Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth Talk about Experiencing and Coping with School Violence: A Qualitative Study

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This qualitative study used five focus groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth attending public high schools to examine their experiences with school violence. Core themes focused on lack of community and empowerment leading to youth being without a sense of human agency in school. Negative attention themes were indicative of the vulnerability that the youth felt at school. As principal means of coping, the LGBT youth escaped and avoided stressors by distancing themselves from school. From emergent themes of LGBT youth’s experiences of school violence, recommendations to make schools safe and supportive learning environments for them are provided. These included the need for
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policies and rules, peer education, planned educational activities, and in-service training for school personnel about LGBT youth to create inclusive school communities.

KEYWORDS agency, bisexual, empowerment, gay, high school, lesbian, safe schools, school violence, transgender, victimization, violence, youth

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth are becoming aware of, identifying, and disclosing their sexual attraction and gender identity at young ages. In a study of 528 LGB youth, D’Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2008) found that males first became aware of their same-sex attraction at an average age of 12 years and females at 13. Both identified as LGB at an average of 14 years and disclosed their sexual orientation at 15. In a separate study of 55 transgender youth, those transitioning from male-to-female (MTF) first considered themselves transgender at an average age of 13 and first told someone at 14; those transitioning from female-to-male (FTM) first considered themselves as transgender at an average age of 15 years and first disclosed at 17 (Grossman, D’Augelli, Salter, & Hubbard, 2005).

LGBT youth who have had a visible presence in schools, with or without concurrent gender nonconformity, often reported daily experiences with school violence emanating from homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Grossman, D’Augelli, & Salter, 2006; Hershberger & D’Augelli, 1995; Telljohann & Price, 1993). Experiences of violence at school within the last year because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity by peers were reported by one-third of the 3,450 youth, aged 13–18, surveyed by a self-administered online questionnaire (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). Additionally, 69 percent frequently heard the pejorative student expressions “That’s so gay” or “You’re so gay,” and one in every two young persons frequently heard students make homophobic remarks such as “faggot,” “dyke,” and “queer.” LGBT students were three times as likely as non-LGBT students (22% vs. 7%) to report not feeling safe at school, and nine out of ten LGBT youth (vs. 62% of non-LGBT youth) reported verbal and physical harassment or assault during the past year because of their perceived or actual appearance, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, race/ethnicity, disability, or religion. The study also found a link between experiences of bullying and unsafe learning environments with poor academic performance as students who experienced harassment were more likely to miss classes and skip school days.

According to the Massachusetts 2003 Youth Risk behavior Survey (MYBRS; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004), which questioned 3,624 students in grades 9 to 12 from 50 randomly selected public high schools, students who identified as LGB or had same-sex contact were significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to have been bullied (42%
vs. 21%), threatened or injured with a weapon (22% vs. 5%), skipped school because they felt unsafe (15% vs. 4%), and experienced dating violence (30% vs. 9%) or sexual contact against their will (41% vs. 8%). Additionally, LGB students were significantly more likely to carry a weapon and to be in a physical fight (24% vs. 13%), or involved in gang-related activity (23% vs. 9%) in school.

Other studies have supported these findings. For example, in the previously mentioned study of 528 LGB youth, ages 15–19 years, D’Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2006) found that 78 percent reported experiencing verbal sexual orientation victimization (SOV) and 11 percent physical SOV. The most frequently reported locations of verbal SOV were: 72 percent at school, 13 percent in public settings, and 10 percent at home. The most frequently reported settings of the first physical SOV were 56 percent, 25 percent, and 9 percent, respectively. Therefore, a majority of LGB youth first experienced both verbal and physical SOV at school.

Bontempo and D’Augelli (2002) examined the effects of at-school victimization on 315 LGB high school students’ health-risk behaviors. They found that the effect of sexual orientation status and high levels of at-school victimization were associated with the highest levels of health-risk behaviors. LGB youth who reported high levels of at-school victimization also reported higher levels of substance use, suicidality, and sexual-risk behaviors than their heterosexual peers who reported high levels of at-school victimization. Victimization of LGB youth in the school environment has also been linked to poor grades, school absenteeism, and high drop-out rates (Ryan & Futterman, 1998).

A study conducted by the Human Rights Watch (2001), was important in that its research design included students and significant adults. The researchers conducted interviews with a convenience sample of 140 LGBT youth (between the ages of 12 and 21) and 130 adults (teachers, counselors, administrators and parents) in six states. Nearly every young person interviewed described school incidents of verbal and other non-physical harassment because of perception of their sexual orientation. For many, relentless verbal abuse and other forms of harassment were part of their normal daily routine. Other forms of harassment reported by the LGBT youth included written notes, obscene and suggestive cartoons, and graffiti scrawled on walls or lockers. The researchers concluded that the unrelenting verbal attacks on LGBT students created a hostile climate that became unbearable, undermined the students’ ability to focus at school, and affected their well-being.

While some of the significant findings from the studies reported above provide a broad picture of the problem of the violence that LGBT youth face in schools, with the exception of the Human Rights Watch study (2001) and a qualitative study of four male-to-female transgender students who attended an alternative school (Gutierrez, 2004), findings from contemporary research
studies failed to report young persons' feelings, opinions, and views of their experiences with school violence.

STUDY DESIGN AND PURPOSE

In this study, we provided LGBT youth opportunities to talk about their past and current experiences of school violence. Using focus groups, we employed the constant comparison method, a technique of grounded theory that enhances analytic depth by looking for key issues, recurrent events or activities that became categories for focus from which to discover basic social processes that emerged within and between groups (Glaser, 1978). Additionally, the focus group design allowed exchanges among participants that helped them to clarify the meaning and behaviors of past experiences of school violence for themselves (Morgan, 1993) and permitted analysis of the “content” versus the “form” of school violence as advocated by Kimmel and Mahler (2003).

School violence is a complex phenomenon. Here we employed the ecological model as a framework to examine it. This model recognizes that transactions between individuals and their environments are complex and that the patterns of social behavior are best understood when one examines the contributions of individual, social, and cultural domains, as well as the interactions among them.

The aim of this study was to understand what LGBT youth found as oppressive and destructive social conditions in their schools. As a result, we hoped to make recommendations so that the interactions between them and school environments could be improved. Based on the quantitative studies cited above, probe questions were developed. These were then used with a purposive sampling of LGBT public high school students in focus groups.

This study embraced a wide perspective of violence, one that was put forth by The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation (cited in Campos, 2005, p. 68). A synopsis of the phenomenon of violence suggests that:

- Violence is words and actions that hurt people;
- Violence occurs when a person uses pain, fear, or hurt to make one do something;
- Violence is using words to scare, bully, embarrass, call names, or put someone down;
- Violence is hurting a person's body or the things a person cares about.

This study of LGBT youth sought to expand knowledge of earlier studies in four ways. First, the present study included the perceptions of mostly ethnically and racially minority youth in an urban environment, whereas previous studies relied on predominantly white youth (Elze, 2003). The study also
included transgender youth, whereas all but one of the previous studies focused on the victimization of LGB youth. Third, focus groups allowed youth to include positive and negative experiences, as did Elze’s (2003) study, but from the experiences of LGBT students in public high schools. Finally, since this is a qualitative study, themes emerged from and are supported by the youths’ words and their interactions among themselves, rather than quantitative summaries based on the researchers’ words, e.g., “Were you ever teased, insulted, harassed, or bullied because of your sexual orientation?”

METHOD

A diverse sample of LGBT youth was recruited from the after-school program of a community-based organization serving sexual minority youth in New York City. Announcements were made asking youth who attended public high schools to volunteer to participate (with a $30 incentive) in a focus group to talk about their experiences in school.

The focus groups, which were used as the units of analyses, were held on five days during March and April, 2006. There were two groups of lesbian and bisexual females (n = 6 each); two groups of gay and bisexual males (n = 8, n = 6); and one group of male-to-female transgender youth (n = 5).1

Each participant reviewed and signed the consent form approved by New York University’s Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects. For those under the age of 18 a youth advocate was present to assure that the youth understood and consented to participation in the group in lieu of parental consent (as many parents were not aware of the youths’ sexual orientation or gender identity). Basic ground rules for the group processes were discussed and agreed to (e.g., confidentiality, safe space, one person speaks at a time), and procedures to be followed were explained (e.g., introductions, probe questions, discussion, audio-taping and transcription). Finally, in order to establish a common vocabulary for the group discussions, definitions of terms were presented and agreed on for the following phrases: birth sex, gender identity, gender expression, gender role expectations; actual sexual identity; perceived sexual identity; verbal attacks; and physical attacks.2

Prior to the focus group, participants completed a demographic questionnaire that also included questions regarding sexual identity and gender expression milestones. The groups were then facilitated by graduate students of various ethnicities and races, who were unknown to the youth participants. There was one male for the male groups, one female for female groups, and a female for the MTF transgender group. Each facilitator was involved in the design, formulation and construction of the probe questions and the demographic questionnaire. Each had previous experience in working with LGBT youth under the supervision of the first author, who was the
principal investigator and who has a history of service to and research with the organization.

Each focus group was conducted from one and one-half to two hours, which provided sufficient time for the youth to describe and discuss their experiences and feelings related to verbal and physical attacks in school. The time period also allowed the youth to recommend and discuss ways that interpersonal verbal and physical violence in schools may be prevented.

The audiotapes of the five focus groups were transcribed by a professional transcription service. The service checked and certified the accuracy of the transcriptions. Although invited during the consent process, none of the youth chose to review the transcriptions. The researchers analyzed the data using the techniques of grounded theory as defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Using open coding procedures, i.e., “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing the data” (p. 61), each author independently established themes. The collected themes were checked by one another to ensure trustworthiness of the coding and the emergent themes.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Participants

The five focus groups were the units of analyses. They consisted of 31 sexual minority youth, ages 15–19, from 21 different New York City public high schools. Table 1 depicts the demographic profiles of each participant.

With regard to their birth sex, 19 (61%) of the participants identified as male and 12 (39%) as female. The youth described their gender identity as follows: 13 (42%) male, 10 (32%) female, 5 (16%) transgender, and 3 (10%) queer. Eleven of the participants identified their sexual orientation as gay (36%), 9 (29%) as lesbian, 8 (26%) as bisexual and 3 (10%) as heterosexual (who were MTF transgender youth). Regarding ethnicity and race, ten (32%) identified as mixed race, 7 (22%) as African American/Black, 7 (22%) Hispanic/White, 3 (10%) Hispanic/Black, 2 (7%) Asian, and 2 (7%) “other.”

The youth resided in the same four boroughs of New York City in which they attended schools (i.e., Brooklyn, Manhattan, The Bronx, and Queens), and they were about evenly divided among the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. Approximately two-thirds (n = 20) of the participants described their family’s income level as “middle-middle” income, about one-quarter (n = 7%) as “high-middle,” and 13 percent (n = 4)) as “low-middle” or “low.”

More than half of the 30 youth who responded to the questions about their gender expression milestones (n = 19) indicated that they were called a “sissy” or “tomboy” under the age of 13, and approximately half of all of the youth (n = 15) reported that their parents tried to make them stop acting like a sissy/tomboy. The majority (n = 17) disclosed their sexual orientation
or gender identity to someone else between the ages of 14–16 (or grades 9–11), while almost one-third \((n = 9)\) came out between the ages of 11–13 (or grades 6–8). Most of the youth \((n = 18)\) first disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity to a person whose birth sex was female. Five \((16\%)\) youth reported less than one-fourth of the people they knew were aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity; 3 \((10\%)\) between 25\% and 49\%; 7 \((23\%)\) between 50\% and 75\%; and 16 \((51\%)\) more than 75\%. Therefore, the youths’ sexual orientation or gender identity was known to approximately two-thirds of people in their social networks.
Themes

Using inductive discovery from each group and constant comparison between the groups, the researchers identified differing but not mutually exclusive themes. The themes have been placed in one of three categories: core themes, sexual minority youth as objects of negative attention; recommendations for the prevention of school violence.

Core Themes. Two themes emerged with high frequency in relation to the LGBT youths’ experiences of interpersonal school violence and their thoughts as to ways it can be prevented in the future: 1) lack of community, and 2) lack of empowerment with a concurrent lack of a sense of human agency. The youth reported that they had no sense of being a part of their school’s community; therefore, they had no sense of empowerment or feelings of influence that comes from belonging to a collective inclusive of sexual minority youth.3

The LGBT youth realized that the “goodness of fit” between them and their schools did not exist. They had awareness that they were marginalized categorically as sexual minority youth in public school settings and had little or no control over how other students treated them. Although they realized that their grievances were attributable to outside adversaries, generally they felt that not much could be done to remedy the situation. They could not envision any catalysts for change. They felt that they were unable to act without assistance. Even if they received help in school (which was rare), once they were off school property, they were on their own once again.

Carl describes the lack of “goodness of fit” between sexual minority youth and the school setting.

In school it wouldn’t matter where you are going. You be going to the next class, somebody is saying something to you. You can go to lunch; somebody else has something to say. You go to the bathroom; somebody has something to say. It’s like everywhere I go somebody has something to say because of the way I dress, the way I look, the way I act.

The youth in all five groups reported experiences and provided reflections on society’s heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia that they saw mirrored in their schools. The youth communicated that heterosexual youth used their perceived and actual sense of power over sexual minority youth to deal out consequences for violating society’s heterosexual norms and gender role expectations. In the words of youth from three of the groups:

Deja: When it comes down to it, I am just tired of straight students looking at gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders as species; like you’re [sic] some sort of
different species living on this earth. I’m tired of guys asking “Why did you choose that sexual preference? Why are you gay? Why are you lesbian?” You just want to live your life the way you want to live it without people questioning you and trying to make decisions for you... Yes, I’m in school; that’s what you need to know about me. I’m a girl, no matter how I dress. You do not have to know who I like. It’s just like I said, it’s all brainwash... because that’s not what you like.

Lane: I think they are intimidated by certain stereotypes about us, like we’re going to make a pass at them.

Jamalia: It’s like what I said. It’s the worst ones, like the ones you really don’t like and you don’t even look at them; they have a bone to pick with you because you are not like them.

LGBT youth said that heterosexual youth primarily used name-calling, hate speech, harassment, and sometimes physical violence. Without assistance from teachers, administrators and security guards, which they received rarely, the LGBT youth, stated that there had been an absence of mastery that would enable them to effect any change in their situations. Five youth, Bobby, Lucky, Timmy, Tommy, and Jocelyn (from four groups) most clearly represent thoughts and opinions expressed in all five groups:

Bobby: No matter where you go, people are going to be gay-bashing or have derogatory comments about individuals or certain facilities...

Lucky: I don’t think you can escape a person, the pain, or how a person would treat a person of another lifestyle. It is going to be everywhere, even in the [Greenwich] Village, but I’m just saying it can’t be stopped. That’s all I’m saying. It can’t be stopped. Even in schools it won’t be stopped...

Interviewer: What about principals, teachers, staff? Do you feel like they’ve been helpful?

Timmy: Some teachers may be helpful, but some teachers may not be because they don’t care. They just don’t care. They like, if they see somebody making fun of you they don’t care. They’re teaching the class; that’s their job. They are just doing their job, making their money. That’s what they go to school for, to teach.... We really can’t stop that [i.e., experiencing verbal and physical attacks]. That’s everybody’s opinion...

Tommy: So if someone is thinking negative about us, we just can’t stop that, but state our own opinions and that’s just gonna keep on going back and forth ’cause that’s a never-ending process.... So, there’s not much to do to change it. Some students, they just don’t like gay people, they just don’t like them. Some people not gonna change their mind. You can’t force somebody to like you if you’re gay. It just doesn’t go that way. If they’re homophobic, then they’re homophobic. There’s nothing
you can do about it, you know. If they want to be ignorant about it, then that’s that. If they hate us, they hate us.

Jocelyn: My first time being attacked and teased was when I was 12 and in junior high school. Some boys found out who I was [i.e., male versus female] and I was in junior high school. There were 10 of them against me and there was nothing I could do. They jumped me and beat me up when I left school. I came back [to school] the next day with bumps, bruises, cuts, and black eyes. I told everybody about it, but they didn’t want to do anything about it though.

Similar to the sexual minority youth in the Homes and Cahill (2005) study, many LGBT students in this study who experienced sexual orientation or gender identity victimization felt such an absence of human agency that led them not to report the incidents. Not only did they fear their parents’ homophobic reactions, but they were also aware that teachers and school staff were often silent or ready to blame the victims. Reis (1999) verified this non-reporting of victimization by LGBT students by the finding that only one in four of cases of LGB youth victimization witnessed by adults were reported to the Washington State Safe Schools Coalition.

According to the youth participants in this study, the climates of their schools, in which their harassment was not a rare phenomenon, naturally led to their feeling “outside” of their school communities. Because of the lack of power that accompanies the absence of community, along with the youths’ perceptions that reporting harassment incidents to teachers and other school staff does not lead them to intervene, the youth felt a lack of agency that they could lead to meaningful changes in their unsafe learning environments.

**Negative Attention Themes.** These themes reflect vulnerability felt by the sexual minority youth in this study. The youth in all focus groups found themselves to be the objects of hate speech, name-calling, insults, and harassment. Ilaney, for instance, commented:

This boy had a crush on me and he found out that I had a girlfriend, and he turned all the boys against me, and then the girls. Every time I passed them they would be like, “You dyke ….” I ended up getting into a fight with a boy. I always felt like I had to watch my back in school because they [other students] were so judgmental ….

The one exception to verbal victimization was the “straight-acting” gay and bisexual male in the two male groups. All of the groups, however, thought that other LGBT youth felt uncomfortable, awkward, and fearful being among other students, always feeling the need to be “on guard” to protect themselves. They also believed that lesbians “had it easier” than gay males who were self-identified or gender non-conforming. Snake, for example, observed:
Lesbians have it way easier in school [than gay males], way, way easier. Because it’s all about the heterosexual guys fantasy of having sex with a lesbian and her girlfriend. Like saying, “Okay, let me befriend this AG [i.e., aggressive girl].” You know, have her bring her girlfriend over.

The harassment faced by the lesbians, though perhaps not direct, was no less difficult. Lucky shared the following incident:

It is a performing arts high school, so you know the boys, some of them, are just out there. But it was mostly the girls that were undercover. And I was like the only AG in the school. So everybody had something to say, but not in front of my face. Like I heard a lot of gossip; he said, she said, and all that stuff. It just killed me . . . I was upset. I had been downgraded.

In response to these negative contexts, some youth in each group described how they had removed themselves from situations in which they felt unsafe:

*Lane:* I (gay male) was in the eighth grade and the kids found out that I was attracted to boys, so for like three months, they’d like say there goes that faggot, homo and stuff like that. I’d get upset because it’s like everybody is trying to get on you. It was kind of hard, but there was nothing I could do for like three months until my mother transferred me out of the school.

*Leonardo:* They would call me names like faggot, fairy, sissy, and the more they called me that, the more I was pissed. They would call me names to the point where I couldn’t take it no more. I felt depressed because they made me feel like I didn’t fit in so I would always sit by myself in a corner in the dark with nothing to do by myself . . . I like kept it inside. It was hard. It actually made things harder. It’s like living inside you. That’s why I think a lot of homosexual people have journals or diaries.

*Bobby:* I don’t go to gym because the gym teacher tried to mock me ‘cause I was like “I don’t want to do this,” and she was like, “You don’t want to do this.” I was like “Excuse me!” And she was like, “Oh you queens, that’s what you call yourselves, right?” I was like “Excuse me!” I don’t know you [like] that, [but] on a teacher to student basis you [should not] be kidding with me like that,” and I was like “good bye.” . . . I never returned to gym class.

The event above was not the only one described by participants involving adults in which the young person distanced himself or herself. In her focus group, Deja relayed the following story:
There was this incident with me that I think kind of scared me. It was my first day of high school, and I was on line, because they [security guards] check the kids before they go in. There are metal detectors, and they have a female and a male line. I look like a boy, but I was standing on the female line. You know, we get checked. A security guard said, “Excuse me; this is the girls’ line. You’re on the wrong line.” I explained to her that I’m a female, and she was like, “Well, I don’t check dykes.” And I’m like “What do you mean dyke?” I didn’t like dyke, and I felt that she was unprofessional to me. Because of that incident, I didn’t go back to that school. That was my first day and my last day of that high school. It kind of messed me up in regards to my education because you see, I didn’t feel comfortable just getting into the school; so imagine how it was gonna feel when I actually attended my class.

Deja stayed out of school for three months before finding a different school that was more gay-friendly.

Whereas all the participants agreed that life in school was traumatic for those males who expressed gender nonconforming behaviors, those male-to-female transgender youth who were very feminine and could pass for females reported that they could prevent verbal and physical attacks based on their gender expression; but, it was always difficult for those males who could not pass, or to use the transgender youths’ words: “were spooked” or “found out.” Jocelyn stated it as follows:

All right, what I think is that if you’re dressed up as a female, nothing will happen to you. Now, if you start coming out of nowhere acting like (excuse my language) a faggot, it’s not cute. If you’re dressed up as a female, they sit there and think of you as a female; but if you give them a reason to think of something else, then it’s your own fault. The whole point of being transsexual is to live your life as a female. What I go by is GLITZ. It’s a connection program, Girls Living in Transgender Zone..., all right? It’s something that I have been doing since I was 12. That’s why I have not been spooked or being caught by “Oh, that’s a man!” If you live as a girl, you’ll be treated as a girl.

In addition to verbal assaults, participants in each of the five focus groups indicated that they found themselves vulnerable to physical attacks. As objects of hate crimes and taunting that led to other acts of violence, some youth dropped out of school. Those who remained avoided places in the school building in which they would be most vulnerable, such as in the bathrooms. Other youth avoided disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity in the school environment; a few engaged in violent responses.

Chucky remembers experiences in junior high school:
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They be like “faggot this,” “homo that.” I was short so that I couldn’t really like defend myself. It happened every place, anywhere, in class, gym class, the halls, on the way home. I guess I would get depressed at times, where I would think to myself, “Am I normal? Why can’t I be like the other kids? Why can’t I be sexually attracted to girls?” I stayed quiet. I was just quiet.

Once, with a group of boys watching, Chucky “got hit with a bat on my back. I ended up fighting. I had to slam a bottle on his face to actually get him off of me because he was like actually bigger than me. Then I just went home.”

Gym was also a difficult school space for Taylor, who recalls dodge ball being called “faggot dodge. The object of the game was for all gay people to dodge the ball coming from thirty other people. That’s how it was! Now, I just don’t go to gym class.”

Snake remembers being in eighth grade when he was walking down the school hall. I was talking to my friends, and I’m honestly going to say that someone did stab me. They stabbed me with a pair of scissors in my back. They stabbed me again in the leg, and I overheard them say “Faggot! We hope you die.” I didn’t go to school for three months.

When Snake did return, “Everybody forgot; they don’t remember the incident.”

Aiya is a transgender female. It was her fourteenth birthday and she was walking home from school.

These guys followed me saying that I was a gay male. I was with my friend, and they started chasing us around. They threw me in the trash. They started calling me names like homo and hit me. My friend, a guy, saved me. Well, it made me feel like, “Wow! If I have to go through this in order to live happy, I just didn’t want to be alive.”

[Aiya stayed home from school for a year and tried to commit suicide.] I ended up in a hospital. My dad was really upset with me until the doctors tried to explain it to him. I got a little better, and then I found [another] school.

Kosciw and Cullen (2001) reported that more than 80 percent of the LGBT youth surveyed reported verbal harassment during the past 12 months because of their sexual orientation, with half saying this happened frequently or often. Additionally, one-in-five reported physical assaults over the past year because of their sexual orientation, while one-in-ten reported being assaulted because of their gender identity or gender nonconformity. Overall,
nearly 70 percent of the students reported feeling unsafe in school. As indicated by the students in all five focus groups in this study, many youth spent long periods of time not enrolled in school. Those who stayed in schools where they had been harassed or assaulted indicated that they had a difficult time paying attention in class.

Recommendations for Prevention. Participants in each of the groups shared thoughts about the single most important action that should be done to prevent verbal and physical attacks based on gender expression or perceived/actual sexual identity in their schools. The responses varied by groups.

The two groups of gay and bisexual males framed one of their recommendations as being their truthful selves (i.e., not trying to pass). They placed the responsibility for teaching heterosexual youth on the individual, not on the school. Jim stated:

The school can’t do anything to change anyone’s idea. It’s basically your mindset as you are growing up. It’s whatever your parents taught you to think. That’s what you believe; that’s how you grow up thinking. I’ll just be myself, that’s the most I can do is be myself. It’s whether a person can accept it or not. If you don’t accept it, I’ll avoid you. If you can accept it, then teaching begins.

Holmes and Cahill (2005) observed that LGBT students can become sources of support through peer education, but they can also be responsible for student-initiated events such as the National Day of Silence. By participating in events such as these, LGBT students gain a sense that they can make a difference and contribute positively to their communities (Lee, 2002). In fact, Mayberry (2006) suggested that supporting LGBT grass-root activism may be more effective in changing schools than “assisting” LGBT students. Student political activism, she argued, should be a foundation of resisting heterocentric school environments, challenging the institutional structures, and constructing positive LGBT identities in school environments.

One common form of student activism is Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs). Youth in all five focus groups thought of and suggested their formation, indicating that GSAs provided opportunities for some LGBT youth to obtain allies and to feel supported. The youth indicated that GSAs served broader functions such as educating students, teachers and school staff who are not LGBT people or their allies. However, the focus group participants expressed little awareness of GSAs in NYC public high schools, usually naming only one or two schools that had them. Only one of the girls’ groups could provide the specific names of nine public high schools in which GSAs have been formed.

As indicated in a report summarizing the Massachusetts Safe Schools pilot program (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002), GSAs are only part of the solution.
Clear policy statements backed by technical, legal and financial resources and the involvement of key administrators (e.g., building principals, district superintendents and school committees), educators, and community and student leaders are at least as important as GSAs in creating lasting school safety.

Three of the focus groups (both groups of males and one of females) reached a similar conclusion. First, the GSAs are not as strong as the LGBT youth would like them to be. Second, the girls’ group concluded that GSAs would not be helpful because they are not “integration groups” where heterosexual boys and girls would come to understand what being lesbian, gay, and bisexual is really about. The two male groups concluded that such groups would isolate them even more than they were as well as make them more publicly vulnerable.

Being public, as Antoine pointed out, was not the same as being vulnerable:

I know at least 30 people that are gay, lesbian or bisexual that go to my school, and none of them show up. I think that if everybody just started coming to school and just like facing it, and stuff like that, when somebody hit them, they hit back, like defended themselves. Like, they (i.e., heterosexual students) would get used to seeing a lot of LGB people every day and they’ll just shut up. Like everybody hides and then they see you come back every now and then, they want you to leave again. They want you to stay out. So, when they see you come back they going to start cursing you out and beating you until you leave again. That will not happen if you come every single day.

This notion of agency was also discussed within the transgender group and best articulated by Jocelyn:

The bashers are students, the bashers are outside. It could be the boys on the corner. It could be anybody, the police, anybody. I’m not going to be messed with. I’ll beat you right back. They’re coming up to me no more, no more running, no more hiding, no more crying, no more writing things down in your diaries. Let’s stand up for ourselves, because if you don’t do it now, when will you?

Along with visibility and agency, Antoine articulated the importance of using school policies and procedures. “If they need to, they should go to the dean’s office and write a report or whatever.”

As an alternative to GSAs, three of the focus groups (two male and one female) talked about formal educational processes and rules against defaming LGBT people. They made suggestions of bringing LGBT organizations and speakers to the schools to educate heterosexual students that LGBT students are like everybody else, except they are attracted to same-sex people. They also suggested that there could be school trips to organizations
that are designed to help LGBT people. According to these youth, such activities would help change mindsets and thereby lessen, but not eliminate, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia.

With regard to rules, Jamalia voiced the groups’ suggestions about the types of rules and bringing organizations to schools.

I go to B… Community High School, and they have two major rules. You can’t use the “n” word that degrades black people and you can’t use the “f” word that degrades gay people. A couple of months ago, they dedicated an entire day for [LGB] organizations to come in and talk to everyone, showing videos, doing surveys and all that stuff. So if you have people come into the schools, trying to connect with people who have a different mindset and a different background and everything, then maybe with stuff like this homophobia could be eliminated somehow.

Concurrently, all of the LGBT focus groups agreed that there was a need for educating teachers, guidance counselors and security guards so that they do not think it is “[morally] wrong to be LGBT” and they recognize that even though youth are LGBT “they still have their feelings hurt when people talk about them.” As Taylor observed:

I don’t feel protected whatsoever. Like okay, I come to this school. I’m an A student, and yet you’re letting kids who are doing nothing with their lives attack people who stand up for who they are. I just felt like our principal, assistant principal, and the rest of staff were like they didn’t really care. They were just like, “Oh, another gay got beat up. Okay, whatever.”

The youth in every focus group thought that such an educational mandate cannot come from the LGBT youth. Bobby said:

The principal needs to educate her employees to make it safe for gay students. There’s nothing that I’m going to tell teachers, the principals, [counselors and security guards]. Until they know how to take care of us, it’s really meant for us gay men and women to stick by each other and fight together [and take care of each other].

The two female and the transgender focus groups talked about the need for schools to provide them with role models and mentors. By having positive role models in their everyday lives and in the media (via news, television, and movies) LGBT youth learn that their sexuality is in the mainstream (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Simerly, 2003). While some LGBT youth know of celebrity LGB role models (e.g., Ellen DeGeneres, Elton John, Rupert Everett, Wilson Cruz, Freddie Mercury, Matthew Shepard, and Margaret Cho) they are not aware of others who are admired and respected. For
example, most public schools fail to teach that many esteemed authors (e.g., Oscar Wilde, Langston Hughes, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, Tennessee Williams, Audre Lorde, and Margaret Mead) were involved in one or more same-sex relationships.

But, beyond celebrity role models there are personally known role models. In a study of 250 LGB youth, ages 16–20 years, Grossman & D’Augelli (2004) found they most admired or respected personally known role models who were: 1) open about their sexual orientation, or lived freely; 2) intelligent, strong-minded, or demonstrated leadership; 3) desirable physical appearance or sexually attractive; 4) talented or demonstrated professionalism; 5) sociable, fun, amusing, had a good sense of humor or demonstrated a positive attitude; 6) supportive, caring or provided information and resources; 7) successful (other than financial), and 8) an honest, moral, good person.

It is these personally known role models, as Deja expressed, who may have the greatest impact:

Teenagers living today, especially in the gay community, need mentors. Because I feel we get put through a lot of things. Especially, homelessness—getting kicked out because your parents don’t agree with what you are doing, fights [at home], fights in school and things like that. So, we need mentors that we can relate to. [They do] not necessarily have to be LGBT, but they need to need to know what they’re talking about and help us to prevent certain things from happening in our lives that we will regret in the future. Harvey Milk High School, [a school attended by predominantly LGBT students] does that a lot you know, but I don’t feel we have that in regular schools.

Individuals cannot be a role model unless they have disclosed their sexual or gender identity. As a component of the process of obtaining role models, the majority of girls in one of the female groups and the transgender group felt strongly about the need for school personnel who are LGBT to be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, especially principals and teachers. They indicated that this would not only be a valuable method of preventing attacks, as the students would not want to get their principals and teachers angry, but it would also be supportive of those teachers who showed caring and concern for LGBT students.

Although a few females voiced the view that sexual orientation was the teachers’ and principals’ “personal business,” Taisha and Jamala, echoing the majority of the females’ point of view, disagreed: “Teachers should be more open about their homosexuality. More teachers need to come out . . . to be open to talking about and to be more open to helping [LGBT students.]”

Supportive Staff Actions. There are adults working in public schools who are supportive of LGBT youth. Leonardo’s male peers always blew kisses
when the teacher was out of the room. “I would get bothered all the time. It was to the point that I could not even use the boys’ bathroom. I used to go to the girls’ bathroom.” Some of the teachers and the school guards would give him permission to leave the school building twenty minutes before dismissal time so that he could get home safely. He told of one security guard,

‘cause she knew that I was gay, she’d let me go to the girls' bathroom. There’s no way I was going to use the boys’ bathroom because she knew the boys would say “What are you looking at? You faggot and stuff like that.” So, she always let me use the girls' bathroom.

Deja also described the role that a supportive teacher had played:

When I was talking about some subject in class, I probably offended one of the boys in class, and he disrespected me. Since I dress like a boy, he was just like, “Then why you trying to dress like a boy?” or “Why are you trying to be a man?” . . . So, I said ‘You just mad because I get more girls than you.” And after the whole situation [at the end of class], my teacher approached me and he was like, “Oh, I really appreciate what you did, standing up for yourself like that and making it known that you’re gay or whatever.” He just gave me that much respect that I had done that. And he went on as how he had a friend from college who never came out of the closet and he regretted it. So, he was like it’s cool that you’re age 15 and you’re able to do that for yourself. And he appreciated it. And I felt cool. I was like proud, you know.

Others gave examples of supportive actions that schools can take by working with communities to provide more places for LGBT youth and for enhancing communication between youth and their parents. Lucky suggested that schools provide meetings for parents so that they could become more understanding, accepting, and supportive of LGBT youth. She said “I think that it will prevent physical attacks [of LGBT youth] by their parents that a lot of kids get. Others added, and “get thrown out.” Lucky continued, “My father used to hit me a lot because I was gay.”

The role that schools can play to educate parents—whether they have LGBT children or not—is one too often neglected by even well-meaning administrators. While most of the other female group members agreed that the relationships between LGBT youth and their parents was a problem and that it affected their education, none reported such initiatives in their New York City public schools.
LIMITATIONS AND RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative study was designed to focus on and understand the views, opinions, feelings, and content of LGBT youths’ experiences of violence in public schools. Participants, primarily ethnically and racially minority youth, attended schools which were components of a large urban school system. These findings are not generalizable to all LGBT youth. Additionally, this study did not address issues related to typical urban characteristics, such as poverty, community disorder, racial and ethnic discrimination.

The sexual and gender orientations of L, G, B, or T youth inevitably interact uniquely with those individuals’ school environments as well as other aspects of the individuals’ cultural orientation, e.g., socio-economic status, social class, race, ethnicity, and geographic location (Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007). It is recommended that future research elucidate the unique experiences of each constituent group. For example, the bisexual male youth in the study reported different viewpoints and experiences with school violence than the gay males; lesbians reported that they had experiences that differed from those of the gay males.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Some schools have serious violence problems that compromise the learning environment and endanger LGBT youth; the violence contributes to school absenteeism or LGBT students dropping out of school. “From Teasing to Torment,” the report of the first national survey on bullying in America’s schools to include bullying and harassment based on sexual identity and gender expression (Harris Interactive and GLSEN, 2005), found that the most common reason cited by students for being bullied or harassed was their appearance, i.e., the way they looked or their body size. The next most common reason cited for frequent bullying and harassment was sexual orientation, i.e., students who were self-identified as or were perceived to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. These findings support the school experiences reported by the focus groups of LGBT youth described in this study. Further support was indicated by the survey’s findings that LGBT students were more likely than non-LGBT students to report that they did not feel safe at school and that the large majority LGBT students reported that they had been harassed or assaulted in the past year. The focus groups of LGBT youth in the current study also reported that they felt had been harassed or assaulted in school and had always to be on guard to protect themselves against violence.

Support of the two core themes, i.e., a lack of community resulting in a lack of empowerment with a concurrent lack of sense of human agency in the school environment, found in the current study were buttressed by findings in the Harris Interactive and GLSEN (2005) report. LGBT students
who experienced bullying and harassment were likely not to report them because the youth learned that teachers or other school staff would not do anything and the students had no power to improve their situations.

Some of the results of this study (e.g., dropping out of school, being harassed by a security guard) are buttressed by the Report of the NEA (National Education Association) Task Force on Sexual Orientation (NEA, 2002). That report indicated that LGBT students face discrimination, harassment, and abuse that are specifically directed at them by reason of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identification.

Not only are these serious problems met with inaction on the part of education employees and school officials, but there are also some teachers, principals, and school staff members who discriminate against LGBT students, as evident in this focus group study. Consequently, those students felt that they are at considerable and disproportionate risk for mental health problems, self-endangerment, self-injury, poor school performance, absenteeism, and dropping out of school (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Schooling is one of the cultural institutions designed to socialize youth to “fit” into the community. In fulfilling this role, many school personnel become gatekeepers of the status quo, which includes fostering heterosexuality and gender “appropriate” expression. Educational policies are needed to ensure that schools foster the inherent worth of each student regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

The actions or inactions by students, teachers, and school staff lead the majority of LGBT participants to feel unsafe in their school communities. These students were forced to figure out how to survive in the school environment and how to provide themselves with an education. These are tasks that no young person should be required to undertake and, not surprisingly, some students were not able to do so. With support, LGBT youth can gain strength, resiliency, and self-advocacy. With these strengths and the help of support networks, LGBT students can not only develop positive and productive coping strategies, but they can also help make schools safe and affirming places in which they can develop and learn in ways parallel to their heterosexual peers (Holmes & Cahill, 2005; Mayberry, 2006; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001).

NOTES

1. Female-to-male transgender youth were not participating in the community organization’s programs during the data collection period, and therefore, were not included in this study.

2. Birth sex: sex assigned at birth (female or male) based on physiological characteristics, especially external genitalia; gender identity: an individual’s sense of being either female or male, woman or man, something in-between, or other, e.g., gender queer; gender expression: how you present yourself as female or male, or something in-between; gender role expectations: how society expects females and males to act; actual sexual identity: how you define yourself, i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer
(heterosexual, only in transgender group); perceived sexual identity: the sexual identity others think you are, which is usually based on your gender expression; verbal attack: teased, called names, threatened with being hurt; physical attack: punched, kicked, or beat or hurt with a stick, bat, knife or other weapon.

3. Empowerment connects mental health to mutual help in a responsive community; one that creates a process of increasing intrapersonal, interpersonal and political power so that individuals can take action to improve their own lives.

4. Names are pseudonyms or nicknames selected by the youth. They were used in the focus groups by the youth who knew that the groups were being audio-taped, that the tapes would be transcribed, and that selections of transcriptions would be included in a publication.

5. No youth in the male groups talked about teachers and principals disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. The female and transgender focus groups were conducted after the male groups; consequently, there was no opportunity to insert a probe question about openness of school personnel in the male groups. This topic needs further research among gay and bisexual male students.

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