

School climate and LGBT⁺ student's perceived safety

The association of perceptions of school climate and characteristics of teachers and classmates with the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students in secondary schools

Student: A.S. Kuperus (S3006980)

Supervisor: Dr. Laura Baams

Second supervisor: Dr. Remo Mombarg

University of Groningen

Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences

Masterthesis Youth, Society & Policy

June 2022

Abstract

LGBT⁺ students face discrimination, violence, and bullying and therefore experience an unsafe school climate. This research aims to investigate to what extent perceptions of key individuals in the environment of LGBT⁺ students are related to the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students and what role characteristics of teachers and classmates play in creating a safe school climate for LGBT⁺ youth. The sample consisted of $N = 1,391$ LGBT⁺ students (mean age = 13.93, $SD = 1.62$) from 66 secondary schools (including 94.0% LGB⁺ students, 12.5% gender nonconforming students) and 1,649 staff members (mean age = 43.49, $SD = 12.17$), who completed the Safety Monitor. A multilevel regression analysis showed that when classmates and teachers perceived the school climate to be positive, LGBT⁺ students felt safer in school (although teacher-effects became non-significant in the full model). In addition, this study showed no relation between the percentage of LGBT⁺ classmates and teachers, and the degree of religion practiced by classmates and teachers, with the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students at school. This research shows the importance of investing in a positive school climate, as this is related to the safety of LGBT⁺ students. Implications are given to improve school policy and practice for creating a more positive and supportive school climate for LGBT⁺ students.

Keywords: LGBT⁺, teachers' perceptions, classmates' perceptions, perceived safety, religion, school climate, secondary education

Introduction

School should be a safe place for students. It is a prerequisite for learning and optimal physical, emotional, and social development (Williams et al., 2018). Moreover, young people are in a critical period where they are searching for their own identity (Kroger, 2006). The vulnerability associated with this period is particularly evident among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students (LGBT⁺, the 'plus' indicates those who may identify with another minority identity or prefer not to label their sexual orientation or gender identity) (Patterson, 2013). Many LGBT⁺ youth experience the school context as unsafe, with high levels of violence and bullying (Poteat et al., 2020). Existing research among LGBT⁺ students focused on perceptions of school climate from the perspective of LGBT⁺ youth (Kosciw et al., 2018). However, little is known about the perceptions of key individuals in the environment of LGBT⁺ students, such as teachers and classmates, and to what extent their perceptions are related to the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students. Moreover, characteristics of teachers and classmates, such as their sexual orientation, gender identity, or religiosity may play an important role when it comes to creating a safe school climate (Page, 2017; Hong & Espelage, 2012). This study will examine the relationship of school climate (reported by teachers and classmates) and perceived school safety (reported by LGBT⁺ students). In addition, it will examine whether the characteristics of teachers and classmates in the immediate environment of LGBT⁺ students play a role in this.

School Climate and Experiences of Violence and Bullying

The school climate reflects the interactions between students, teachers and other staff-members within schools that are shaped by beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors (Bradshaw et al., 2014), and is linked to student's sense of safety at school (Thapa et al., 2013). These norms and values should support students to feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe and should contribute to the development of young people (National School Climate Council, 2007). Substantial

research shows the relationship between a positive school climate and student's emotional, social, and physical well-being (Thapa et al., 2013).

A supportive school climate for LGBT⁺ students is positively associated with LGBT⁺ student's sense of safety (Day et al., 2020; DePedro et al., 2018). However, for LGBT⁺ students, school is an environment in which a strong heterosexual, cisgender norm prevails. The school climate is defined by the broader society, where heterosexuality and gender conformity are accepted, and when youth "deviate" from these norms and expectations they are more likely to experience rejection and misunderstanding (SLO, 2015). Many adults and students copy and internalize these norms without being aware of it, but perpetuate the norms nonetheless (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). At school, this can ultimately lead to increased violence and bullying toward LGBT⁺ students. In a Dutch sample of LGBT⁺ youth, 34.4% of LGBT⁺ youth reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 15.7% because of their gender expression (Pizmony-Levy, 2018). These experiences correlate with experiencing an unsafe school climate (Kosciw et al., 2020, Poteat et al., 2020, Higa et al., 2014). In addition, multiple studies have found that LGBT⁺ students are more likely to experience discrimination, bullying, and violence than their heterosexual, gender-conforming classmates (Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Toomey et al., 2010; Ybarra et al., 2015 & Poteat et al., 2020). More than half of the LGBT⁺ young people in the Netherlands indicate to have experienced verbal violence and 29% of the young people indicate to have experienced physical violence at school. Moreover, it appears that not only classmates, but also teachers bully and intimidate LGBT⁺ students. For example, teachers have been found to bully students who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual by 10% more than their heterosexual classmates (Kaufman & Baams, 2022). In addition, students experience that school staff and teachers do not always intervene when LGBT⁺ youth are harassed at school (Higa et al., 2014).

Teacher's Role in Shaping the School Climate

Teachers play an important role when it comes to the physical and psychological well-being of students at school. Given the vulnerability of LGBT⁺ students, it is extremely important that these students experience positive support from teachers. Multiple studies show that when LGBT⁺ students experience positive support from teachers, they feel safer (Kosciw et al., 2013; McGuire et al., 2010), feel more connected (Murdock & Bolch, 2005), and experience less bullying and harassment (Kosciw et al., 2013). As role models, teachers can teach students about the values of respect and tolerance regarding sexual orientation and gender identity (Eisenmenger, 2002). Yet, it appears that this is not always the case, especially when it comes to LGBT⁺ youth.

One aspect that can potentially get in the way of teachers acting as role models is the religion that a teacher adheres to. Within the school environment, religious teachers, among others, are most often mentioned as exhibiting anti-gay or other discriminatory behavior (Higa et al., 2014). Within various religious communities, there are people who are in favor of gay rights, but there are also religious institutions that support or even encourage discrimination against LGBT⁺ people (Siker, 2007). In the Netherlands, little research has been done on the religious environment of LGBT⁺ students, but existing research shows that in the Netherlands religious groups generally think more negatively about sexual and gender diversity than non-religious groups (Kuyper, 2018). In some religious communities conversion therapy is being used, where, through conversations, Bible training, and other methods, "help" is offered from a Christian perspective to suppress feelings that do not conform to the heterosexual and cisgender norm (Van Wijk et al., 2020).

In addition, because teachers can act as role models for their students, teachers who are openly LGBT⁺ can be perceived as positive support by LGBT⁺ students (Kosciw et al., 2018). For example, research shows that having a teacher who is gay can be positive, not only for LGBT⁺ students, but for all students. This is because the teacher can resist the heterosexual norm and step out of the "box", and in doing so can be a role model for students (Rofes, 2000). In addition, LGBT⁺ students

feel more comfortable when they have a teacher who is gay, in part because it increases acceptance (Macgillivray, 2008). Thus, having openly LGBT⁺ teachers can help create a safer school environment for LGBT⁺ students (Higa et al., 2014; Macgillivray, 2008).

Role of Classmates in Shaping the School Climate

Not only teachers, but also classmates of LGBT⁺ young people play an important role for the well-being of students. A friendship can affect many contexts of young people's lives (Wilkinson, 2010). How young people's self-image develops depends, among other things, on the type of relationship that young people have with their classmates. A negative relationship with classmates can hinder the development of self-image, resulting in social and emotional damage (Kim et al., 2008). The closer the relationship with classmates, the more positive the perception of school climate, life satisfaction, physical and mental health and support from peers is experienced (Tomé et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, having a good relationship with classmates is not self-evident for LGBT⁺ students. As with teachers, a factor such as religion can also play a role in the attitude of classmates towards LGBT⁺ students. Religious beliefs among classmates are negatively linked with youth's perceptions about the acceptability of being LGBT⁺ (Horn & Szalacha, 2009). This unsupportive attitude towards the LGBT⁺ community can develop from an early age (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016). For example, research shows that LGBT⁺ youth are vilified by other youth based on their religious beliefs. LGBT⁺ youth were negatively spoken about by other youth for being LGBT⁺ and even called to be ashamed of and feel remorse for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Moreover, students within the same school were, amongst others, the ones who most often exhibited anti-LGBT⁺ behavior (Higa et al., 2014).

Although religion can play a negative role in the acceptance of LGBT⁺ youth, having classmates who are LGBT⁺ can be a positive factor in the perceived sense of safety of LGBT⁺ youth. As a result, young people feel less lonely and experience less shame about their sexual orientation

when they know other LGBT⁺ students (Wolff et al., 2016). Research also shows that when there is an organization or group of students and volunteers at school (i.e., Gender & Sexuality Alliance) that is committed to LGBT⁺ young people, there is less LGB⁺ and gender-based bullying and therefore a safer school climate (Day et al., 2020). However, there is little research on having LGBT⁺ classmates and the association with perceived safety of LGBT⁺ youth at school.

Current Study

Existing literature shows the association between a supportive and positive school climate and the perceived sense of safety of LGBT⁺ students (Day et al., 2020; DePedro et al., 2018). However, little is known about the extent to which the perceptions of teachers and classmates are related to the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students. Therefore, this study examines the association of teachers' and classmates' perceptions of school climate with the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students in secondary schools. Furthermore, it examines to what extent characteristics of classmates and teachers such as religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity are related to the sense of safety of LGBT⁺ students.

From this, the following three research questions follow: 1) To what extent are perceptions of the school climate of teachers and classmates related to the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students in secondary education? 2) To what extent are characteristics of teachers such as religion and sexual orientation related to the feelings of safety of LGBT⁺ students in secondary education? And 3) To what extent do characteristics of classmates such as religion and sexual orientation correlate with the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students in secondary education?

Based on existing literature, I hypothesize that a more positive school climate would be associated with better perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students (Day et al., 2020; DePedro et al., 2018). In addition, lower religiosity among classmates (Higa et al., 2014; Horn & Szalacha, 2009) and teachers (Higa et al., 2014; Siker, 2007) and more LGBT⁺ classmates (Day et al., 2020) and LGBT⁺

teachers (Higa et al., 2014; Macgillivray, 2008) would be linked with better perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The data for this study came from a nationally administered questionnaire: the Safety Monitor. This questionnaire was administered to $N = 13,043$ students in all levels of secondary education (mean age students = 14.02, standard deviation = 1.52) and $N = 1,649$ staff members in secondary education, including $n = 1,141$ teachers and $n = 129$ teacher assistants/remedial teachers (mean age staff = 43.49, standard deviation = 12.17). The term 'staff members' was used in this study, as no distinction could be made between the different school-functions in obtaining the aggregated scores by school.

The full sample comprised 66 schools within secondary (special) education in the Netherlands (pre-vocational (vmbo), intermediate general (havo) and pre-university (vwo)). All schools in the Netherlands were approached to participate in the study. The survey was conducted individually at schools. Participation by students and staff members was voluntary and data collection was anonymous. The final analytic sample comprised $N = 1,391$ LGBT⁺ students (mean age students = 13.93, standard deviation = 1.62), including LGB⁺ students ($n = 1,307$; 94.0%) and gender nonconforming students ($n = 174$; 12.5%). Overall, 60.3% girls assigned at birth and 39.7% boys assigned at birth participated. In addition, the analytic sample included $n = 39$ (2.4%) LGB⁺ staff members (mean age = 42.15, standard deviation = 11.00) and $n = 1324$ (80.3%) heterosexual staff members (mean age = 43.67, standard deviation = 12.19) from a total of 34 schools.

This study was a correlational study, that looked at the relationship between variables. The student research proposal was submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Pedagogy and Educational Sciences Department.

Measurements

Perceived safety. LGBT⁺ student's sense of safety in school was assessed with the item "Can you indicate below how safe you feel at school?" (1 = very unsafe; 2 = unsafe; 3 = not unsafe/not safe; 4 = safe; 5 = very safe; Praktikon, 2018).

School climate. Staff members' perceptions of school climate were assessed with three items: "Teachers intervene directly when needed when students' undesirable behavior occurs," "Educational support staff intervene directly when needed when students' undesirable behavior occurs," and "Teachers support positive behavior" (1 = never; 2 = almost never; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; 5 = always). The mean score of the three items indicated staff members' perceptions of school climate (Praktikon, 2018). The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76. Classmates' perceptions of school climate was measured by four items: "Teachers support positive behavior", "Teachers intervene immediately when needed", "Teachers give attention to behavioral rules when needed", "Students give attention to behavioral rules when needed" (0 = No; 1 = Yes). The mean score of the three items indicated student's perception of school climate (Praktikon, 2018). The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71.

Sexual orientation and gender nonconformity. Student's sexual orientation was assessed with the items "I could fall in love with a boy", "I could fall in love with a girl" (1 = totally agree; 5 = totally disagree) and "What is your gender?" (1 = boy, 2 = girl). By combining the reported gender with the reported sexual orientation, the extent to which students reported same-, both-, or other-sex attraction was determined, this was then used to infer a heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual orientation. Next, a dummy-variable was created representing a heterosexual orientation (0 = only attracted to another sex; strongly agree/agree with the item about falling in love with a different sex; and strongly disagree/disagree with the item about falling in love with the same sex) and an LGB⁺ group (1 = attracted to both sexes or same sex; strongly agree/agree with the item about falling in love with the same sex). Gender was determined with the items "What is your gender? (1 =

boy; 2 = girl), “Do you feel like a boy?” and “Do you feel like a girl?” (1= Yes completely; 2 = partially; 3 = No, not at all). Next, a dummy-variable was created representing cisgender (0 = gender identity totally aligned with the reported gender) and gender nonconforming (1 = gender identity partially or not aligned with the reported gender). Next, a variable was created where the non-LGBT⁺ students (0) were represented, and the LGBT⁺ students (1) were represented. Only LGBT⁺ students were included in the current study.

Sexual orientation of staff members was assessed with the item “What is your sexual orientation?” (1 = I am heterosexual; 2 = I am gay or lesbian; 3 = I am bisexual). Subsequently, a variable was created representing the heterosexual (0) and LGB⁺-group (1). There was no item present in the dataset measuring the gender identity of staff members, therefore gender(non)conformity or gender identity could not be inferred.

Religion. Staff members' and classmates' religious beliefs were assessed with the items “Are you religious?” (1 = yes, Christian; 2 = yes, Muslim; 3 = no; 4 = yes, other) and “Because of your faith, do you go to a church, mosque, synagogue, or other place of worship?” (1 = no; 2 = yes, about once or twice a year; 3 = yes, about once a month; 4 = yes, weekly or more often). A variable was created for both classmates and staff members that stated whether the respondent was religious and/or how often that religion was practiced (0 = no religion; 1 = religious, never go to church; 2 = a religion, 1-2 per year; 3 = religious, once a month; 4 = religious, weekly, or more).

Covariates. Covariates were LGBT⁺ student's age, sex assigned at birth (boys; girls) and educational level (1 = pre-vocational; 2 = practical education; 3 = intermediate general; 4 = pre-university; 5 = combination pre-vocational/ intermediate general; 6 = combination intermediate general/ pre-university; 7 = combination pre-vocational/ intermediate general/ pre-university; 8 = special education; 9 = other). Student's educational level was recoded into a new variable (1 = intermediate general/ pre-university; 2 = pre-vocational; 3 = other). Subsequently dummy variables

were created representing dummy variable 1) intermediate general/ pre-university (1) and all else (0) and dummy variable 2) other (1) and all else (0).

Statistical Analysis

To obtain the scores for school climate, sexual orientation/gender identity, and religion for both classmates and staff members on a school-level, scores were aggregated by school. For school climate, the mean score at the school-level was obtained for both classmate- and staff member-reports. For sexual orientation/gender identity, the percentage LGB(T)⁺ classmates and staff members at the school-level was measured and lastly, regarding religion, the mean score of religiosity at the school-level was obtained for both classmates and staff members.

To answer the three research questions, a multilevel regression analysis with students nested within schools was conducted in SPSS Statistics 26. First, assumptions for multilevel regression analysis were tested. All assumptions were met with regards to homoscedasticity, linearity, and normality of residuals. Fixed effects models were used in all multilevel regression analyses, meaning all model parameters (slope and intercept) were set to be fixed. Fixed effects were used, as the key model parameters (school-level school climate, percentages LGB(T)⁺, and religiosity) in this research were measured at the highest level (school-level) and thus no random effects (variances in effects between schools) could be analyzed.

A multilevel regression analysis was conducted using LGBT⁺ student's perception of safety as the dependent variable, and the percentage of LGBT⁺ classmates, the mean score of religiosity and the mean score of school climate of classmates at school-level were used as the independent variables. Next, a multilevel regression analysis was conducted using the staff member variables. LGBT⁺ student's perception of school safety was again used as the dependent variable in the analysis, and the percentage of LGB⁺ staff members, the mean score of religiosity and the mean score of school climate of personnel at school-level were used as the independent variables. Last, a multilevel regression analysis was conducted using both classmate variables and staff member

variables. The following covariates were included in all analyses: student's age, sex assigned at birth, and educational level.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for LGBT⁺ students, classmates, and staff members. There were 315 (22.6%) students in the pre-vocational level, 569 (40.9%) students in the intermediate general/pre-university level and 106 (7.6%) students who were in the category 'other' educational level. The results showed that LGBT⁺ students generally felt safe at school. In addition, their classmates reported an average school climate and low religiosity. When looking at the average scores for staff members, it appeared that staff members rated the school climate at the school level more positively than classmates (this was not tested). Just like classmates, staff members reported low levels of religiosity at the school level.

Table 2 shows the correlations between key variables in the study. Pearson correlation analyses showed that the older the student, the less religion was practiced, and the more classmates identified with the LGBT⁺ community. Furthermore, it appeared that the more staff members at school identified as LGB⁺, the less religion was practiced among staff members and classmates, the lower the school climate was rated by staff members and classmates and the less classmates identified with the LGBT⁺ community. It also appeared that when religion was practiced more by staff members, the school climate was assessed more positively by classmates, classmates practiced religion more and fewer classmates identified with the LGBT⁺ community. In addition, it seems that the higher the school climate was rated by staff members, the higher classmates rated the school climate, and the more classmates identified with the LGBT⁺ community. When it comes to the school climate assessed by classmates, it appears that the higher this was rated, the more classmates identified with the LGBT⁺ community and the safer LGBT⁺ students felt at school. Finally, it seems

that the more religion was practiced by classmates, the less classmates identified with the LGBT⁺ community.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for (LGBT⁺) Students, Classmates and Staff-Members

| | <i>N</i> | Mean | <i>SD</i> | Min. | Max. | LGB(T) ⁺ <i>n</i> (%) | Non-LGB(T) ⁺ <i>n</i> (%) |
|--|----------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Students</i> | | | | | | 1,391 (13.3) | 7,769 (74.0) |
| Perceived safety by LGBT ⁺ students | 1,295 | 4.09 | 0.81 | 1.00 | 5.00 | | |
| <i>Classmates</i> | | | | | | | |
| School climate | 1,391 | 2.40 | 0.23 | 2.06 | 3.57 | | |
| Religion | 1,391 | 0.87 | 0.84 | 0.07 | 3.94 | | |
| Age | 1,391 | 13.93 | 1.62 | 11.00 | 19.00 | | |
| <i>Staff members</i> | | | | | | 39 (2.4) | 1,324 (80.3) |
| School climate | 1,318 | 4.15 | 0.16 | 3.67 | 4.80 | | |
| Religion | 1,318 | 0.82 | 0.86 | 0.21 | 4.00 | | |

Perceived safety (0 – 5). School climate (0 – 4). Religion (0 – 4). The mean score for school climate and religion reflects the mean score at school level.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Key Variables

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|------------------------------------|---|-----|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1. LGBT ⁺ student's age | | .02 | -.05 | .01 | .03 | -.09** | .13** | .01 |
| 2. % LGB ⁺ teachers | | | -.44** | -.18** | -.17** | -.29** | -.06* | .02 |
| 3. Religion teachers | | | | .05 | .14** | .93** | -.56** | .00 |
| 4. School climate teachers | | | | | .49** | -.02 | .28** | .05 |
| 5. School climate classmates | | | | | | -.04 | .16** | .12** |
| 6. Religion classmates | | | | | | | -.49** | -.01 |
| 7. % LGBT ⁺ classmates | | | | | | | | -.02 |
| 8. Perceived safety | | | | | | | | |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Multilevel Regression in Student-Models

Table 3 shows the different multilevel regression models for students, staff members and students and staff members combined. First, the multilevel student-model was tested with the following parameters: LGBT⁺ students' age, education level, gender assigned at birth, percentage of LGBT⁺ classmates at school-level, the extent to which religion is practiced by classmates at school-

level, average school climate at school-level assessed by classmates and last, the dependent variable ‘perceived safety’ (see Table 3). The results showed that there was a significant difference in perceived safety between intermediate general/pre-university-students and pre-vocational-students, whereby intermediate general/pre-university-students generally felt safer at school than pre-vocational-students. Furthermore, there was a significant difference in perceived safety between boys assigned at birth and girls assigned at birth, with girls generally feeling safer at school than boys. There was also a significant association between school climate and perceived safety, whereby LGBT⁺ students in schools with overall more positive school climate as reported by classmates, felt safer at school. The percentage of LGBT⁺ classmates and the mean level of religiosity at a school (reported by classmates) was not significantly associated with perceived safety.

Table 3

Multilevel Regression Models of LGBT⁺ Student’s Perceived Safety

| | Student-model | | Staff-model | | Combined model | |
|---|---------------|----------|---------------|----------|----------------|----------|
| | <i>B (SE)</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>B (SE)</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>B (SE)</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Student age | -.02 (.02) | .166 | -.02 (.02) | .193 | -.02 (.02) | .275 |
| Sex assigned at birth | -.13 (.05) | .015 | -.12 (.06) | .030 | -.12 (.06) | .031 |
| Education level ¹ | .25 (.05) | .000 | .30 (.06) | .000 | .24 (.06) | .000 |
| Education level ² | -.09 (.11) | .408 | -.03 (.11) | .773 | -.08 (.12) | .513 |
| Percentage LGBT ⁺ classmates | -.00 (.01) | .413 | | | -.01 (.01) | .210 |
| School climate classmates | .58 (.11) | .000 | | | .49 (.18) | .007 |
| Religion classmates | .00 (.04) | .988 | | | -.04 (.10) | .695 |
| Percentage LGB ⁺ staff-members | | | -.01 (.01) | .431 | -.01 (.01) | .336 |
| School climate staff-members | | | .45 (.18) | .013 | .17 (.24) | .466 |
| Religion staff-members | | | .02 (.04) | .594 | .00 (.11) | .998 |

¹Education level = intermediate general/ pre-university (1), all other levels (0). ²Education level = other (1), all other levels (0). Sex assigned at birth (0 = boy, 1 = girl).

Multilevel Regression in Staff Member-Models

Next, the multilevel staff member-model was tested with the following parameters: LGBT⁺ student's age, education level, gender assigned at birth, average school climate at school level assessed by staff members, the extent to which religion was practiced by staff members at school level and the percentage of LGB⁺ staff members at school level (see Table 3). Results showed that, in accordance with the previous model, there was a significant difference between intermediate general/pre-university-students and pre-vocational-students and their perceived safety at school, where intermediate general/pre-university-students generally felt safer at school than pre-vocational-students. Furthermore, there was also a significant difference regarding sex assigned at birth and perceived safety, with girls assigned at birth reporting a higher perceived safety at school than boys assigned at birth. Finally, as with the first multilevel model, there was a significant association between the average school climate at school level assessed by staff members and the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students, with schools where the school climate was assessed more positively by staff members, LGBT⁺ students felt safer at school. The percentage of LGB⁺ staff members and the mean level of religiosity at a school (reported by staff members) was not significantly associated with perceived safety.

Multilevel Regression in Student and Staff Member-Models Combined

Finally, a multilevel analysis was performed, in which the previous two models were combined and tested in one model (see Table 3). Again, a significant association was found between the average school climate at school level reported by classmates and perceived safety, where LGBT⁺ students felt safer at school when a more positive school climate was reported by classmates. The association between staff member-reported school climate and LGBT⁺ student-perceived safety was no longer significant. The associations between percentage of LGBT⁺ classmates and staff members, and the mean level of religiosity at a school (reported by classmates and staff members) remained non-significant.

Discussion

It is important that LGBT⁺ students experience a safe environment at school, as this is crucial for their physical and psychological well-being (Williams et al., 2018). However, many LGBT⁺ students experience an unsafe school climate, with a high degree of violence and bullying (Poteat et al., 2020). Existing research focuses on perceptions of school climate from the perspective of LGBT⁺ students (Kosciw et al., 2018), but little is known about the perceptions of key individuals in the environment of LGBT⁺ students. Moreover, characteristics of teachers and classmates can play a role in creating a safe school climate (Page, 2017; Hong & Espelage, 2012). The current study examined the association between teachers' and classmates' perceptions of school climate and perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students in secondary schools. In addition, the extent to which religion, sexual orientation and gender identity of teachers and classmates were related to the sense of safety of LGBT⁺ students at school was studied.

This study found a relation between the perception of the school climate of classmates and perceived safety by LGBT⁺ students. The more positive the school climate was perceived by classmates, the safer LGBT⁺ youth felt at school. School climate and a sense of safety at school are closely linked. As was found in previous research, school climate is linked to student well-being and may improve positive development (Cohen et al., 2009).

Although a relation was also found between teachers' perceptions of school climate and perceived safety by LGBT⁺ students, this association disappeared when classmate-perceptions and characteristics were added to the model. Indeed, a good teacher-student relationship can give students confidence and support in their school career (Serdiouk et al., 2016), however, from the current study it appears that relationships with their classmates in school mattered more to LGBT⁺ students than the relationship with their teachers. Students see and meet each other in class, during breaks and after school. These relationships with classmates strongly, both positively and negatively, influence the perception of the school climate (Gowing, 2019; Traylor et al., 2016) and subsequently

LGBT⁺ students' perceived sense of safety (Cohen et al., 2009). Also, because students share experiences with each other during different classes, in the hallways and during lunchbreaks, classmates may have a different and even more accurate perception of the school climate than teachers do--teachers may only have a perception of the school climate based on the classes they teach. Prior research even shows that, though teachers and students share the same school environment, the different roles they have may lead to different ratings of the school climate (Debnam et al., 2021). Often, teachers even rate the school climate more positively because of their perceived control over the school climate (Mitchell et al., 2010).

This study also showed that there was no association between the percentage of LGBT⁺ classmates and teachers at school and the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students. While having classmates and teachers who identify as LGBT⁺ can be a positive factor in perceived support and sense of safety among LGBT⁺ students (Kosciw et al., 2018; Wolff et al., 2016), the degree of 'coming out' may be an important factor that was unaccounted for in this current study. For example, research shows that the degree of 'coming out' can affect the perception of comfort among oneself and others, as the extent to which LGBT⁺ students have come out can influence the understanding of heterosexual, cisgender students (Dentato et al., 2014). The degree of perceived comfort can subsequently influence the sense of safety that LGBT⁺ students experience within school. Unfortunately, the current study did not assess whether classmates or teachers had disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity with others.

Further, the results showed that there was no relation between the degree of religion practiced by classmates and teachers and the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students at school. Although the religion of teachers and classmates can influence the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students (Higa et al., 2014), carrying out these religious views, the 'outness' regarding religion, may be a more important factor here. One factor in conveying religious beliefs is the communication that takes place between two people. Research shows that communication related to religion, both explicitly and implicitly

(such as going to church), influences the transmission of religious values (Milevsky et al., 2008). The current study did not assess whether classmates and teachers had shared their religious beliefs with LGBT⁺ students, and so no conclusion could be drawn about this.

Limitations and Future Research

This research looked at a multi-informant perceptions of school climate of key individuals (teachers and classmates) in the environment of LGBT⁺ students and how this correlated with the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students. This study builds on research aimed at measuring the perceptions of the school climate of LGBT⁺ students themselves and shows the accuracy of the perception of the school climate of classmates and its correlation with the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students. In addition, this study used a large, national sample of LGBT⁺ students, with the use of a school wide questionnaire.

Despite strengths, there were also some limitations. First, the sample of LGBT⁺ students in this study was too small to measure differences between the lesbian, gay and bisexual groups. There may be differences between the different sexual orientations in perceived safety at school, as research shows differences between the different sexual orientations in rates of experienced violence and bullying (Kosciw et al., 2020). Follow-up research could reveal whether there are differences in perceived safety between the various sexual orientations, including other sexual orientations and gender identities in addition to the LGBT orientations and identities used in this study.

In addition, the questionnaire design in this study required the variables related to classmates to be measured at the school level and not at the classroom level. Peers within the same class may know one another better, have a closer relationship, and spend more time with one another than they do with students from other classes and grades. The closer the relationship with classmates, the more positive the perception of school climate (Gowing, 2019; Traylor et al., 2016), physical and mental health and support from peers is experienced (Tomé et al., 2014) and thus the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students (Cohen et al., 2009). This can also lead to different results in terms of percentage of

LGBT⁺ students and average level of religion at class level instead of school level. Follow-up research could look at the association of the perception of school climate among classmates, percentage of LGBT⁺ classmates and degree of religion with the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students at classroom level.

Furthermore, the categories for educational level could not be categorized exclusively, because the questionnaire involved categories with a combination of education levels (pre-vocational/intermediate general, pre-vocational/intermediate general/pre-university, etc.). In addition, there were too few respondents within some levels of education. It has therefore been decided to classify these combination levels together with other education levels (including special education) under the category 'other'. By combining education levels, students may have ended up in the 'other' category, while these students belonged to the intermediate general/pre-university or pre-vocational category. This may have influenced the results, as there are differences in the perceived safety of students between different levels of education (Scholte et al., 2016). Follow-up research could look at differences in the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students between all possible levels of education.

Theoretical Implications

This study looked at the relation between the perception of school climate of classmates and the perceived sense of safety of LGBT⁺ students. It appeared that a positive school climate (assessed by classmates) was associated with a higher sense of safety among LGBT⁺ students at school. This is in line with previous research, which shows that LGBT⁺ students feel safer at school when there is a more positive and supportive school climate (Day et al., 2020; DePedro et al., 2018). This research contributes to prior research by examining this relationship based on how classmates assessed the school climate and how this was related to the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students.

This research also underlines the importance of 'outness', both with regard to one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity, but also regarding one's religion. It appears that it is important not

only to look at whether students and teachers put an LGBT⁺ 'label' on themselves and/or are religious, but also whether they make their sexual orientation and/or gender identity public to the people around them (Dentato et al., 2014) and communicate their religious views to others. Another factor that may play a role here is the 'culture' that prevails in a school. The views and values of a school and the people within the school shape the school culture. The school climate then makes this school culture visible, with the interactions between people determining the experiences of those within the school environment (Payne & Smith, 2013). Therefore, it is important not only to look at the school climate and the views of individuals, but also to look at the surrounding school culture and the social (possible heteronormative and cisgender) norms that exist within the school.

Suggestions for Educational Practice

This research shows that it is important to invest in a positive school climate, as this is related to the safety of LGBT⁺ students. However, as previously mentioned, the school culture needs to be considered. This can start with the policy of the school, the vision and the standards and values that a school uses. An LGBT⁺-supportive school climate can act as a protective factor in helping decrease violence and bullying and increase LGBT⁺ student's sense of safety (Wimberly, 2015). It is thus important that schools pay attention to different sexual orientations and gender identities in their policies. Attention can be paid to subjects within the curriculum regarding sexual and gender diversity (Russell et al., 2010). It is also important that the discussion is held with LGBT⁺ students about what they consider important in this regard and that school staff are aware of the students' experiences. Furthermore, attention needs to be paid to the pedagogical climate regarding rules about LGBT⁺ discrimination. It is key that school staff have the knowledge and skills to enforce rules and intervene in cases of violence and bullying against LGBT⁺ students. Moreover, it is crucial that schools are critical of existing heterosexual and cisgender norms and have an understanding of normalizing diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities, so that sexual and gender diversity become part of the climate and culture of the school.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship of school climate (as reported by teachers and classmates), the degree of religion of teachers and classmates and the percentage of LGBT⁺ teachers and classmates at school with LGBT⁺ student's perceived school safety. This study found a relation between the perception of the school climate of classmates and perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students at school. Though a relation was also found between teachers' perceptions of school climate and perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students, this relation disappeared when the perceptions and characteristics of classmates were added to the model. Furthermore, this study showed that there was no relation between the percentage of LGBT⁺ classmates and teachers at school, the degree of religion practiced by classmates and teachers and the perceived safety of LGBT⁺ students. Overall, the study underlines the importance of school climate for LGBT⁺ students' safety in school and highlights potential implications for educational practice.

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