Asian, Native American, and Multiracial. Individuals who identified as genderqueer were represented in the younger cohort. The lead university's Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol. Participants gave active consent by signing a consent form. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews (2–3 hours) with 191 sexual minority people, 62 of whom shared about their K-12 school experiences during youth. A sample greater than 20, recommended for semi-structured interviews was achieved (Creswell, 2002).

¹The Generations Study included self-identified cisgender LGB individuals; however, during the study participants may have self-identified using preferred labels, some of which were not exclusively cisgender, "lesbian," "gay," or "bisexual," and male or female.

Participants had attained at least a sixth-grade education, and, if they had a partner, their partner had not already been in the study. Participants were interviewed one-on-one by a graduate research assistant or post-doctoral researcher. Thirty-three (53%) individuals were in the younger cohort, nineteen (31%) individuals were in the middle cohort, and ten (16%) individuals were in the older cohort. All 62 participants mentioned interactions with educators when talking about their school-age experiences (kindergarten through 12th grade). A semi-structured interview protocol was used to interview each participant, and interviews were audio-taped for transcription. The full protocol is publicly available (www.generations-study.com), and focused on key points in life, challenges, stressors, coping, and social and historical moments. Samples of interview items are in Table 1. We present data from 62 participants who discussed school age experiences in response to these topics.

Positionality

The first author is a White cisgender gay male who works as an assistant professor at a private college. He specializes in school counseling and LGBTQ topics. He grew up in the rural Midwest during the AIDS epidemic and was educated in schools without LGBTQ resources. He believed that most of the participants would have talked about school experiences as part of their lived experiences. The second author is a White cisgender gay man, and senior faculty member at a research-intensive university. His age is between the middle and oldest cohorts in this study, and he grew up in the rural South, and experienced only silence related to LGBTQ issues in secondary schools.

Procedures for data collection and analysis

The lead author and two graduate assistants utilized a directed approach to interpret meaning from the text. With this approach, analysis began with relevant research findings as guidance for categories. With directed empirical, qualitative methods, categories are defined before and throughout the process of analysis; categories are created from findings from prior research (Clarke et al., 2015; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). In this study, data were restricted to one of four educator interaction categories so that the average occurrence and frequency of the narrative data disclosed could be calculated. The meaning of participants' responses was derived from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each coder had training in qualitative methods and collaborated about research with sexual minorities. Graduate assistants were enrolled in a master's level counseling program. The lead author had training in mixed research and advanced qualitative research methods. Interview data were coded with unique identifiers. Records of emerging categories were kept, and the research team coded transcribed data using Dedoose (2018), a web-based application for conducting mixed research. To understand the data for the purpose of the study question—What have the school experiences, including interactions with educators, of sexual minority students looked like?—we consolidated and interpreted data with respect to four categories: unsupportive educators, role of school counselors, supportive educators, and sexual minority teachers.

First phase

Three coders open-coded the same interviews until they reached consensus on major categories at six interviews (Nastasi, 2009). Remaining interviews were coded separately. Bi-weekly research team meetings were held to discuss coding decisions. Researchers coded interviews individually for categories, which were further refined by the research team. In addition to identifying the categories, we recorded the frequency of participants who mentioned one of more of four specific types of educator interaction: (1) supportive or unsupportive, (2) explicit or implicit, (3) at the individual level or school (group) level, and (4) regarding academic or personal concerns. Deductive coding was emphasized first to develop a codebook to code interview data into evolving categories in relation to prior research findings. Once the codebook was prepared, interviews were coded by analyzing text segments. The codebook was developed until no new codes emerged.

Second phase

The second phase focused on the participants' interactions with educators during the school-age years (childhood and adolescence). After interview data were coded, three coders explored sexual minority students' interactions with educators in greater depth. This involved coding any data in which participants shared about interacting with supportive educators and unsupportive educators, including school counselors, and educators who identified as sexual minorities. In using Dedoose (2018), 145 pages of data from 62 participants resulted, including data on the following: interactions with school counselors, 13 pages; supportive educators, 60 pages; unsupportive and hostile educators, 59 pages; and educators who were sexual minorities, 13 pages. The two codes (a) supportive interaction with educators and (b) unsupportive interaction with educators were largely discussed by participants who talked about school experiences. Within these codes, the participants often shared about what educator support during the school-age years looked like. All educator data were coded until coders reached 100% consensus.

Third phase

To ascertain the merit of a code and its frequency, consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 2005) augmented the use of an empirical, directed qualitative approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). Negative case analysis (Morse, 2015) was used to examine outlier response data. This helped us to monitor bias and validate data (Morse, 2015). According to Hill et al. (2005), codes may be placed into categories based upon how frequently they occur: general, typical, variant, and rare. General codes were codes discussed by all participants, typical codes were codes discussed by more than half of the participants, variant codes were codes discussed by up to half of the participants, and rare codes were codes discussed by less than three participants. A frequency table captures these codes and CQR categories in Table 2.

Trustworthiness of data

The procedures of confirmability, credibility, and transferability (Guba, 1981) were used to improve the trustworthiness of data. Prior to interviews, researchers familiarized themselves with the interview protocols. A secondary goal was to improve rapport with participants

and understand discourse and the isomorphic process during interviews. Interviewers familiarized themselves with the interview process, including how to manage unexpected occurrences before meeting participants. During the training stage, interviewers developed a sense of comradery. At the beginning of interviews, participants signed the informed consent form and were informed of the limits to confidentiality and that they could withdraw anytime. Participants were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers in response to question items. At the end of interview sessions, interviewers confirmed with participants if they had shared everything that they wanted to. An audit trail was maintained before, during, and after data collection to allow for replication. Reflective journal entries were kept for each interview, along with codebook and interview protocol information. To minimize coder bias, those who coded data created and reviewed memos about reactions to the interview data.

Results

For this study, participants were recruited from a Post Stonewall Pride cohort (ages 52–59 in 2015), an HIV/AIDS epidemic cohort (ages 34–41 in 2015), and a marriage equality/gays in the military cohort (ages 18–25 in 2015). Males were overrepresented in each age cohort (younger cohort, 52%; middle cohort, 61%; and older cohort, 73%). Queer people were mostly represented in the middle cohort, and neither pansexual nor queer people were represented in the older cohort. For selected participant information, see Table 3.

In comparison to racial and ethnic groups, individuals who identified as White talked the most about having supportive interactions with educators. They were also more likely to identify as pansexual, queer, and gay. Participants who identified as Black and Multiracial mostly identified as bisexual. Participants who identified as Native American mostly identified as two-spirit and educators. Finally, more than half of the participants who discussed school experiences were in the younger cohort; given the recency of the younger cohort's school experiences, it is understandable that their school experiences might be more salient to them at this time in life than those in the middle or older cohorts. For more demographic information, see Table 4.

The major categories identified from the data were the (a) unsupportive educators, (b) role of school counselors, (c) supportive educators, and (d) sexual minority teachers. The mean average of the number of participants who shared about interactions with educators is presented in Table 2. Descriptive categories (Hill et al., 2005) are included for each type of interaction with how often participants discussed each factor, along with subcategories. Interactions with educators were either supportive or unsupportive and occurred at either the individual or school (group) level. Interactions at either of these levels were (a) explicit—intentional behavior(s) or implicit—chance behavior(s) and (b) related to academic and personal concerns. An example of an academic concern is not being allowed to participate in gym class. An example of a personal concern is not being taught about same-sex attraction.

Unsupportive educators

Across all the three cohorts, every female participant ($n = 18$) and all but one male participant ($n = 36$) mentioned interacting with both unsupportive and supportive educators during the school-age years. However, perhaps due to the recency of the experiences and the salience of negative interactions with educators, participants in the younger cohort discussed the impact of unsupportive and hostile educators more than participants in the middle and older cohorts. These unsupportive interactions occurred at the individual and group levels, and they had a cascading effect on the students (Morrow, Simons, Frost, & Russell, 2018). *Negative support eventually compromised resilience.* The negative interactions came to be viewed by participants as contributing to lack of motivation, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Unsupportive educators were both unable to help students who were being bullied (implicit unsupportive interaction), and in some instances, unsupportive educators were unwilling to help and became bullies themselves (explicit unsupportive interaction).

As noted, a number of participants made statements that demonstrated experiences with unsupportive educators. For example, Manny, a 24-year-old male with a high school degree, who identified as queer and multiracial shared:

I ran cross country. Then senior year I became captain. That was coincidentally the year that I started becoming more comfortable with talking about being gay to my schoolmates. My coach caught wind of it and his attitude towards me completely changed. He berated me a lot for the silliest little things. It was just really apparent that even my teammates saw it. It got to the point where it was just like I did not wanna [*sic*] be in their environment anymore and I just quit. It sucked because I thought I was pretty good.

Janet, a 24-year-old female with a bachelor's degree, who identified as lesbian and Asian shared a similar story:

I was bullied my freshman and part of my sophomore year. (...) I would get harassed or stuff—I would have stuff thrown at me. These three guys, they would throw stuff at the girls, and it was really awkward. The teacher was definitely a bystander. She just didn't know what to do. She would say, "Well, just ignore them." It's like, well shit, I can't ignore them. I would start showing up late to her class, and just not caring at all.

A teacher told a student that being gay was a choice. Elaine, a 19-year-old female with some college education, who identified as lesbian and Asian shared:

I remember one time it was my senior year in high school, probably because all the bad things happened during that period—but it was sometime in high school my mom had me go to confessions or whatever, and so I remember before she had me go I was like, okay if I do this—like okay. (...) I remember going into it saying, I want to ask this preacher while I'm sitting here one on one with him if he thinks being gay is wrong and why. So I remember I asked him, I told him, well, I'm gay, this is not me repenting, I don't think it's wrong, but do you? He gave me such a gray answer, which I thought was cool but also kind of annoying. He basically said

on a personal level I don't think it's a choice and I don't think it's that bad but on a religious level, yes. I was like, that's conflicting.

One teacher showed discomfort around same gender loving behavior that she observed between two students (implicit unsupportive interaction). While another teacher became uncomfortable teaching when the topic of homosexuality came up and consequently changed the lesson content (explicit unsupportive interaction). Narda, a 19-year-old female with high school education, who identified as bisexual and Latina, shared:

I specifically remember one of my teachers seeing me kiss one of my then girlfriends it was just on the cheek. Still, she assumed—not weirded out by it, but uncomfortable. For a while, she was kind of wary towards me. (. . . .) Then after a while, she kinda pulled me off to the side and questioned it. I just let her know, because she was a really nice teacher. I loved her teaching methods and everything. Her [*sic*] and I would talk. We were close. She would be a close adult figure in my life too. Once I explained it to her, she just asked, “Who was that girl that you kissed?” I explained to her, “That was my girlfriend.” Because we were kinda in a class, it kinda be [*sic*] kinda hush hush. Once she knew what was the deal, I guess, she wasn't as wary of me anymore, but she did act differently, because she—she was accepting of it, but she did act differently, because it was something new. She didn't know how to react to it. After a while, she was fine. We were both fine. Then my girlfriend didn't have a class with this teacher, but obviously she would walk me to class and drop me off there. It got to the point where all three of us were talking there outside the classroom. It was fine.

Gary, a 59-year-old male with a bachelor's degree, who identified as gay and White, related a similar story:

I remember, when I was a junior in high—you have to understand, the environment was so—it was so anti-gay that there was no word for it. In junior high literature class, we were doing poetry. We read one poem, and this girl, she asked the teacher—she says, “It sounds like this could be about two men.” It was just immediately after, the teacher completely changed the lesson. We just completely switched. I think that was really an example of how people were so uncomfortable with dealing with anything that might deal with homosexuality.

Sometimes suspected gay students were outed by teachers. These outcomes are examples of explicit unsupportive interactions at the school level. Ellen, a 56-year-old female with some college education, who identified as lesbian and White shared one such example, saying:

I got into elementary school. That's when I realized I had crushes on girls. I wasn't lookin' at the boys like they were. It went down into junior high. I had a teacher I had a crush on, and she always liked me. She was a math teacher. I told her one day after class that I think I like girls. About an hour later, I was in my next class. I got a note to report to the principal's office. They led me to the counselor's office. The math teacher, the counselor and my mother. My mother was bawling. She got into my diary and was reading it. All they wanted to know was if I masturbated. I didn't even know what it meant. I didn't even know what they were talking about. My

mom kept saying, “What do you mean you like girls? What do you mean?” I denied it. I said, “You must’ve misunderstood.” I knew never to come out. [I learned] not to talk about it.

Hostile educators, a subgroup of unsupportive educators, explicitly treated youth differently based not only on sexual orientation, but also race, writing ability, and English-speaking ability. Thus, intersectionality often played a role in participants’ experiences with educators. Concerning intersectionality, Janet also shared:

We also had a gym teacher in middle school, and he was very sexist, extremely. Gender and sexuality overlap a lot of times, and he would treat people who people thought were gay differently and stuff. (...) I was treated differently, in that I wasn’t really athletic, and I honestly did not care about sports. I would opt to walk the track, or I would opt to just not participate, or not change. I remember specifically having conversations with the gym teacher, where he was like, “If you don’t wanna participate, then you don’t have to.” I was like, “Well, I won’t, then.” I was tired of the harassment. I [also] had this English teacher. (...) I was the only non-white person in her class. That’s something that I’ve experienced most of my life, being the only non-white person around. I like to write a lot, and she just hated my writing. She was like, “You’re not good enough to do advanced literature.” I didn’t do advanced literature. She [also] wouldn’t let me use the bathroom, but she would let the white kids use the bathroom. Then, one time I just left and went to the bathroom, and she legitimately chased after me and just told me to go sit down. I was like, “But I have to go pee.”

Eric, who identifies as Latino, also shared:

Myself and the other Latino kids who were Spanish speakers in my kindergarten class or my first-grade class, we were treated very differently. I was whipped on my hand. It’s a criticism about being GLBT, but I mean, I was whipped on my hand six times on each side for speaking any word other than English in first grade. And put in the dunce chair with the dunce hat. If I spoke in Spanish. Yeah. If I spoke in Spanish at all. That was my first-grade teacher’s way of getting us to learn English. Just hitting us and shaming us, you know?

Hostile educators tended to impose their personal values on sexual minority youth, and some even told the students that they would not amount to anything. For example, one teacher compared same sex marriage to bestiality, while another told students that two men do not get married. Finally, in another instance, positive information about sexual minority communities was intentionally withheld.

Role of School Counselors

While it is likely that experiences with school counselors have changed since the 1970s and “80 s,” some participants reported that school counselors interacted with them mostly at the individual level, and, for the most part, this support varied. All participants in the older cohort had this experience. A participant in the middle cohort who attended a school in a

rural community had a counselor explicitly tell him not to come out. The participant relayed the counselor's warning as follows:

This is the way. It's like you can't say anything to anybody now really basically because they end up calling you out nowadays. The town's gone back to the way it used to be. They look down on you because of who you are.

Another participant talked about meeting a counselor after having a bad classroom experience. He said:

This one time we were watching a video about Hitler and the Holocaust and they talked about who Hitler targeted, et cetera, and then [my teacher] brought me up saying I should've been one of those people. I just had enough so I saw my teacher who told the counselor and then the counselor talked to him and this other guy who were both on me about that kind of stuff. The counselor didn't really do anything to them. He just told them not to say anything. Then, when [the counselor] met me personally, he just said, "Yeah, people shouldn't do that to you." At the end he said, "People shouldn't hate on you because of a choice you make." I was just like, "It's not a choice." I walked out.

Several participants talked about having positive interactions with school counselors. These experiences were related to having school counselors who were knowledgeable of resources in the community and demonstrated an ability to provide both academic and personal counseling services. Denise, a 24-year-old female with technical/trade education, who identified as queer and Black shared:

I was referred to The Door by a high school counselor, because of when I transferred from Brooklyn Tech. At that time, the attendance was bad, and the grades were bad, so I guess they said, hey, as well as this high school that we're referring you to, you could also check this out. One day one of my friends from The Door who went to both places was going to this camp reunion, cause they had a camp every year, and he had gone to the camp. I walked him there, and waited for it to be over. Then I met all these people that were from the Center outside of the Center, and then everybody went to this park to hang out later, and I was interacting with everybody. I was like, wow, I really want to go to this camp. Why don't I just start coming here, let me find out more about what they offer, and slowly but surely, I started going there more.

Darwyn, a 50-year-old male with some high school education, who identified as gay and Black, talked about receiving personal counseling services at school that were helpful:

I kind of didn't understand it, you know. I had this feeling for—this liking for boys. You know, I didn't know that it would be something called gay or homosexual. I was a kid, to be teased or to be tormented, you know, back in them days—it really hurt, because I felt what I felt. I didn't understand too much what it was. To understand why I was being so mistreated. I was being picked on because I'm a good kid and I don't do what everybody else do. They took that as me being conceited and standoffish. That's, you know, what happened. Getting older and stuff, I continued to have this liking. That's when I realized that—at first, I was

like, okay, this could be that I'm gay. It wasn't until after I met that counselor in high school and talked to him—I told him what I felt and what I was craving. I guess I could say craving, or looking for. He asked me, "Well, could it be that you are gay?" From there, that led me to the community center, which was something, like I said, totally different as a young person who was trying to find his identity. I went into the counselor. He asked me what I'm looking for in life. He asked me about, you know, my hobbies, what I liked to do. I was kind of depressed a little in high school. I mean, nobody was picking on me anymore, but I felt like I really didn't have much [*sic*] friends. I mean, there were people and I chilled with them and stuff. You know in high school, you have the different cliques and stuff. Speaking to this counselor, I just kept saying the term, "he." I was saying I was looking for a friend I could hang out with and spend time with. I kept using the term, "he." That's when he was like asking me. He said, "You know, I'm wondering"—He said, "You keep saying, you know, he." Again, I don't remember too much, but because I was saying to him, "he," I guess he started picking up that maybe I could be showing signs that I might be gay or interested in another guy. You know, bicurious. When he questioned me about that, just from me telling him about me wanting to go out and meet new people—I made it kind of personal. 'Cuz I kept saying "he, he." That's when he started to put two and two together, I guess. He was asking—I guess he was trying to be careful of approaching the question to me. He asked me, he said, "You know, I need to ask you something. You keep saying 'he,' and from what you describe and what you're looking for, you know, are you gay? Are you gay? Maybe you're showing some tendency towards other guys?" I'm like, "Gay? No." I'm like, "Really? No. I just wanna hang out with someone, and 'he,' someone I can chill with me and him." I guess I was throwing out words like "him" and "he." I was given it up without me really acknowledging—that this is who—maybe this is who I am.

Supportive educators

Thirty-five participants mentioned supportive educators 44 times. Seventeen were in the younger cohort, thirteen were in the middle cohort, and five were in the older cohort. However, participants in the middle and older cohorts were most likely to share about supportive educators. Additionally, those in the middle and older cohorts were most likely to mention interacting with sexual minority educators who were supportive. Richard, a 58-year-old male with a bachelor's degree who identified as gay and White, shared about what his gay teacher told the class in 1973:

I remember one of my school teachers when I—I guess maybe I was a sophomore in high school, about the American Psychiatric Association declaring homosexuality was no longer a mental illness. That was a big thing at the time. Then there was that ABC TV movie with was it Hal Holbrook? I can't remember. About this guy who was middle-aged and married to a woman and realized he was gay, so he had a son—I forget what it was called. It was a big deal back in the early '70s. He came out as gay. He had a boyfriend. I think Martin Sheen portrayed the boyfriend.

In addition to talking about interactions with sexual minority teachers, participants in the older cohort talked about interactions with school counselors. Some participants also talked about their decision to become teachers, mentors, or coaches. These participants often identified as African American, Native American, and gay and lesbian. [To learn more about the experiences of participants in the Generations Study who decided to become educators, refer to Simons, Hahn, Pope, and Russell (2021).]

One participant shared that he was the recipient of explicit individual level support during youth. He received support from a priest and an openly bisexual dean. These individuals affirmed the student who had sought them out for help. Positive individual level support was also provided to participants in other ways: a principal followed up on bullying incidents and referred a participant to therapy, a counselor referred participants to a teen crisis center and a LGBT resources center, and an English teacher taught students how to use humor to manage stress. Another teacher encouraged a student to work on her leadership skills by participating in an academic decathlon. Dolores, a 23-year-old female with some postgraduate education, who identified as bisexual and female shared:

Junior year after I failed chemistry, I had a professor—or, I guess, a teacher, sorry, it was high school—teacher come to my class. He said that he needed students to do academic decathlon. My friend signed up for it, so I was like, oh, yeah, okay, I'll try it out. Went to the introductory first day, where you take a test and they tell you if you're gonna be good at it or not. I took the test, and the teacher came up to me and he said, "You're really talented. You're really smart. You're good at reading. You could be great at this. You could be on our team. Here are all these people who are gonna be on this team with you and support you in this." It was just this incredible, wonderful thing, because it was that mentor I had been hoping for, somebody who was gonna take recognition of me, and then pay me a lot of attention. He was a really good coach, and it was a really good group of kids. I would stay there for hours after school, and I would show up there two hours before school, so it allowed me to escape the environment with my mother. Then, my boyfriend would call and say, "Oh, you need to come over," things like that. I'd be like, "Well, can't. I'm doing academic decathlon. I'm stuck at practice for hours." It really was a lifesaver.

Participants talked about receiving support from educators at different times. In one instance, a teacher verbally responded to harassment of a gay student (explicit supportive interaction), and in another, a sex education teacher provided youth with accurate information about the occurrence of same sex relationship experimentation (explicit supportive interaction). Other examples of effective explicit school level support that participants reported included a swim coach who did not tolerate homophobic students on the swim team, a teacher who facilitated discussions about sexual orientation and what it meant to students, and a teacher who sponsored a student group for LGBT students. Eric, a 40-year-old genderqueer person with a bachelor's degree, who identified as pansexual and Latino shared his experience of with a teacher who offered explicit school-level support for a student organization:

I learned about Project 10, which was the original gay-straight alliances. (...) It took me a year, 'til my senior year. I found somebody who—and every week I was

making announcements for the teachers to—for somebody to be our teacher advisor for our Project 10. It was hard. There was a lot of fear at that time, I think. Teachers might—they were thinking they were going to get fired (...), but there was (*sic*) threats towards the teachers that showed interest in wanting to do it. Finally, there was one teacher, Miss White. She was brave enough to step up and do it.

Sexual minority teachers

Participants described sexual minority teachers who were closeted as well as those who were out about their sexual minority orientation. The percentages of those who talked about having a teacher who was a sexual minority (known or suspected) were as follows: four percent of the total number of participants in the Generations Study sample ($N = 191$) and 13% of the number of those who talked about interactions with educators ($n = 62$). Moreover, at least one participant in each of the three cohorts mentioned being taught by a teacher who identified as a sexual minority. Jerry, a 37-year-old male with some college, who identified as gay and Native American shared:

Once I was in my teenage years, I realized that my preschool teacher was gay. His lover was his coworker. Looking back now, after years later, I found out that my second grade teacher was a lesbian, and so was my other second grade teacher, who was having a relationship with the teacher aid, who was white. I didn't know that, growing up all those years. Then I found out that the kindergarten teacher aid was a lesbian, on the reservation, who was Native. I didn't realize all these influences that people that I was around. (... .) Looking back, there were a few people I looked up to. Then, once I realized that, in some respect, too, on the reservation, my teachers, for instance, I didn't know that they were gay, up until I finally realized I was gay. Then I'm like well, why couldn't I just have a conversation with them?

Those teachers who were out were out either implicitly (by chance such as if asked) or explicitly (by disclosing to students upon meeting them) served as role models. For example, Cat, a 36-year-old genderqueer person who identified as queer and multiracial, said,

Wouldn't be here without my mentorship of the people both in the queer community. (... .) Like Dr. Russell. He was a mentor to me as an undergraduate. I wouldn't have gone to graduate school if it wasn't for him.

Janet had experienced both implicit and explicit unsupportive interactions with teachers because of her sexual orientation, gender, and writing skills, she found support from her openly gay photography teacher. He became a role model to her, and she eventually came out to herself and others in college. She shared:

I started doing photography in 2008. I had my first openly-gay teacher. (... .) I was a "straight ally," I guess, in middle school and high school. Or, I told people that. My mom was like, "Well, if you're a straight ally, then you're gonna get killed because they're gonna think that you're gay." I didn't really want to believe that, though. I felt like what a stupid thing to get killed for. I befriended a lot of gay people who were openly gay. I had an openly gay photography teacher. It was interesting because he—the first thing I heard about the photography class was that

the teacher's gay, and that's gross or whatever. I was like wow, this is an academic class, and here you are talking shit about the teacher who's gay. I took the class on a whim. I was like, you know what, I'm just gonna take photography. I found out that I really liked it, and now I take pictures. It was significant, in the sense that he didn't define himself by being gay. He just was a teacher who happened to be gay. There was that, [then] in 2009, I came out to myself as bisexual. I would later identify as a lesbian, a year later. After high school, I wasn't really sure what to think because I was like I've done all these things—kind of a what-the-hell moment. Then I started to accept myself after I started college.

Discussion

Sexual minority youth frequently experience unsafe school climates often characterized by victimization and bullying (Russell & Fish, 2016; Toomey & Russell, 2016). Coinciding with significant societal change in visibility and attitudes regarding sexual minorities, the age of coming out has become younger for recent generations, and more youth come out among peers and educators in recent cohorts (Russell & Fish, 2019). Sexual minority youth are coming out at younger ages even though schools often lack safety for them. The adult authorities in schools, typically teachers, support personnel, and administrators, play a crucial role in the daily lives and healthy lifespan development of sexual minority (and all) youth. However, empirical evidence of anti-bullying and school-based practices intended to help sexual minority youth is limited notwithstanding indicators that these interventions serve all school stake-holders (Kember, 2015; Saewyc, 2011). Consequently, understanding educator interactions for and with sexual minority youth is central to identifying pathways for advocacy and resilience (Russell, 2005; Simons, Hutchison, & Bahr, 2017). In this study, we have examined support (or lack of support) from educators considering the changing societal and schooling contexts for sexual minority youth. The findings hold the potential to improve individual and group level support for this historically marginalized population (Meyer, 2015; Simons, 2017).

Findings from the current study identified a number of age-cohort differences, as well as some experiences that were consistent across cohorts. In our study, the younger cohort was somewhat less likely to report supportive interactions, and they more often reported experiencing unsupportive interactions than those in the middle and older cohorts. This finding is noteworthy considering studies that show an increase in homophobic bullying in recent years (Toomey & Russell, 2016). Second, regarding age, participants in the younger cohort shared more about experiences with educators than participants in the other cohorts. This was likely due to the recency of those experiences. Third, male participants across all cohorts were most likely to talk about interactions with educators. Notably, across all cohorts, interactions with school counselors were usually viewed as not helpful. This finding may be related to how the role of the school counselor has continued to evolve since the last 1800s when Jesse B. Davis, the first school counselor in the United States, began to implement systemic (comprehensive) counseling in schools (Pope, 2009). Historically, the role of the school counselor has been more reactive in nature. Additionally, over the years many schools have lacked funding to hire school counselors. As a result, not every student has had access to a school counselor for support.

Beyond the issues of counselor availability and helpfulness was the problem of educators imposing their non-affirming values on sexual minority youth. Study participants identified these individuals as hostile. As a result, educators should be encouraged to self-evaluate as part of training to better understand how their attitudes, identity, and resilience influence their ability to effectively advocate for sexual minority youth (Simons et al., 2021). Advocacy ability should also be assessed in relation to advocacy plans (Simons, 2017; Simons et al., 2017).

Another finding that crossed age-cohorts was that participants who identified as sexual minorities and White talked more about being supported by educators than participants who identified as sexual minorities and people of color (POC). It is unclear though why this might be. Two hypotheses, however, warrant consideration: (1) sexual minority POC are more resilient to stress than sexual minorities who identify as White and thus do not seek out support (Meyer, 2010), and (2) sexual minority POC prefer to seek out support outside the school. Another consideration is that educators who are White are part of the majority culture. As such, White students might be more likely to seek them out than sexual minority POC

Given the experiences described by Generations Study participants, the need for educators to increase their capacity for effective sexual minority advocacy is evident. To provide effective sexual minority advocacy comprising either implicit or explicit forms of supportive educator interaction, educators can be guided by the six Rs; seek to provide *resources*, make *referrals*, show *respect*, take *risks*, *refrain* from judgment, and *recognize* the whole student. To that end, supportive educator interactions can be demonstrated by showing interest in both the personal and academic lives of students. Further, educators can improve on their capacity to provide support for youth by asking sexual minority youth about the effectiveness of interactions and if they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc. On a school-level, support can be demonstrated by stepping up to serve as an advisor for a GSA when others will not. School counselors should also be taught about the harmful effects of conversion therapy with sexual minority youth. All educators should be taught how to refer sexual minority youth to prevention programs for affirmative support. Effective programs tend to emphasize the importance of resilience and focus on teaching about what is right over what is wrong regarding one's human development (Greenberg et al., 2003). Positive Youth Development Programs serve as an example (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009). As a final point, all educators are reminded that they are mandated reporters. This is important because sexual minority youth may become angry and sad (Simons, Ramdas, & Russell, 2020), an experience which has been found to relate to low self-esteem and thoughts of suicide.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, a gray area appears to exist between explicit and implicit interactions (supportive and unsupportive). In this space, it is unclear whether interactions are explicit or implicit. Examples include when teachers do not challenge students and do not explicitly promote and sponsor programming at schools specifically for sexual minorities and allies to sexual minorities. Second, study participants were not interviewed specifically about their school-age experiences, but the results of this study

organically reflect these retrospective experiences as an integral part of their lifespan narratives. Third, the data that participants shared was retrospective and retrieved from individuals in different age groups. While the passage of time could have affected what participants shared, it allowed us to learn about and compare the school-age experiences of sexual minority people across different age groups and to explore the underpinnings of educator interaction with sexual minority youth. And finally, only five (8%) of participants in this study resided in rural environments, thus limiting our understanding of experiences of students in these areas.

Future research

A paucity of research on the interactions between sexual minority youth and educators exists, and, of the research that does exist, most is dated. More research is warranted because newer resources are needed. Additional studies should explore the dynamics of the sexual minority student-educator interaction regarding implicit academic interaction, supportive versus unsupportive interaction, and effective sexual minority advocacy competence among different subgroups of educators. Researchers should examine how each of these subgroups effectively advocate for sexual minority students in ways that increase supportive actions and decrease negligible, unsupportive, and hostile actions. Future research should also be conducted on the relationship between modes of training professional development over time and level of effective educator interaction. Last, more participants from rural environments should be recruited to participate in future studies because sexual minority-educator interaction in rural settings may significantly differ from sexual minority-educator interaction in urban settings. We suggest recruiting individuals from athletic, educational, retirement, and service organizations.

Conclusion

Some individuals who identify as sexual minorities report that the effects of both supportive and unsupportive interactions with educators remain a significant part of their lives. For good and bad, these stories have had a lasting impact; adults remember years later who empowered them, dismissed or ignored them, or stood in their way. Their stories illustrate how educator interactions with sexual minority youth, which occur in rural, urban, and suburban areas and at the individual and group levels, either help or hinder academic success, resilience, and well-being. Studies of educators' interactions with sexual minority youth, including bullying, are limited, and in some disciplines, non-existent. Of the research findings, however, that do exist, it appears that sexual minority youth are placed at a disadvantage stemming from negative interactions because those who educate them have received inadequate or no training in sexuality and gender topics related to human development. Simons (2018) has also found that this may occur because educators have not had to interact with sexual minorities, nor learn about their culture and experiences. Fortunately, however, our results are encouraging; the results of this study show that there are distinctly different ways in which educators can effectively interact with sexual minorities to support and empower them. For the interactions to be helpful, they must hold the potential to improve the lives of sexual minorities. Many angles exist from which educators can do this—to identify and understand both the academic and personal concerns

of sexual minorities. Additionally, educators can make a positive difference in the lives of sexual minority students by working with researchers to further investigate interpersonal dynamics in schools and to develop and refine clinical practices, teaching pedagogy, and school and community policies. It is especially important for administrators to participate in this aspect; principals and superintendents may be able to fund scholarship and recruit students and educators to participate in research studies. In closing, we hope that greater numbers of educators who identify as sexual minorities will come out and be more visible as leaders in their school communities (Simons et al., 2021). This too can have an impact on how educators interact with sexual minority youth.

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Table 1.

Sample interview items.

Protocol Section	Item
Introduction	We'll talk about challenges and stressors that you may have experienced over your life.
Life story	<p>Tell me about the time in your life that is really the highest point in your life story, a time when you were just so happy and felt at peace with the world.</p> <p>Tell me about the time in your life when you felt the lowest—a time when you felt a lot of negative emotions, like sadness, despair, fear, or anger.</p> <p>Now tell me about a turning point in your life. A turning point is a time in which something happened that changed you as a person. Think of a particular event in your life that had this kind of impact on you when before this event happened, you thought of yourself one way, then the event happened, and you thought of yourself in an entirely different way.</p>
Challenges, stress, and coping	<p>Looking back over your life, tell me what you think has been the single greatest challenge you have faced so far in life. Tell me how you have handled this challenge, and how you think having to deal with this challenge has impacted you as a person.</p> <p>How about any challenges you may have had in your life relates to being [LGB term]? Starting when you were an adolescent, were there times when you were treated differently because of your sexual identity and or gender expression? Were there other times in your life that you were treated differently because of your sexual identity and or gender expression? Has that changed over time?</p> <p>Looking back over your life, were there times that you had an easy or hard time accepting yourself as [LGB term]? Has that changed over time?</p> <p>In general, in your day-to-day experiences, do you feel that society is accepting of you and other LGB people? People sometimes need to or feel like that they need to hide their LGB identity from others such as teachers, etc. Looking back over your life, please tell me about being out vs. not being out about your [LGB identity term]. What types of things helped you deal with challenges and negative experiences you've had related to being [LGB term]?</p>
Social and historical moments	Can you tell me about your memories during puberty and adolescence about what was happening in society with regard to LGBT issues?

Table 2.
Coding across cohorts related to four-factor theory of sexual-minority educator interaction.

	Younger (<i>n</i> = 33)			Middle (<i>n</i> = 19)			Older (<i>n</i> = 10)			All participants (<i>N</i> = 62)			Frequency
	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%	Average <i>n</i>	
Unsupportive	26	79		3	16		5	50		34	55	11.33	Typical
Individual level	14	42		1	5		3	30		18	29	6.00	Variant
Explicit	12	36		1	5		3	30		16	26	5.33	Variant
Implicit	2	6		0	0		0	0		2	3	0.67	Rare
Academic	5	15		0	0		0	0		5	8	1.67	Variant
Personal	9	27		1	5		3	30		13	21	4.33	Variant
School level	12	36		2	10		2	20		16	26	5.33	Variant
Explicit	11	33		0	0		2	20		13	21	4.33	Variant
Implicit	1	3		2	10		0	0		3	5	1.00	Rare
Academic	0	0		1	5		1	10		2	3	0.67	Rare
Personal	12	36		1	5		1	10		14	23	4.67	Variant
Supportive	14	42		11	58		6	60		31	50	10.33	Typical
Individual level	6	18		7	37		4	40		17	27	5.67	Variant
Explicit	6	18		7	37		4	40		17	27	5.67	Variant
Implicit	0	0		0	0		0	0		0	0	0.00	Rare
Academic	1	3		0	0		1	10		2	3	0.67	Rare
Personal	5	15		7	37		3	30		15	24	5.00	Variant
School level	8	24		4	21		2	20		14	23	4.67	Variant
Explicit	7	21		4	21		1	10		12	19	4.00	Variant
Implicit	1	3		0	0		1	10		2	3	0.67	Rare
Academic	2	6		2	11		1	10		5	8	1.67	Variant
Personal	6	18		2	11		1	10		9	15	3.00	Variant

Note. *n* = Number of participants across cohorts reporting type of support and subtype. Descriptive labels for code frequency are: general = all or all but one; typical = more than half; variant = up to half; rare = one to three.

Table 3.

Selected participant information.

Pseudonym	Sexual Identity	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Cohort	Age
Elaine	Lesbian	Female	Asian	Some college	Younger	19
Narda	Bisexual	Female	Latina	High school	Younger	19
Dolores	Bisexual	Female	Latina	Some postgraduate	Younger	23
Denise	Queer	Female	Black	Technical/Trade education	Younger	24
Manny	Queer	Male	Multiracial	High school	Younger	24
Janet	Lesbian	Female	Asian	Bachelor's degree	Younger	24
Cat	Queer	Genderqueer	Multiracial	Completed postgraduate	Middle	36
Jerry	Gay	Male	Native American	Some college	Middle	37
Darwyn	Gay	Male	Black	Middle school/Some high school	Middle	40
Eric	Pansexual	Genderqueer	Latino	Bachelor's degree	Middle	40
Ellen	Lesbian	Female	White	Some college	Older	56
Richard	Gay	Male	White	Bachelor's degree	Older	58
Gary	Gay	Male	White	Bachelor's degree	Older	59

Table 4.

Demographic data.

Characteristic	Younger (<i>n</i> = 33)	Middle (<i>n</i> = 18)	Older (<i>n</i> = 11)	All participants (<i>N</i> = 62)	%
Mean age	22	37	56	32	52
Gender identity					
Female	11	4	3	18	29
Male	18	11	8	37	60
Genderqueer	4	3	0	7	11
Sexual orientation					
Bisexual	5	4	1	10	16
Gay/lesbian	21	12	9	42	68
Pansexual	3	1	0	4	6
Queer	4	2	0	6	10
Race/ethnicity					
American Indian	1	3	0	4	6
Asian	6	2	0	8	13
Black	7	2	1	10	16
Latinx/Hispanic	6	6	3	15	24
Multiracial	5	3	1	9	15
White	8	3	5	16	26
Education					
6th–8th grade	0	1	0	1	2
High school	7	0	0	7	11
Associate's	0	2	0	2	3
Bachelor's	6	5	2	13	21
Some college	17	5	4	26	42
Some postgraduate	2	1	0	3	5
Post-graduate	0	5	4	9	14
Technical	1	0	0	1	2