WHERE DO I BELONG?: GENDER AND/OR SEXUAL MINORITY STUDENTS AND
LEADERS IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The heteronormative ordering of schools poses challenges for gender and/or sexual minorities (GSM). GSM leaders in schools are challenged by decisions about whether to come out of the closet and the implications that these decisions can have for the leadership they enact and their career trajectories. Meanwhile, GSM students face difficulties including identity-based victimization and diminished sense of belonging in school. The experiences of attending high school are further complicated for students who attend an international school outside their country of origin. This qualitative investigation explored how GSM former students at international schools experienced a sense of belonging at school and understood any changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. Guided by queer theory and employing interpretive phenomenological analysis, this study addressed both the diminished sense of belonging experienced by GSM students in schools and the gaps in literature surrounding GSM students, GSM leaders, and international schools. Analysis of semi-structured interviews with six GSM former students at international schools yielded three findings. Sense of belonging in school is connected to both (1) identity-related and (2) contextual factors. Further, (3) GSM leaders can serve as a support structure for GSM students in certain cases. The findings of the current research suggest that changes need to be made both in the ways that international schools are structured and how students with marginalized identities are supported.

Keywords: international education, LGBTQ+ high school students, LGBTQ+ school leaders,

sense of belonging

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the queer children around the world

who ever felt like they didn't belong in school.

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Finally, and most importantly, I wish to acknowledge the participants in this study. Thank you for sharing your stories with me. My sincerest hope is that this research will amplify those stories so that the students in international schools who follow you will find themselves in places where they feel they belong.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Over the past 10 years, new opportunities for career advancement in education as well as progressive steps in protective legislations for LGBT individuals in the workplace have emerged (Lee, 2020a). Progress toward a more inclusive conceptualization of leadership challenges the idea that educational institutions have historically remained the exclusive domain of heterosexual and cisgender persons (Blackmore, 2006; Blount, 2003; Lumby & Coleman, 2007; Mizzi et al., 2021). Historically, the structures of regulation within educational institutions have viewed anyone whose identity was perceived as deviating from what was considered normal as being potentially predatory (Dumaresq, 2014; Lee, 2020a). Although challenges to gender and/or sexuality minority (GSM) educators' career advancement remain, adults who are not exclusively heterosexual and cisgender now occupy positions of authority within schools (Prosen, 2013). Imagining an educational space that is less governed by strict binary conceptions of gender identity and sexual orientation and more inclusive of queer educators and leaders presents unexplored effects on the ecology of the school and its students.

Like the progress seen by GSM leaders, GSM students have also seen a decrease in negative impacts on their educational experiences (Kosciw et al., 2020). Despite improvements over time in school climate for GSM students, these students still face hostility in schools, such as exposure to biased language, experiences of harassment, and hostile school climate (Kosciw et al., 2020). The challenges faced by these marginalized students impact myriad school-related factors including sense of belonging and academic achievement (Kosciw et al., 2020). The current study focused on the topic of GSM leaders and students in a shared space. Understanding how students experience and make meaning of their own sense of belonging in school requires a

review of the types of support structures that have been provided to GSM students. The research presented here picks up where other researchers have left off in the exploration of the experiences of marginalized persons. The newfound visibility of GSM leaders creates further opportunity to examine the impact and actions of GSM school leaders specifically related to GSM students. Determining the full scope and quality of GSM leadership in schools requires the experiences of GSM students who co-occupy educational spaces with GSM leaders in schools to be explored further.

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) placed the onus on the researcher to discuss their own position or role in the research, including the personal experiences, biases, values, and assumptions. This reflexivity recognizes that those characteristics of the researcher are actively written into the research and are thereby accounted for (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In this current research, my own experiences as a teacher and school leader are part of what led me to engage with this specific topic and setting. Admittedly, this research was intended to advocate for the advancement and inclusion of GSM students and school leaders in recognition of the marginalization faced by all people who identify as a GSM. When I began teaching elementary aged students in the early 2000s, I did not disclose my sexual orientation to my students or my colleagues despite that one of my administrators openly identified as a lesbian. My experience with sexual identity non-disclosure were not unlike that of many other teachers (see Dumaresq, 2014). Lee (2019) compared the non-disclosure of non-heterosexual identities amongst teachers to the Clinton-era "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy that precluded coming out in the military. Lee's (2020b) further research into LGBT teachers considering advancement noted that many potential leaders avoid promotion out of fear of greater personal scrutiny due to their LGBT identities. Some of the experiences documented by Lee (2020b) mirror my own.

In July of 2008, I shifted from teaching in an American public school to an independent international school. My partner and I moved to India to work at the same international school. At that point in my career, with my partner working at the same school, it became impractical to keep our sexual orientations hidden. When our twin sons were born in 2011, we felt support from our work colleagues and, for the first time, I felt that my sexual identity was widely known in the school community amongst colleagues, parents, and students. With few exceptions, our experiences as gay men with children who attend the school where we both work have been positive. Those experiences have led me to wonder about the experiences of GSM students and if my visibility as a gay school leader has any impact on those students. I hoped that the experiences of the GSM students I was teaching, whether their GSM status was known to me, were more favorable than my own. By extension, I wondered whether the presence of any GSM leader can generally be stated as positively impactful on GSM students' sense of belonging in schools.

The concepts explored in this current research related to the interaction and relationship between visible GSM school leadership, GSM students in international schools, and sense of belonging in school. Sense of belonging in school has been widely studied and is frequently defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80). Sense of belonging is "of paramount importance for academic success and engagement" (St. Amand et al., 2017, p. 115). Indeed, students have been more likely to achieve academic success and engage in healthy behaviors when there isa sense of connection to the school they attend (Roffey, 2013). Additionally, there are actions that can be taken to increase sense of belonging at school. For LGBTQ university students specifically, maintaining a diverse campus climate was found to

be related to sense of belonging (Parker, 2021). Amongst high school students, strong teacher–student relationships also promoted sense of belonging (Riley, 2019). Unsurprisingly, victimization decreased sense of belonging (Heck et al., 2014; Konishi & Saewyc, 2014). The extent to which observing someone whose gender identity or sexual orientation can be considered similar to the observer's positively impacts the sense of belonging of the observer remains to be explored fully in research both within the context of international schools and in other contexts.

Definitions of Key Terms

Following the example of Henrickson et al. (2020), I realize that much of the language revolving around gender and sexually diverse populations is dynamic. As such, I actively seek to include language that represents this dynamism. Therefore, the following terms are used in this study:

Gender and/or sexual minority (GSM)—an umbrella term that encompasses all persons other than those who identify as exclusively cisgender and heterosexual (Fenaughty et al., 2019). This can include persons with various gender expressions that do not align with sex assigned at birth, persons who may identify as trans or gender queer, and/or persons who may have sexual orientations that are not exclusively heterosexual including those questioning their sexual orientations (Hazel et al., 2019). Indeed, "Gender and sexually diverse communities comprise multifarious persons who experience themselves as radically and subjectively different from cisgender heterosexual majorities" (Henrickson et al., 2020, p. 3).

Throughout the evolution of the literature about gender and sexual minorities, different abbreviations have been used to describe the groups discussed in the studies. Some studies use the abbreviation LGBTQ+ as an inclusive moniker for all gender and sexual minority groups (see

Abreu et al., 2021). The very act of listing groups in an attempt to be inclusive, however, is an exclusionary practice. Rather than trying to include all different gender and sexual minority groups within an abbreviation, I will use the abbreviation GSM. This practice mirrors the practice of nomenclature found in Hazel et al. (2019) and is a slight variation of the nomenclature used by Fenaughty et al. (2019), who used the term *sexual and gender minority*. When referring to a specific study or the information found therein, however, I will use whatever term has been chosen by the author(s) because in many cases these terms serve as intentional delimiters of the scope of the study, especially if the studies did not include a trans or nonbinary population.

Other important terms that will be used in this study include:

Cisgender—a term denoting alignment between gender identity and sex assigned at birth (National Institutes of Health [NIH], n.d.).

Coming out or *coming out of the closet*—a process of disclosure of identity for LGBTQ+ people. Coming out can proceed in stages or degrees. The process can begin with self-recognition first and may entail revealing personal identity information to others as well. The experience of coming out can be transformative and often occurs at multiple points in an LGBTQ+ person's life (NIH, n.d.).

GSM school leader—any schoolteacher or administrator in a high school setting teaching or administering programs for students in Grades 9–12 who openly identifies as a member of a gender and/or sexuality minority group. Leader, in turn, is broadly construed as one who holds influence and therefore has the capacity to move others to think and behave in a particular way (Fassinger et al., 2010).

Heteronormative—a blanket presumption of heterosexuality that may be accompanied by implicit suggestion that non-heterosexual identities are inferior (NIH, n.d.).

International school—a school that self-identifies as international and could be in any host country, including the United States.

Queer—a term of radical inclusiveness that, when used within the theoretical framework of queer theory, implies fluidity of sexual and gender expressions (Lugg & Tooms, 2010)

Sense of belonging in school—feelings of personal acceptance, respect, inclusion, and support that a person feels within the school (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

Statement of the Problem

LGBTQ students who experienced victimization at school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression reported having more psychological difficulties such as depression and worse educational outcomes such as lower GPA than students who are harassed less (Kosciw et al., 2020). Additionally, LGBTQ students who experienced victimization reported a lower self-esteem and sense of belonging at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). A close relationship with an adult at school can lessen feelings of loneliness for LGBT students (Mulcahy et al., 2016). Amongst high school students, strong teacher–student relationships also promoted sense of belonging (Riley, 2019). In a seminal study into student sense of belonging at school, Goodenow and Grady (1993) determined that students derived much of their academic motivation from feeling supported by others at school.

Previous research on support structures offered to GSM youth has identified several mechanisms through which schools, communities, and leaders provided support. Most of the studies that will be further examined in Chapter 2 of this research involved the interaction between a supportive adult and a GSM youth. These structures include attendance at youth

support groups (Porta et al., 2017; Wilkerson et al., 2017), identification of mentors (Mulcahy et al., 2016; Renn & Bilodeau. 2005), role modeling (Anderson, 2014; Beck, 2020; Brown, 2016; Porta et al., 2017; Russell, 2010), and teacher–student relationships (Price et al., 2019). In addition to these interventions that bring GSM students in contact with a supportive adult, other positive mechanisms for support include teacher activism (Brown, 2016; Wells, 2017), the development of a positive school climate (Aerts et al., 2012; Fenaughty et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2017) and the implementation of inclusive curricula (Beck 2020; Tompkins et al., 2019). Despite the extant research into structures of support for GSM students, Fenaughty et al. (2019) described a dearth of research exploring GSM student experiences outside the United States. The problems addressed by this research were, therefore, the lack of sense of belonging in school for GSM students (Kosciw et al., 2020) as well the gap in academic literature about GSM students and leaders specifically within the context of international schools (Anderson, 2014; Brown, 2016; Fenaughty et al., 2019; O'Malley et al., 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how former students at international schools who self-identified as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority experienced a sense of belonging at school and understood any changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. For this research, GSM leader was generally defined as a teacher or administrator who was understood to identify as GSM and who holds influence and therefore has the capacity to move others to think and behave in a particular way (Fassinger et al., 2010). In exploring how former students at international schools experienced and understood their own sense of belonging in school, the current research sought to add to the growing body of literature regarding GSM students in

schools and what might potentially serve as a support in providing an increased sense of belonging and therefore ameliorating educational outcomes for marginalized students.

Research Questions and Design

The theoretical framework of queer theory, based on the work of Butler (1990/2006) was used to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do GSM former students at international schools experience sense of belonging in school?

- RQ2: How do GSM former students at international schools perceive and make sense of any changes in their sense of belonging after interacting with GSM leaders in international schools?

The current research employed interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to study sense of belonging in GSM students and used queer theory as a framework for understanding how GSM students and school leaders actively challenged heteronormativity and thereby created transformational change in the experiences of the GSM students. Nutt and Backoff (1997) described transformational change as change within an organization stemming from environmental disturbances that required movement within the organization to a higher level of complexity and added value for all stakeholders. In the context of this research, transformational change represents a shift away from mechanisms of organization that value heterosexual and cisgender bodies above others. In phenomenology, the researcher comes to understand the world through the experiences of the participants (Moore, 2017). In this present qualitative study, participants, whose experiences as GSM students in international schools where there is visible GSM leadership have provided them with a close perspective to the phenomenon being studied, were identified using typical sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Using semi-structured

interviews to collect data on the experiences of GSM former students at internationals schools, the data collected from participants were coded into themes that responded to the research questions detailed above. Using queer theory as a lens for interpretation, implications of the current research were then discussed.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Grant and Osanloo (2014) referred to the conceptual framework as the researcher's understanding of how the research problem will be explored. In the current study, the conceptual framework was built around the GSM school leader and GSM student who interact within the context of the international school (see Figure 1). The impact and extent of this relationship has yet to be fully explored. Extant literature already described the beneficial relationship of mentors to LGBT youth (Kosciw et al., 2020; Mulcahy et al., 2016) and the importance of positive teacher–student relationships for sense of belonging (Riley, 2019). The present research adds to the current understanding of support structures available to schools for GSM students when the identity of the school leader is also non-heteronormative. The conceptual framework of this research is connected to the theoretical framework by the resistance offered against heteronormative practices within educational institutions.

Figure 1

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks of the Current Study
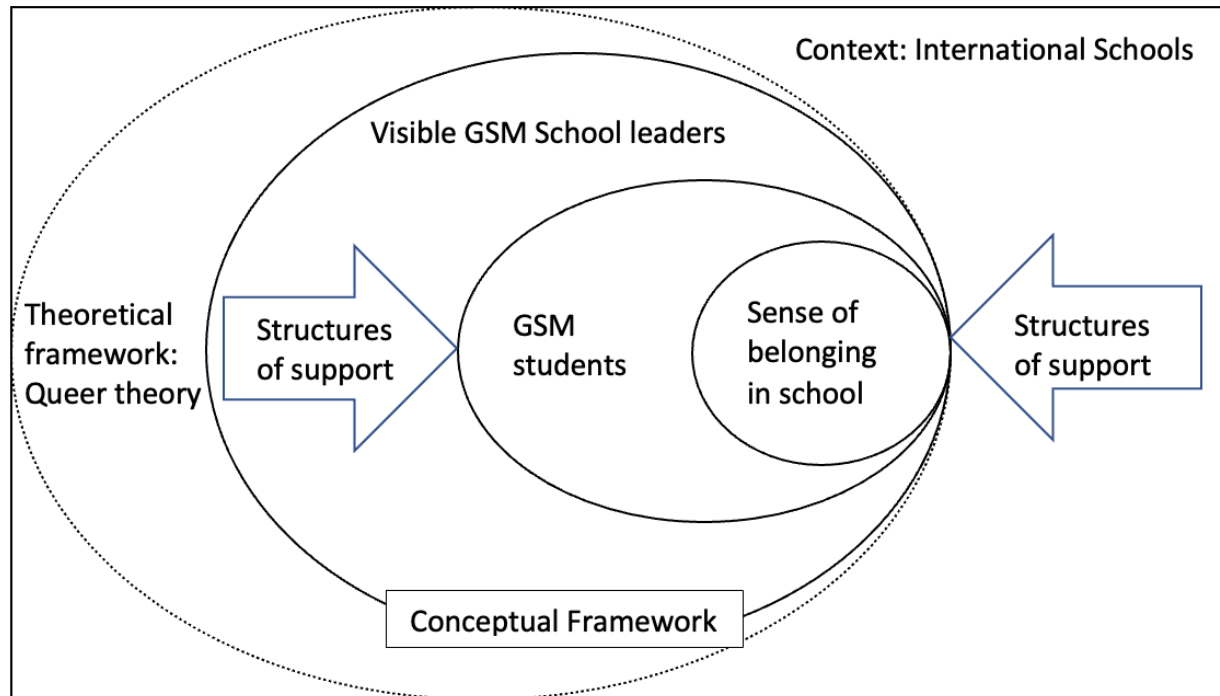
The theoretical framework that guided this research was queer theory, which is highly

influenced by the work of Judith Butler (Drousioti, 2021). Queer theory challenges the

heteronormative (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Courtney, 2014; Johnson & Lugg, 2011) and

critiques gendered and sexualized practices (Manning, 2016). Butler (1990/2006) posited that

"gender is not always constituted coherently" (p. 4) and that to conceive of gender as a stable,

consistent trait requires viewing the feminine as an opposing binary to masculine. Butler instead

suggested that gender is neither a result of biological sex, nor is it fixed; rather, it is culturally

constructed and performative in nature. In critiquing the nature of gender and deconstructing the

male-female binary, Butler also problematized compulsory heterosexuality (Drousioti, 2021).

Queer theory guided this current investigation into the manner through which students and

leaders who identify as not exclusively heterosexual and/or not cisgender, and therefore transgressive actors within a heteronormative/cisnormative paradigm, exist simultaneously as both participants in a system of education and in opposition to that same system.

Schools exist as heteronormative institutions (Blount, 2003) and school leadership itself is an act imbued with heteronormative associations (Tooms, 2007). According to Mulcahy et al. (2016), LGBTQ students did not have the same sort of support systems that were often present in schools for non-LGBTQ students. Of the support systems that are available to GSM students, which will be further detailed in Chapter 2, Mulcahy et al. (2016) pointed out that students who were looking for mentors looked for particular qualities in those mentors. Yet, there is a gap in the literature exploring the extent to which a GSM school leader can fill that role by virtue of the challenge to heteronormativity posed by the presence of their non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender body within the school building.

In addition to the conceptual challenge to heteronormativity, queer pleasure, and the pursuit of pleasure including, but also beyond, sexual pleasure, are important concepts within queer theory (Blackburn, 2021). The need for pleasure goes beyond the basic need for recognition in school, or attendance at a queer-friendly school. Blackburn (2021) described the needs of GSM youth to copartner not only in the interrogation of gender and sexual constructs, but also to participate in schooling in a way that brought pleasure. In the current study, I examined the ways in which the co-presence of GSM persons—leaders and students—within the international school brought about an increased sense of belonging at school in GSM former students at international schools.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Assumptions

The fundamental assumption made in this research was that the experiences of each of the GSM participants were accurately recalled and conveyed through the words transcribed in the interviews. Implicit in the act of accurate recall was accurate identification of a GSM school leader as belonging to a GSM group. Furthermore, accurate analysis and thematic construction rested on assumption that the researcher, through the processes of qualitative data collection and analysis, faithfully captured and interpreted the intended meaning of the experience being recalled and encoded by the speaker through speech. In the process of inductive coding, as described by Creswell and Guetterman (2019), the researcher makes sense of the text data, narrowing the data to themes that can be supported with evidence. This process can be influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher and intentionally incorporates the subjectivity of the participants. The assumed difficulty of data collection was further described by Bell et al. (2019), who pointed out the difference between quantitative data collection of human-environment interactions, and the qualitative data collection within social systems. While some human-environment interactions can be detected by sensor and measured with reasonable accuracy (Bell at al., 2019), the research here was reliant on memory and assumed accurate recall of experiences that may have happened years earlier in a participant's life.

As previously discussed, accurate recall is a fundamental assumption that was implicit in the research design. The use of purposeful sampling limited participation in the current research to those who had a close experience with the phenomenon under study. Limiting the research sample to former students at international schools who self-identified as GSM also protected current GSM students at international schools. Current GSM students may well have been able to

describe their experiences in the educational environment with more accuracy due to the lack of passage of time but could have been potentially vulnerable as both minors and members of a marginalized group. Therefore, the design of the current research sought to provide useful insight on the phenomenon of sense of belonging within a specific context while protecting those who could be vulnerable within that context due to their marginalized identities.

A second underlying assumption of this research is that the identities of gender and/or sexual minorities were identifiable as stable for the purpose of research. The idea of a stable sexual orientation or gender identity—that a person's sexual orientation or gender identity remains fixed over time—exists in tension with the theoretical framework of this study. Using the example of Courtney (2014), the focus of the current use of queer theory to illuminate the experiences of GSM leaders and students in schools required that participants' identities be describable as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority. This despite Butler's (1990/2006) description of gender explicitly and sexuality implicitly as "permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" (p. 22). Essentially, Butler posited an anti-essentialist approach that is anathema to the participant identification method used in the present qualitative research. This current research did not seek to promote the reduction of gender or sexual orientation to essentialist or stable categories; however, to study the lived experience of a particular group of people, certain delimiters had to be operationalized and a strategic essentialism employed. In this sense, the current research exists in a state of tension with the theoretical framework of queer theory. This tension is explored further in Chapter 2.

Limitations

Several limitations existed in the structure of this research. First, the limitation of the sample of participants. Participants in this study were former students at international schools

who completed at least one year during their Grades 9–12 experiences at an international school. The participants were identified using typical sampling to provide a close perspective on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Further, participants in this research were required to identify as GSM, and to have attended an international school within the last 10 years where an identifiable GSM leader was visible in the community. This research was therefore limited by the relatively small sample size, 5–8 participants, available to the researcher because of the specific research design requirements for participation. This limitation impacted the generalizability of conclusions to other settings beyond international schools. This limitation was necessary, however, to protect minors with marginalized identities.

Secondly, this research was limited by the geographic locations of the participants. The GSM community is not a monolith. Furthermore, the cultural imprint and customs of a particular place and time as well as specific school ecologies marked the experiences of participants and may have limited the ability to generalize the findings of this study. Although typical sampling was used to identify participants who have experiences close to the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), the small sample size and disparate geographic locations of the participants limited the generalizations that can be drawn from the findings.

Scope

The scope of the current research was in alignment with the purposes of IPA as outlined by Smith et al. (2022). Studies employing IPA are concerned with how participants have understood a particular experience within a particular context (Smith et al., 2022). The phenomenon studied was sense of belonging within a particular context as experienced by a particular set of people. This study's specific context of the international school and inclusion of

participants who are former students at international schools provided a partial glimpse into the wider study of sense of belonging for all GSM students.

Rationale and Significance

The development of policy and practical responses to social inequities experienced by GSM students were the primary rationales for this research. While other studies have examined potential structures of support for GSM students in schools, the emergence of GSM leaders in schools created the opportunity to understand a system of support that is possibly qualitatively different from those previously studied and perhaps significant. Interestingly, while some studies focused on the characteristics of the person providing support to the GSM student (see Mulcahy et al., 2016), there is a deficiency of evidence related to the potential impact of those school leaders who identify as a gender and/or sexual minority. This may be related to the newly emergent phenomenon of GSM persons who act as leaders in schools that continue to replicate heteronormative standards and values. Gause (2021) described the state of heteronormativity in schools saying, "The gendered stereotypical expectations of a heteronormative White male leader are still pervasive and dominant" (p. 76). According to Brown (2016), further information was needed about the impact of GSM leadership in schools. Despite the heteronormative expectations placed on students and staff, some programs exist that support emergent LGBT school leaders (Lee, 2020a), and, in recent years, laws have become more protective of civil rights for GSM people (Budow, 2020). A survey by the National Association of Independent Schools found that many heads of school who identified as gay or lesbian were fully out to family, friends, and their school communities (Wheeler, 2019). The emergence of identifiable GSM leaders in schools allows the opportunity to study a phenomenon in a context that would not have been able to be studied previously, providing immediate relevance because of the

potential to support and mitigate negative conditions for a marginalized group. As Brown (2016) noted, the research related to lesbian and gay (LG) administrators' experiences and lives was "undocumented and unexamined" (p. 2). The contribution of this research is important because the multiple, intersecting identities claimed by GSM students in international schools often leave them marginalized within their school communities and/or possibly at risk within their host country.

Summary

Recent efforts by educators have sought to improve the experiences of marginalized students and the ecology of the schools in which they work through providing structures of support to sexually marginalized students. While these structures of support have often involved intervention by or interaction with a supportive adult, no studies have examined the potential impact on GSM students' sense of belonging in school due to the presence of a visible GSM school leader. No studies situated in international schools have examined these concepts. Using queer theory as a lens to understand the experiences of GSM students in international schools, this study sought to contribute to extant literature that would ameliorate the conditions of schooling for a marginalized group.

In Chapter 2, I will uncover the ways in which extant research described the situation for GSM leaders and students in schools. The method of the study is discussed in Chapter 3. The results and conclusions are presented in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. In engaging in this research, I hoped to contribute to the understanding of sense of belonging for GSM students in international schools by determining to what extent and how the presence of visible GSM leadership in schools could positively impact student sense of belonging for GSM students.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERAUTRE

The disparate and often negative educational outcomes of gender and/or sexual minority (GSM) youth when compared to their straight, cisgender peers have been widely studied (Kann et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2020; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Singh & Kosciw, 2017). GSM students in schools experienced bullying and harassment more than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). This includes homophobic or transphobic remarks by classmates (Kosciw et al., 2020). In 2015, approximately 40% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth had contemplated suicide, while 30% had attempted to take their own lives (Kann et al., 2016). Various studies have examined how schools and pre-service teacher training programs have attempted to address these issues through implementation of programs creating safe spaces for GSM youth (see Byrd & Hays, 2013; Henning et al., 2016; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Kearns et al., 2014). While progress has been made toward creating safe spaces for GSM youth, there is still an unwillingness to discuss issues pertaining to sexuality, gender identity and sex in schools (Boas, 2013; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019; McWilliams, 2014).

The research presented here sought to challenge this unwillingness to address issues of sexuality and gender in educational institutions, specifically in international schools, and to center the voices of GSM youth regarding the topic of GSM leadership in their schools. Those in positions of leadership have the capacity to make changes for members of marginalized groups (Bolt, 2018). For example, Beck's (2020) study detailed the exemplary inclusive practices of school counselors and principals, including promoting inclusive curricula. Similarly, Lilienthal et al. (2018) described policy changes, access to resources, support from trained counselors, and teacher training in inclusive practices as ways to create an inviting classroom for all students.

Neither Lilienthal et al. (2018) nor Beck (2020) described of the presence of a GSM leader as a potential support to GSM students. Although several of the participants in Beck's (2020) research identified as either a member of a gender and/or sexual minority group, the participants were not selected because of their gender identities or sexual orientations. Beyond the concrete practical suggestions made in these studies, the narratives of how GSM youth experienced the impacts of leadership enacted by GSM leaders were not explicitly told in any of the studies included in this review of literature. The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive phenomenological analysis was to explore how former students at international schools who self-identified as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority experienced sense of belonging at school and understood any changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. There is a dearth of research that includes GSM youth (Espelage, 2016) and GSM leadership (Anderson, 2014; O'Malley et al., 2018). Furthermore, while some educational leaders may be out of the closet, identifying and studying GSM educational leaders could put an uncomfortable spotlight on these individuals as has been documented in other GSM studies (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011).

The settings of this study were the various international schools attended by the former students. As Bunnel (2020) suggested, the recent enormous growth in the market for international schools has created a tension between the liberalizing educational motives of the apolitical institutions of international schools and "illiberal" nations. Within illiberal nations, education carrying the label "international" gives globalized middle-class parents a competitive advantage over parents who choose to send their children to national or state-run institutions of education (Bunnel, 2022). Meanwhile, within international and more traditional educational spaces, GSM school leaders could potentially "serve as powerful and positive role models for

queer and questioning youth" (McWilliams, 2014, p. 277). The current study is significant because it adds to the literature about GSM leadership and specifically, GSM school leadership in relationship to GSM students. Anderson (2014) poignantly noted that "the stories of our lesbian and gay school leaders remain largely untold" (p. 2). Including the perspective of GSM students will help create a thicker description of what GSM leadership in schools is.

To understand the state of research related to the two protagonists of this research, this literature review focused on GSM leaders and GSM students. This review explored the subtopics of queer theory as a theoretical framework for the current study, GSM leaders and their sense of identity, queer leadership, the lavender ceiling, GSM students and their sense of belonging in schools, existing support structures for GSM students, and the context of the international school.

The literature for this review was selected from the following databases: ProQuest education database, the *Journal of Leadership Education* database, ERIC collection, JSTOR, Gale OneFIle, EBSCOHost, SAGE Journals, Project Muse, and the University of New England dissertation database. Articles were also identified through ancestry searches by consulting the reference lists of previously reviewed literature. A combination of keyword and subject searches were used using the following terms: gay, education, leadership, school leadership, queer, teacher, education, LGBTQ+, self-esteem, youth, LGBTQ people, lesbian, LGBTQIA, achievement, school belonging, high school students, sense of belonging, secondary education, K-12, teacher relationships, sexual minority students, and gay students in schools. A manual search was also performed through the last 10 years of volumes of the *Journal of LGBT Youth*.

Efron and Ravid (2018) described the process of reviewing literature as systematic, critical, and evaluative. Findings, theories, and scholarly literature around a specified topic are synthesized (Efron & Ravid, 2018). As such, in the process of reviewing the literature related to

this topic, I hoped to achieve the following outcomes: first, to identify prevalent themes in current literature related to these topics; second, to justify the need for the current study based on gaps in the literature; and third, to provide preliminary implications for policy and practice.

Conceptual Framework

As an out, gay man who has been a leader in international schools, my own experiences in disclosing my sexual orientation and in trying to positively influence the experiences of GSM students through role modeling and mentoring have often made me wonder about the impact my presence has on the school communities of which I have been a part. Furthermore, the context of international schools is made increasingly complex by the cultural influence of the locale of the school as well as the diverse population within the school, signaling potential complications due to intersecting identities. The leader and student represent the main structural components within the conceptual framework of this research.

The purpose for using queer theory in this current research was to help the reader understand how the various GSM actors within the educational setting, GSM leaders and GSM students, relate in ways that cause transformative change. According to O'Malley et al. (2018), "Queer knowledges and methods are largely untapped intellectual resources in the wider educational research field that hold rich potential for expanding research practices oriented toward questions of justice, inclusion, transformation, and equity" (p. 573). In this sense, the concepts of this research were organized around the two primary agents of transformation: the GSM leader and the GSM student. Extant literature described ways in which structures from inside and outside the school context provide support for GSM students. This current research sought to understand how visible GSM school leaders served as support structures for GSM students in ways that positively influence the student's sense of belonging in school. This

research examined how former students at international schools understood any changes in their sense of belonging in school after interacting with a GSM school leader, and thereby disrupted the heteronormative and gendered practices of school leadership in ways that are transformatively resistant (see Figure 2). Cammarota and Fine (2008) described this kind of resistance as a road path to "systematic and institutional change to promote social justice" (p. 2).

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of the Current Study
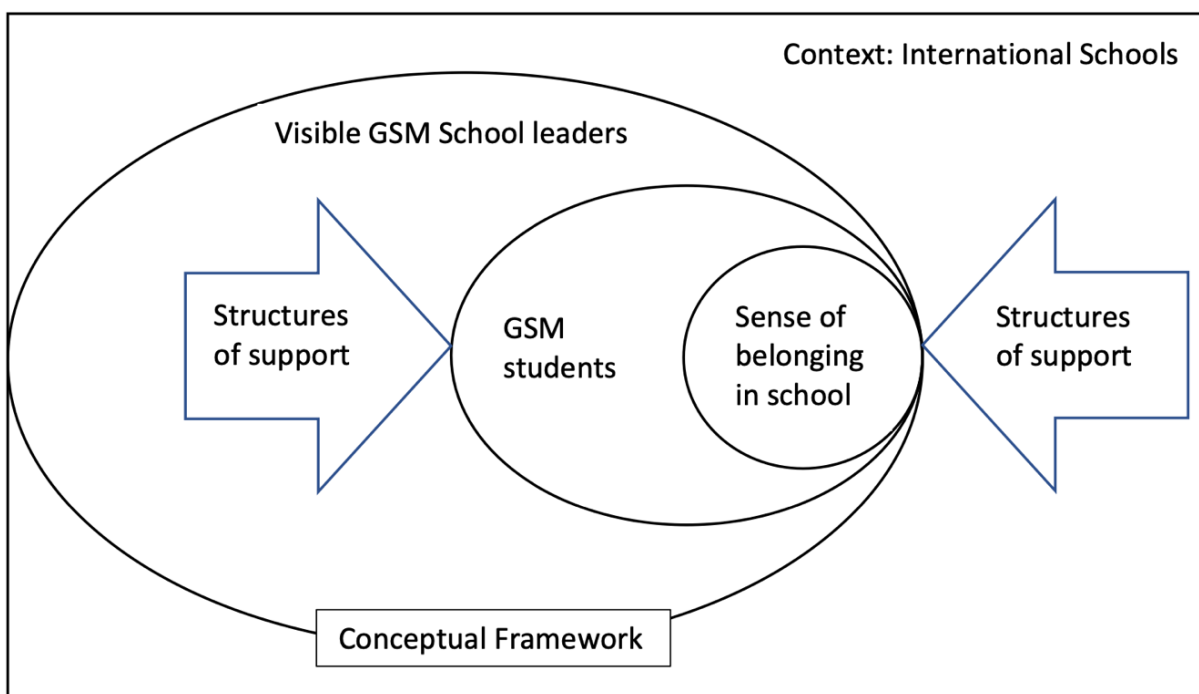
Courtney's (2014) use of queer theory as a theoretical framework provided a model for understanding queer leadership. Rather than thinking of queer as an identity which one takes on as a label, Courtney understood queer as an action verb, where the leader focused on the subversion of the heteronormative through moments of transgression and non-normative

identities. While Johnson and Lugg (2011) understood queering to be the deconstruction of identity, self, and community, in the context of my research, the very existence of GSM leaders operating in heteronormative institutions, including international schools, represented a queering of heteronormative communities and structures. If the bodies themselves are the mechanism of deconstruction of straight, masculine, cisgender conceptions of leadership, then the impact on GSM students are potential outcomes of that deconstruction. Understanding that impact in a fuller sense was the focus of this current research.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework guides the research and researcher philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The conceptual framework for this study related to the theoretical framework insofar as the theoretical framework offered a broader perspective for how the various concepts interacted with each other (Adom et al., 2018) and tied the concepts in the study to extant research. The theory chosen for this research was queer theory because of the theory's tendency to challenge the heteronormative (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Courtney, 2014; Johnson & Lugg, 2011) and critique gendered and sexualized practices (Manning, 2016). Queer theory "disrupts the normalcy of education" (Mayo, 2007, p. 81). Queer theory centers the voices of GSM leaders and students by placing a critical gaze on any school stakeholder who would resist the centering of non-normative voices (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). In this way, queer theory can be a device to interrogate, and to design novel and informative research that includes a broad variety of human experience (O'Malley et al., 2018).

Queer theory, which can be seen as the intellectual successor to LGBT studies (Courtney, 2014), evolved from challenges to the idea of gender as a universal conception (Butler,

1990/2006). Butler (1990/2006) posited that gender is just another form of drag that people wear to counter the violence of enforced gender norms. One of the main tenets of queer theory is the rejection of binary understandings of gender and sexuality through which certain identities are both minoritized and stigmatized to "establish a definitional and dominant normative space for heterosexuality" (Courtney, 2014, p. 384). Western culture promotes an understanding of sex, sexuality, and gender through a scheme of tightly enforced binaries: male/female, masculine/feminine, straight/gay (Johnson & Lugg, 2011). The basic binary categories that are presumed to be stable and permanent—male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual—exert power over those whose identities lie outside what is considered normal. The function of queer theory is to invalidate the argument for fixed binaries by deconstructing the reduction of sexuality and gender into essentialist categories (Valocchi, 2005). Valocchi (2005) pointed out that the imposition of binaries into the way we conceive about identity goes beyond homosexual/heterosexual. Binaries are a mechanism of oppression through their ability to marginalize and affect how we think about what is normal and abnormal in addition to what is hidden versus what is public (Valocchi, 2005).

If gender and sexuality do not exist as binaries, then any identity group that exists based on an exclusive trait like homosexual or heterosexual is problematized because the borders of those groups can no longer be conceived as clearly defined. Queer theory deconstructs what people often think of as stable, privileged identities, like heterosexuality, and questions the power afforded to certain identities over others (Johnson & Lugg, 2011). More recent conceptualizations of queer theory, while continuing to argue against categorization, focus more on queer activism (Berlant & Freeman, 2020). Queer theory, therefore, tends to destabilize. The use of the word queer itself questions the comfort felt by static and rigid understandings of

gender and sexuality (Manning, 2016). One issue with queer theory's destabilization of essentialist identities, an issue that has caused some theorists to distance themselves from queer theory, is that for a minority group to receive some protection, there must be some stability in the collective identity of the minority group (Courtney, 2014; Johnson & Lugg, 2011). This current research, following the model of Courtney (2014), sought to reconcile the idea that essentialist identities such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, while problematized by some component queer theory ideas, still presented a challenge to heteronormativity that is the essence of queer theory.

Queer theory offers insights into the tensions that come from the simultaneous construction of multiple identities such as gender, race, ethnic, sexual, and academic. Tensions arising from the process of constructing identity make navigating school more difficult for students with multiple, intersecting identities (Johnson & Lugg, 2011). The act of reducing gender to essentialist groups, a practice that ignores and devalues diversity, is an act of marginalization for groups that are already stigmatized due to their intersecting identities (Chapman, 2021). The use of queer theory in educational research has contributed to the understanding of racial and sexual intersectionalities (Boas, 2013). This theory was applicable to the current research because the identities of the participants in this research, in addition to being gender and sexual minorities, were complicated by further intersectionalities such as racial and religious identities as well as the characteristic that all the participants in the research shared of being former students at international schools.

While the problematization of stable gender identities and sexual orientations is a component of queer theory, the idea of LGBTQ inclusion is not a main tenet of queer theory; rather, queer theory, through scholarship and activism, is less concerned with describing and protecting certain identities and seeks more to challenge heteronormativity (Manning, 2016).

Queer theory is, therefore, an appropriate theoretical framework for a study that seeks to examine how GSM bodies interact in a heteronormative space. Indeed, the project of queer theory is to question the normalizing discourse of heteronormativity and how that discourse, when unquestioned in institutions, leads to a loss of power for certain minoritized and stigmatized groups (Courtney, 2014). Understanding what is meant by heteronormativity helps in creating a framework through which heteronormativity can be challenged. Courtney (2014) defined heteronormativity as the social and institutional structures that shape how heterosexuality is viewed as coherent, normal, and privileged. For the purposes of this study, heteronormativity was defined as a blanket presumption of heterosexuality that may be accompanied by implicit suggestion that non-heterosexual identities are inferior (NIH, n.d.).

In the case of the former international school students in the current study, they represented a deviance against the heteronormative and their interaction with GSM school leaders represented a chance to question how schools have been constructed to perpetuate certain normative identity performances in both leaders and students. Queer theory is an appropriate framework for exploring the experiences of GSM leaders and students because the theory can help us understand how deviance within leadership can challenge the educational institution in ways that go past the inclusion of disenfranchised groups. Whereas the project of seeking LGBTQ+ inclusion in the institutions and structures that oppress gender and sexual minorities was the focus of the gay rights movement, the gay liberationist movement, a precursor of queer theory, sought to question the social and political construction of gender identities and sexuality orientations themselves (Johnson & Lugg, 2011).

One of the institutions being questioned, critiqued, and ultimately deconstructed by queer theory is the heteronormative institution of school leadership (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003).

Historically and unquestionably the domain of White, masculine, heterosexual, and able-bodied (Blackmore, 2006; Blount, 2003; Lumby & Coleman, 2007), Blount (2003) went so far as to use the metaphor of husband and wife when considering the relationship of school leaders to teachers and described heterosexuality as a prerequisite for leadership. Tooms' (2007) study examined how several gay and lesbian administrators felt pressure to uphold heterosexist norms in their enactment of leadership thus simultaneously acting to uphold and trouble the regulating structures of a system. To summarize, the enactment of leadership by GSM school leaders problematizes the heterosexual and cisgender conceptualizations associated with school leadership.

School leadership is, therefore, understood as a gendered and sexualized practice. According to Manning (2016), queer theory can be useful for critiquing gendered and sexualized practices and is applicable in many contexts, including as a theoretical lens through which one can interpret history, coalition building and activism, art, and, more recently, social science scholarship. Queer theory drives researchers to examine the spaces and conditions in which queer folk exist and operate (O'Malley et al., 2018). The voices that are centered by queer theory are often unheard and underrepresented in qualitative educational research (O'Malley et al., 2018).

Referring to empirical examinations of school leadership, O'Malley et al. (2018) bluntly state that "there are decades of research yet to be conducted with LGBTIQ educators" (p. 577). The effect of GSM underrepresentation in research is to thwart the development of a greater understanding of mechanisms of power—both the oppressive and the transformatively resistant—in educational communities, policies, and practices (O'Malley et al., 2018).

GSM Leaders in Schools

Of the two main protagonists in this research, first, I will examine the literature available on the topic of GSM leaders in schools. Schools are conservative institutions (Aerts et al., 2012; Prosen, 2013; Zook, 2017). In his dissertation, Prosen (2013) examined the experiences of two out, gay male superintendents of public-school districts in the midwestern United States. While both experienced having to navigate coming out during the interview process, both were ultimately hired in top-level positions in their district. Although reduced homophobia has allowed GSM leaders access to some educational spaces that were previously unexplored, the situation for GSM leaders was described as multifaceted and difficult to navigate (Prosen, 2013).

GSM leadership challenges heteronormativity as the leaders themselves actively trouble the decidedly-unqeer narrative that has been created because of norms surrounding leadership in schools (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Normative expectations can include but are not limited to how GSM leaders dress and the way they communicate (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Even for teachers who are already out of the closet, a blanket presumption of heterosexuality requires educators to continually come out of the closet upon encountering new people (Wells, 2017).

GSM leadership does not occur in a vacuum but is contextualized by heteronormative and cisgenderist messages that are reinforced by institutions and the media (Jourian & Simmons, 2017). For trans leaders in particular, the cisgenderist messages are pervasive (Jourian & Simmons, 2017). An overarching heteronormative/cisgenderist narrative pathologizes trans bodies as transgressive and therefore disqualified for positions of leadership (Jourian & Simmons, 2017). Essentially, a master narrative of heteronormativity and sexmuteness has been created in schools that is the unspoken, yet pervasive educational context in which LGBTQ+ students and leaders find themselves (McWilliams, 2014). The effect of such a master narrative

can prevent a marginalized class of people from achieving status or agency within an institution (Haynes et al., 2016). Yet, due to the conservative nature of schools, there is a contradiction in the simultaneous unwillingness to deconstruct the master narrative through broaching issues of sex, sexuality, and queerness and the ongoing push in certain places to create a safe space where LGBTQ+ students are not bullied by their peers (McWilliams, 2014). Research has yet to fully explore the role that GSM leaders will play in deconstructing the old and creating a new master narrative.

Challenges Faced by GSM Leaders

Among the challenges faced by GSM leaders are the decision whether to come out of the closet at work, the historical evolution of the law regarding GSM persons in education, heteronormative policies and practice, the difficulty of ineffective, unsupportive, or hostile leadership, and the often negative or limiting perceptions of GSM people by community members. Deciding whether to come out at work is a challenge for all GSM leaders (Anderson, 2014). Should a leader choose to come out, the heteronormative context of schools makes coming out a repeated process, not something that a leader has to do only once (Anderson, 2014). When leaders choose to come out of the closet, they make the choice based on factors in their context, including perception of security, safety, isolation, and administrative or community support (Anderson, 2014). Wells (2017) documented the experiences of four sexual minority Canadian educators who were also activists as part of a larger research effort to relate stories of 53 gender and sexual minority teachers in Canada. As out teacher activists, not only did the teachers in the study have to deal with a homophobic backlash, but also with the discomfort of other LGBTQ+ educators who were trying to keep their sexual orientation hidden from the communities they served (Wells, 2017). Indeed, the studies that documented the experiences of

LG administrators noted the ever-present fear they faced of losing employment because of their sexuality (Anderson, 2014; Bolt, 2018).

There are, however, conditions that mitigate some of the fear that GSM leaders may face. The presence of supportive colleagues and supervisors at work is important for GSM leaders in determining how open they can be about their GSM status (Anderson, 2014). Anderson (2014) explored the experiences of eight school administrators in building or district-level positions. Of the eight participants interviewed, LG leaders who had close relationships with their supervisors felt comfortable disclosing their sexual orientations. Anderson explained that leaders' perceived feelings of isolation caused them to lie about their sexual orientations; however, some leaders who experienced an environment of support reported a positive effect on their leadership.

A sub-theme that emerged from the literature surrounding challenges for GSM school leaders concerns the referent power, or "the power held by someone due to their capacity to influence and persuade people through well-developed interpersonal skills" (Jeanes, 2019, para. 1) of the GSM leader (Anderson, 2014; Wells, 2017). In Anderson's (2014) study, several participants noted that they were covert about their sexual orientations when moving to a new job until they reached a point where they had developed relationships with their supervisors. This covertness represented an inherent conflict between the professional choices and the personal lives of LG administrators. Heteronormative policies and practices impeded the establishment of a supportive environment by creating environments where LG administrators felt that they could not be themselves (Anderson, 2014). It is unsurprising then, that none of the eight participants in Anderson's study reported discussing their sexuality with parents of students or members of the community out of a fear of backlash from morally conservative stakeholders.

The opinions of community members about leaders of schools affect whether leaders feel safe to come out of the closet and serve as a regulating force for how queer leaders can act (Tooms, 2007). Tooms (2007) examined the concept of fitness to lead for queer leaders, explaining that being perceived as "fit" for leadership by the community in which one is leading is based on the heteronormative associations made with school leadership by members of the community. Tooms questioned whether all queer leaders would be considered fit, or if there were specific characteristics that queer leaders must have or not have to be considered fit for leadership. Criticizing the overarching heteronormative narrative of school leadership, Tooms explained that queer leaders are often judged as fit, and therefore successful school administrators, based on their ability to learn and maintain heteronormative rules. In this sense, the experiences of the LG administrators documented in Anderson's (2014) study are held against the backdrop presented by Toom's (2007) study and further elaborated by the narrow parameters along which GSM leaders are recognized, validated, and given agency.

Similar to the ways in which research about GSM school leaders and educators has evolved, laws pertaining to GSMs have also changed. Despite the repeal of some discriminatory laws, educators today can still feel the impact of homophobic legislation of the past (Lee, 2019). Historically, gays and lesbians specifically were viewed to have a negative, predatory impact on students (Russell, 2010). Various court cases in the United States (see *Morrison v. State Board of Education*, 1969; *National Gay Task Force v. Board of Education of the City of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*, 1984) slowly eroded the school board's power to terminate an employee for violations of morality clauses found pervasively in contracts (Bass, 1986). More recently, in *Bostock v. Clayton County, GA* (2020), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act protects employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender

identity (Budow, 2020). In the United Kingdom, the Equality Act, passed in 2010, protected individuals from discrimination based on actual or perceived sexual orientation (Lee, 2019). These advances in the legal rights of GSMs have a particular impact within the context of schools, allowing GSMs to emerge and become visible in the communities within which they operate (Lee, 2019). Still, being an out, open, and visible queer educator can be fraught with fear.

In Bolt's (2018) study examining the experiences of lesbian educators in the state of Virginia in pursuing leadership roles, none of the lesbian educational leaders were out to students. When asked why, the primary reason given for remaining closeted with students was fear (Bolt, 2018). For teachers, an unsupportive administration may send the message to the community that LGBTQ+ teachers are deviant and unable to be a moral role model for students (Wells, 2017). Well's (2017) study documented the experiences of four Canadian teachers with inept or hostile administrations. One teacher recounted several episodes in which he had to act as a pseudo-leader when faced with confrontational parents. He did so by supplying clear language to families of students who questioned the appropriateness of out-teachers in the classroom in cases where administration was either ambivalent or openly hostile to the interrogation of the heteronormativity of schools by the very presence of an out-LGBTQ educator (Wells, 2017).

To summarize the challenges faced by GSM leaders, even though access to leadership positions has increased for the GSM leader and is documented in the literature, navigating the coming out process with various school stakeholders remains a difficulty of GSM leadership (Bolt, 2018). Some leaders who find themselves in the context of supportive colleagues and supervisors can be out either completely or to a certain extent while others remain in the closet (Anderson, 2014). Laws and judicial rulings have also evolved in ways that provide rights to GSM leaders (Bass, 1986; Budow, 2020; Lee, 2019). Lastly, as GSM leaders gain higher

positions of authority, they feel more latitude to disclose their gender or sexual minority status (Anderson, 2014). The research on challenges for GSM leaders informed the current study insofar as extant literature uncovers a new space for research to be conducted, one that explores the impacts of out GSM leaders the context of heteronormative educational institutions.

Identity and Leadership

Identity, including sexual orientation or gender identity, is inextricably linked to leadership (Grabsch & Moore, 2021). According to Grabsch and Moore's (2021) phenomenological study of how leaders experienced identity, "Identity within the leadership context is the next frontier in leadership scholarship" (p. 63). In their exploration, the researchers described a gap in the literature about how the leader's identity is understood, enacted, managed, or presented in leadership.

Identity was further explored in Bolt's (2018) study about lesbian educational leaders in Virginia. The study's participants viewed the leader's identity as inseparable from the acts of the leader (Bolt, 2018). According to Bolt, openness about sexual identity allowed the leader to be more authentic. The five lesbian leaders in the study agreed with the idea that authentic leadership was important in order to be an effective educational leader (Bolt, 2018) Additionally, an investigation into the experiences of 15 LGBT student leaders in Midwestern universities found that being open about their LGBT identities increased their confidence as leaders (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). In a study about trans leadership, Jourian and Simmons (2017) noted that the leadership qualities of self-esteem and efficacy in trans college leaders were necessary to enact leadership, and centering trans student voices helped develop these qualities in emerging leaders. Further attention, however, needs to be paid to how trans students are included in leadership (Jourian & Simmons, 2017).

Beck (2020) found that identity is enacted through the acts of school leaders who advocate on behalf of LGBT students. In this study, two of the four leader-participants identified as gay and one as a transgender woman. The two gay participants noted that their leadership in advocacy was a direct result of their own experience with schooling and not having a place where they belonged. The personal nature of their past experiences created a sense of urgency in their work. The gay and trans participants in the study noted that being out and open was meaningful for their advocacy work. Furthermore, the leader's identity was a motivating factor for taking on LGBT inclusion and advocacy work in leading schools (Beck, 2020). This same idea is echoed in Wells' (2017) study of Canadian educators. The childhood and youth experiences of teacher-activists motivated their work in advancing inclusive practices in schools (Wells, 2017).

In addition to impacting motivation for leadership, identity also influences why leaders choose to be involved with certain groups of followers. Grabsch and Moore (2021) concluded that leaders were often drawn to the context in which they lead because of some aspect of their identity. For example, queer leaders may be motivated to take up activism for queer issues because they identify with their queer followers and empathize with the difficulties facing the group (Grabsch & Moore, 2021). Identity is, therefore, a situational factor in leadership (Grabsch & Moore, 2021).

The development of leadership identity also reinforces LGBT+ identities in certain contexts (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). In their grounded theory study, Renn and Bilodeau (2005) applied a leadership identity model to the experiences of 15 LGBT+ university leaders that breaks down the development of leadership identity into six stages: (1) awareness, (2) exploration/engagement, (3) leader identified, (4) leadership differentiated, (5) generativity, and

(6) internalization/synthesis. Their findings suggested that leadership involvement with identity-based groups in university provides student LGBT+ leaders the opportunity to develop leadership identity in each of the six stages of the model. The development of leadership identity also has specific implications for the leader's positive identity development as an LGBTQ+ person (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). While the authors did not discuss the implications of interlocking queer and leadership identities in their study, they suggested that researchers explore the topic further. The idea of such an interconnectedness was further explored by Kodama and Laylo (2017), who described leadership experiences within identity-based groups as having the potential to develop leaders' sense of identity as well as their leadership skills. The concept of identity development in leadership is relevant for the current study because of the dual identities of GSM leaders as members of a marginalized group and as leaders. These intersecting identities seem to be inseparable from the acts undertaken by GSM leaders. Yet, those acts are contextualized within the heteronormative educational institution, which gender and sexual minorities are more likely to challenge in ways that are observable (Tompkins et al., 2019). The current study sought to explore the experiences of GSM youth in relation to visible GSM leadership within the context of international schools and specifically related to GSM students' sense of belonging.

When considering the role identity plays in leadership, the discourse surrounding GSM persona within the educational institution must also be considered. Russell (2010) explored the idea of compliance or resistance to the discursive narratives presented about LGBTQ+ teachers in educational spaces in a study of eight queer Canadian educators. Conflicting narratives were viewed as influential in shaping teachers' behavior: on one hand, queer teachers are portrayed as a role model for gay youth, and on the other hand, queer teachers are viewed as predatory or

overly sexualized. Russell (2010) posited that the latter of the two discourses is potentially more powerful than the former due to its destructive nature. LGBTQ+ teachers comply with and resist these narratives in their interaction with current and former students (Russell, 2010). Themes from this research were reaffirmed in 2019 in a qualitative study of eight secondary schoolteachers in the United Kingdom (Henderson, 2019).

Finally, the leader's identity in relationship to their context is relevant to the decision that every queer leader makes to remain closeted or come out. In Tooms' (2007) study, queer leaders all closeted themselves to various extents in a variety of situations, thereby masking aspects of their identity. Queer leaders negotiate their identity in their individual contexts through work ethic, lack of display of gay artifacts in the workspace, downplaying queer partnership, and explicit revelation of sexuality to targeted audiences only (Tooms, 2007). Similar to the ideas previously discussed about referent power, within educational institutions, those who are lower in rank and authority—new teachers for example—often must hide their personal lives more than someone who has been in a district or school for a longer period (Wells, 2017). With time comes the accrual of power and the resilience to weather the backlash that may come from being either visibly queer or a visible advocate (Wells, 2017).

The overarching theme identifiable in the literature and underscored by Grabsch and Moore (2021) is that a leader's identity may play a strong role in their leadership in certain contexts and a less present role in other contexts. Leaders, on account of their own identities, are drawn to certain leadership opportunities (Beck, 2020). For GSM leaders, the opportunity to serve GSM youth provides a motivation for leadership that is identity-based. How GSM youth experience their interaction with GSM leadership in international schools was the subject of this current study.

Queer Leadership

Given the obstacles and opportunities facing GSM leaders and the importance of identity in leadership, GSM leaders have the potential to act as change agents in the queering of educational spaces. Queer leadership, as defined by Pryor (2020), was a social practice against a heteronormative status quo performed by any leader regardless of orientation. The act of centering queer voices is endemic of queer leadership (Pryor, 2020). Pryor interviewed both straight and gay leaders in a study exploring the experiences of student affairs officers within a college setting who had success in initiating change and advancing LGBTQ equity within their institutions. Gay leaders in the study reported conflicting feelings about their role as queer leaders due to the heavy burden placed upon them. While all participants engaged in queer leadership strategies, the gay leaders reported some tokenization in their leadership in the sense that they were assumed to be mentors to all LGBTQ+ students. Pryor also noted the lack of studies into queer leadership, specifically in the college setting.

Courtney's (2014) description of inadvertently queer leadership was slightly different than Pryor's (2020), but still defined queer leadership in direct contrast to heteronormativity. Examining lesbian, gay, and bisexual leaders who perceived sexual orientation as an essentialist component of identity, Courtney (2014) argued that inadvertently queer leadership exists even among leaders who view sexuality as a fixed quality. There are three main ways in which queer leaders disrupt heteronormativity: disclosing a claimed sexual identity with which students can relate; embodying school leadership visibly as successful to the whole school community; and challenging homophobia (Courtney, 2014). All the participants in the study described their leadership as queer regardless of whether they were out of the closet because they used their

positions of power to increase the visibility of identities and lifestyles in the curriculum that were non-heteronormative and promoted policies of inclusion (Courtney, 2014).

Tompkins et al. (2019) connected the concept of the identity of the GSM leader with queer leadership, studying the experiences of four queer educators at the beginning of their careers. The researchers found that the teachers in this study were more likely to identify themselves as enacting elements of LGBTQ+-inclusive leadership rather than their administrators. Participants in the study shared at least some sense of empowerment and a willingness to engage in activities that challenged homophobia (Tompkins et al., 2019).

Queer leadership can manifest in different ways: advocating for change (Pryor, 2020), humanizing minorities (Wells, 2017), joining organizations to influence policy (Wells, 2017), and activism (Jourian & Simmons, 2017). Pryor's (2020) study of college staff members suggested that through queer leadership, the leaders were able to shift the school's practice by advocating for change and performing outreach. Wells (2017) noted a similar case in one of his participants who utilized "critically queer practice" (p. 270) to ameliorate the situation for LGBTQ persons at his school, saying: "Gerard's goal was to humanize sexual minority teachers and issues by normalizing their experiences" (p. 282). Wells identified yet another way that leaders enacted queer leadership, by becoming involved with educational organizations like unions as a method of affecting more inclusive policy positions. Similarly, Jourian and Simmons (2017) described trans leadership as often taking the form of community activism or research in which trans people participated to challenge heteronormative practices.

One caveat to GSM leaders enacting queer leadership generally is the case of GSM leaders who are not out of the closet. According to Tooms (2007), if the leader is not out, it is possible that the GSM leader will avoid engaging in queer leadership. In order not to draw

attention to their marginalized status as LGBTQ+ leaders, the leaders in one study often had to avoid political activism in the realm of LGBTQ+ advocacy (Tooms, 2007). This finding suggested the importance of acknowledging identity in leadership and that authentic leadership, or leadership that acknowledges identity, is potentially more impactful than inauthentic leadership. This topic was explored further in the current study by exploring the perceptions of GSM youth about the effect of GSM leadership on their sense of belonging.

Understanding the context of education as a conservative institution as well as the activism that has promoted LGBTQ causes since the 1960s, Prosen (2013) extended the discussion of queer leadership by making a recommendation for practice to examine the hiring of gay males in educational leadership and a suggestion to examine whether lesbian and transgendered educational leaders shared similar experiences. The advice to look at the human resources practices of inclusiveness of GSM leaders in school administration and in leadership positions was a preliminary implication for both policy and practice in the current study.

To summarize, queer leadership is a project that counters heteronormativity and is enacted in myriad ways: through coming out (Courtney, 2014), embodying successful leadership (Courtney, 2014), taking on activist roles (Jourian & Simmons, 2017), normalizing the experiences of gender and sexual minorities, and joining organizations as a way of initiating change (Wells, 2017). As described by Beck (2020), the implication of queer leadership for practice was for school leaders to challenge systemic biases from a standpoint of social justice. These findings further implied a shift needed in school policy and practice relating to the hiring of GSM educators and leaders.

The Lavender Ceiling

Being a GSM leader and enacting queer leadership has implications for career trajectory (Bolt, 2018). Bolt's (2018) study noted the negative impact of GSM status on career path. Like a glass ceiling for women, LGBTQ+ leaders face a similar lavender ceiling which marginalizes and excludes sexual minorities from positions of power and privilege (Smith, 2013). The lavender ceiling places a limit on LGBTQ+ advancement (Bolt, 2018). Due to recent political gains, out-LGBT people have claimed positions in the workplace that force employers to reconsider their biases, prejudices, and fears (Bolt, 2018). Even so, a group of lesbian educational leaders interviewed by Bolt (2018) recognized that sexual orientation had a negative impact on career trajectory.

In sum, gender and sexual minority leaders face challenges in accessing and enacting leadership (Prosen, 2013). Their identities are inextricably tied to their sexuality and coming out provides a foundation for a more authentic leadership (Bolt, 2018). When leaders engage in queer leadership, they do so in a variety of ways, including through coming out (Courtney, 2014). Coming out as GSM, however, can have negative implications for career advancement within the context of a largely heteronormative educational establishment (Bolt, 2018). The focus on the GSM leader, although critical to this study, represents only one perspective related to this current research. GSM students also face challenges in the context of schools.

GSM Students

Students who do not identify as exclusively cisgender and/or heterosexual have been labeled using various acronyms or monikers such as gender or sexually diverse, or queer (Bruce & Horsley, 2018). When considering the complex identities of students, advancements in physiology and psychology have led to a movement away from a binary understanding of gender

(Baule & Leeper, 2020). While the focus of this research was on the aspects of identity related to gender and sexuality, as McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018) noted in their study of LGBTQ youth, these students represent multiple, intersecting ethnic, cultural, religious, and social class identities. The intersectionality of these identities complicates the negotiation of gender and sexual identity that confronts each student in schools. Schools are places where the concepts of gender and sexuality are given meaning, which is then perpetuated and discursively circulated (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). And yet, systems of schooling have historically been organized to reinforce the male/female binary (Baule & Leeper, 2020). Unsurprisingly, then, GSM students in schools must actively navigate their queer identities (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). As is evidenced by the studies outlined in this review of literature, schools have various mechanisms by which GSM students can receive support. Nevertheless, understanding how students experience school and the victimization experienced by GSM students is necessary to construct and enact adequate systems of support for GSM students. While the situation for LGBT+ students in schools may be improving, according to Harris et al. (2022), "There is still considerably more work that many schools need to undertake" (p. 169).

Identity-Based Victimization

The experience of school is challenging for GSM students due to increased victimization (Kosciw et al., 2020). Myers et al. (2020) defined victimization as acts or threats of acts including physical and sexual assault, theft, bullying and other forms of harassment. In an empirical study of Chilean high school students, Poteat et al. (2017) noted that victimization based on sexuality or gender expression (SOGE) was indirectly associated with truancy through the moderating variables of students feeling unsafe at school and through students feeling unsafe because of their SOGE. Price et al. (2019) suggested that identity-based victimization was

pervasive and negative to the mental health of GSM students in a study that examined the role

teacher relationships can play in mitigating the impact of identity-based victimization. In a

similar study, Fenaughty et al. (2019) examined factors related to academic achievement and

demonstrated mitigating factors for victimization. Using a nationally representative sample,

Fenaughty et al.'s correlational study, based on data from high school students in New Zealand,

suggested that higher sense of school belonging increased academic achievement for

heterosexual cisgender pupils and sexual minority students more than gender minority students.

This finding illustrated that the situation for gender minority students was generally more

difficult than for sexual minority students (Fenaughty et al., 2019).

GSM Students' Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging in school has been defined in various ways in academic literature. A

review conducted by Osterman (2000) defined school belonging as a sense of being valued

personally as well as being accepted and included in school. Riley (2019) viewed sense of

belonging as an umbrella term that included components such as feeling safe, included and

involved, having friendships, and being treated with respect and kindness. Goodenow and Grady

(1993) included the components of feeling personally accepted, respected, included, and

supported by the other individuals in the school environment in their definition of sense of

belonging in school. In a study conducted in the United Kingdom, when asked what they needed

to feel a sense of belonging at school, students listed things like being respected, listened to, and

supported in their work (Riley, 2019).

Teacher–student relationships are critically important for developing students' sense of

belonging in school (Allen et al., 2018). In a study of students in 41 countries, students' sense of

belonging at school was most positively related to strong teacher–student relationships (Chiu et

al., 2016). Additionally, for a student, having someone who believes in them, who cares enough to invest in them, and maintains high expectations are all factors that promoted resilience (Roffey, 2013).

The importance of teacher–student relationships for GSM students' sense of belonging is clarified when considering how students feel excluded from school. Unsurprisingly, when students do not feel a sense of belonging, they feel alienated at school and those feelings are made worse by bullying, being isolated, and poor-quality relationships with teachers (Riley, 2019). These findings underscore the precarious nature of sense of belonging in school for those who experience identity-based victimization, such as GSM students. Such victimization negatively impacts a student's sense of belonging (Heck et al., 2014; Konishi & Saewyc, 2014).

Although the situation regarding sense of belonging in school for GSM students in most studies is negative, this is not the case in all studies. In Flanders, Belgium, sexual orientation does not have a significant effect on sense of belonging in school according to Aerts et al. (2012). Though the study was not intended to investigate causality, the report questioned whether the finding was due to the relatively progressive view on sexual minorities taken in Flanders. Despite the relatively positive findings, Aerts et al. (2012) recognized that schools in Flanders remain largely heteronormative institutions. Among the participants studied, sense of belonging is highest in heterosexual girls, with LGB students who perceive discrimination having a lower sense of belonging (Aerts et al., 2012). Two significant indicators of sense of belonging were perceived LGB friendliness of the school, which was positively correlated, and perceived teacher and peer discrimination, which was negatively correlated to sense of belonging (Aerts et al., 2012). The study may have had design issues, however, including omitting gender

minority students from the study or forcing them to misclassify their gender minority identity as a sexual minority orientation.

One way that GSM students can develop a sense of belonging is by joining a gender and sexuality alliance (GSA). Through GSAs, students meet their LGBTQ peers and develop a sense of being part of a larger community (Porta et al., 2017). Parker (2021) conducted a study about sense of belonging with LGBTQ students in Canadian universities. For LGBTQ students, perception of campus climate regarding diversity was positively related to their sense of belonging. For students with minoritized identities, maintaining a diverse and inclusive campus is important for sense of belonging (Parker, 2021). Parker's (2021) study adds further precision to the findings of Roffey (2013) that feeling accepted within a social group is a basic psychological need. A more recent study conducted in Germany with culturally diverse students suggested similar findings when researching students outside the GSM community. Equity, inclusion, and cultural pluralism were found to be associated with increased student sense of belonging in school, which in turn was associated with higher achievement, academic self-conception, and life satisfaction (Schachner et al., 2019). These findings further suggested the importance of diversity as related to sense of belonging in school.

Furthermore, students who are vulnerable, for whatever reason, need more connectedness at school (Roffey, 2013). Although extant research on sense of belonging has addressed the teacher–student relationship (Chiu et al., 2016) as well as the importance of diversity in community (Parker, 2021), understanding the extent to which GSM leaders can affect GSM students' sense of belonging in international schools will add further nuance to current research on sense of belonging in school.

Support Structures for GSM Students

Even though sense of belonging at school is an important factor for predicting student success in school (Allen et al., 2018), the challenges faced by GSM students are myriad. The next section of this literature review examined research about the kinds of support available to GSM students given the unique profiles and characteristics of GSM students and the possible decreased sense of belonging that they experience. One poignant vignette detailed in the literature was the story of an activist teacher marching in a pride parade. As he walked, a voice in the crowd was heard shouting to the group of marching teachers, "Where were you when I needed you?" (Wells, 2017, p. 273). The shout in the crowd represented a literal cry for help from an adult on behalf of their former self. The studies examined here explored the different ways in which teachers, leaders, and institutions have shown support for GSM students.

Some support structures for GSM students have been identified in various studies included attendance at youth support groups (Porta et al., 2017; Wilkerson et al., 2017), identification of mentors (Mulcahy et al., 2016; Renn & Bilodeau. 2005), role modeling (Anderson, 2014; Beck, 2020; Brown, 2016; Porta et al., 2017; Russell, 2010), teacher–student relationships (Price et al., 2019), teacher activism (Brown, 2016; Wells, 2017), school climate (Aerts et al., 2012; Fenaughty et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2017) and inclusive curricula (Beck 2020; Tompkins et al., 2019). These were relevant to the current study because they represented possible mechanisms through which GSM students could be supported by GSM leaders.

Attendance at a Youth Support Group

Hatch Youth, a community support group in Houston, Texas has served LGBTQ+ youth for almost 30 years and was the setting of a study that presented an empirical evaluation of the

social support provided by the program (Wilkerson et al., 2017). Wilkerson et al. (2017) suggested that within the first 6 months of attendance in the program, youth participants reported an increased perception of social support. Accompanying this perceived increase in social support was a lower report of depression and increases in self-esteem and coping (Wilkerson et al., 2017). The evidence of program success was possibly attributable to the combination of a meeting space for LGBTQ+ youth, a learning space where information was shared about relevant issues, and a discussion space where important conversations were facilitated (Wilkerson et al., 2017).

Another type of youth support group is the gender and sexuality alliance. Porta et al. (2017) studied perception of GSAs amongst 58 GSM youth. In addition to contributing to an increased perception of social support for LGBTQ+ youth, Porta et al., (2017) reported that GSAs represented an opportunity to be part of a community. Community membership was represented through emotional connection, senses of support and belonging, opportunities for leadership, and fulfillment of needs (Porta et al., 2017). Further, GSAs served as a conduit for LGBTQ+ youth toward supportive organizations and adults (Porta et al., 2017). Finally, GSAs represented a safe space for vulnerable students (Porta et al., 2017). The most prevalent theme emerging in interviews about GSAs was the sense of community that GSAs provided. Sense of community is broken down into several component parts: "(1) Community members share an emotional connection and social support, (2) communities provide a sense of membership, and (3) communities fulfill needs of the members" (p. 6). Furthermore, students who are gay and involved in identity-based campus groups noted the intersection between coming out, involvement in identity groups, and the identification of role models (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005).

Identification of Mentors

Another, tangentially related support available to some GSM youth is the relationship formed with a mentor. Although not specifically limited to mentors who are also GSM, Mulcahy et al. (2016) identified successful processes in which LGBTQ+ students found a mentor in the school community. Their findings demonstrated that marginalized students looked for specific characteristics in mentors: independent thinkers, political liberals, those who are genuinely interested and able to help with student's career ideas, and a commitment to anti-bullying were among the characteristics that students sought. This study also suggested that for those who would look to be a mentor for an LGBTQ+ student, emulating these qualities was important (Mulcahy et al., 2016). This suggestion was a preliminary implication for institutional practice in the current study.

Additionally, Mulcahy et al. (2016) listed many positive outcomes of the mentor-student relationship that were identified by the participants, including: improved self-awareness, improved comfort with one's sexuality, fewer feelings of isolation and loneliness, and increased focus on positive prospects. Although Mulcahy et al. did not attempt to define mentors as leaders, the results of the positive mentor/student relationship were enumerated through the outcomes listed by the interviewees. Mulcahy et al. provided a basic understanding of the ways that LGBTQ+ youth reacted when provided a close and supportive adult connection in a school environment (Mulcahy et al., 2016). Also addressing the topic of mentorship, Renn and Bilodeau (2005) identified that mentors often served as a connecting agent to identity-based groups or GSAs.

Role Modeling for GSM Students

Several studies also explored role modeling for GSM students (Anderson, 2014; Beck, 2020; Brown, 2016; Porta et al., 2017; Russell, 2010). Brown's (2016) dissertation examined the work experiences of LG leaders within school districts. In the study, several participants noted the benefits of being an out leader, saying, "One positive aspect of being out at work that several participants cited was their ability to be positive role models for students" (p. 84).

Other studies are more definitive in demonstrating how, why, and to what end role modeling is enacted. For example, the importance of the leader's identity emerged again in Beck's (2020) study, which suggested that being a role model for LGBT students and taking a stand were important parts of the leader's advocacy identity. Every leader in the study noted that they felt a personal responsibility to make sure that every student had the opportunity to achieve their maximum potential (Beck, 2020). The visibly queer leaders created spaces where questions could be asked from anyone in the community. In this way, queer leaders acted as role models for their communities, which were comprised not only of LGBTQ+ students, but of all people who desired to learn more (Beck, 2020). Porta et al. (2017) described the role that GSAs played in providing a space where LGBTQ adults could be role models for youth. Students in the study identified that GSAs served as a conduit to adults in the community who acted as a resource to students or served as a role model of how to be an out-LGBTQ person (Porta et al., 2017).

Queer teachers also act as role models for students. In a study exploring how queer teachers understand "touch, sexuality, confidentiality, the private versus public domain, and pedagogical responsibility within the schooling context" (Russell, 2010, p. 143), Russell (2010) acknowledged the impact of teachers not only to current students, but the continued role-modeling teachers provided even with former students. This kind of leadership is a condition of

being an out queer teacher or leader in educational spaces (Russell, 2010). Participants in Anderson's (2014) research recommended being out of the closet to provide a role model to students and create safe, inclusive spaces.

Research has demonstrated positive effects of role modeling on the sense of belonging with groups other than GSM students (González-Pérez et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2016). A quantitative study of 1,035 science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and non-STEM university students suggested that exposure to role models increased general academic outcomes including academic sense of belonging (Shin et al., 2016). González-Pérez et al.'s (2020) study about encouraging girls to participate in STEM also demonstrated the impact of role modeling. Modeling women's successful career trajectories to young girls encouraged them to pursue roles that require STEM math skills (González-Pérez et al., 2020).

Role modeling for GSM students, however, is complicated by the fact that a burden is placed on the GSM teacher to be a role model when the GSM teacher may also need support to act as a counteragent to institutional heteronormativity (Henderson, 2019). Henderson (2019) noted that past research has often associated the ability to identify a supportive adult with an increased sense of belonging in LGBT students; and, although the supportive adult does not necessarily exclude heterosexual adults, being supportive implied a vocal advocacy for LGBTQ issues. This current research added to these understandings by exploring the effect on sense of belonging from the perspective of the GSM student given access to a visible GSM leader.

Teacher–Student Relationships

Like mentoring, but more formally in the context of schooling, teacher–student relationships are an important support for GSM students (Price et al., 2019). Teacher–student relationships (TSRs) are typically characterized by teacher positivity about the student and the

promotion of autonomy in the student (Price et al., 2019). Price et al. (2019) examined the effects

of TSRs on students who had experienced discrimination, identity-based victimization, or

identity-based bullying in a large sample of sexual minority students in Grades 9–12 in an

American school district in the Northeast. Findings of this study suggested that positive and

autonomy-promoting TSRs mitigated the negative mental health of some GSM students but was

an ineffective mitigation against identity-based bullying (Price et al., 2019). The study also

suggested that TSR positivity was strongly negatively correlated to depression in LGBQ

adolescents (Price et al., 2019). Positive TSRs were a moderating force against negative impacts

on mental health for some students, but not for those students who experienced more severe

bullying (Price et al., 2019). Results indicated stronger negative mental health impacts for

students whose identities are already stigmatized (Price et al., 2019). In a study of 896

adolescents from the United States ranging from age 10 to 16, Mulvey et al. (2021) reported that

students with the dual characteristics of having positive TSRs and perceiving positive school

environment were more likely to defend other students against exclusion. This finding

demonstrated the impact of positive TSRs on individuals as well as on school climate.

Teacher Activism for GSM Advancement and Inclusion in Schools

Brown's (2016) study of lesbian and gay administrators across the United States focused

more on the things that LG administrators had done for LGBTQ+ students rather than the impact

(raised or lowered self-esteem, for instance) that is experienced by the LGBTQ+ student.

Brown's study was unique amongst the studies reviewed in this chapter in that it speculated that

LGBTQ+ administrators are de facto role models for LGBTQ+ youth. The four educators in this

study challenged the heteronormative practices and ethos of their schools. Because of the

connection of their activism and identities to their acts as teachers and leaders, maintaining the

status quo was not an option for these teachers. Like the subjects of Wells' (2017) study, these teachers were working to transform their institutions from the inside out. Wells documented that the activist leader desired to become a more visible and vocal advocate for LGBTQ students in schools.

School Climate

School climate can be a support to GSM students or a detriment to their mental health (Aerts et al., 2012; Fenaughty et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2017). Student perceptions of negative reactions to sexual orientation or gender expression (SOGE) within the school climate have been indirectly associated with truancy from school through general feelings of unsafety at school (Poteat et al., 2017). Aerts et al. (2012) also identified that those LGB students who perceived their school as having a friendly environment unsurprisingly had a higher sense of belonging at school.

Fenaughty et al.(2019) found that supportive school structures for sexual minority students resulted in higher achievement for those students. Sexual minority support structures, however, did not impact gender minority students in the same way, indicating a difference in support needed for gender minority students. The study noted that further research was necessary to determine what kind of school support structures are necessary to support gender minority student achievement (Fenaughty et al., 2019). This current study sought to address whether visible GSM leadership in a school could be conceived of as a support structure for students who are marginalized due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

In a study by Poteat et al. (2017), of 1,122 students in Chilean high schools (Grades 9–12), students were given an adapted survey like the School Climate Survey (see Kosciw et al., 2020), developed by GLSEN. Students were asked about their sexuality, SOGE victimization,

SOGE climate, sense of safety at school and truancy (Poteat et al., 2017). While the data did not address causality in this study and represented a single point in time, "stronger perceptions of a negative SOGE-related school climate had significant indirect associations with truancy through stronger feelings of general unsafety at school" (Poteat et al., 2017, p. 431). In addition to contributing to the knowledge about school climate and for LGBQ student, Poteat et al. (2017) further extended the research on school climate for LGBQ students outside of the United States. The research also highlighted that gender and sexual minorities are not a monolith and that certain segments of these communities have greater needs. Leaders should attend to both the individual causes for concern as well as school-based climate causes for concern when considering the difficulties faced by GSM students (Poteat et al., 2017).

Inclusive Curricula

An inclusive curriculum is another support structure for GSM students (Beck, 2020; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2018; Kuehn, 2020; Lilienthal et al., 2018; Steck & Perry, 2018; Tompkins et al., 2019; Zook, 2017). An inclusive curriculum can positively affect LGBTQ students' engagement in school (Kosciw et al., 2018) and the educational and social success of LGBTQ Youth (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011). An inclusive curriculum is one where the lived experiences, histories, and cultures of LGBT people are voiced (Steck & Perry, 2018). Steck and Perry (2018) perceived of LGBT-inclusive curricula as a way for school leaders to challenge heteronormativity. Zook (2017) conceived of the lack of LGBTQ representation in the curriculum as concomitant to depriving LGBTQ students of a safe, supportive, and equitable space for schooling. Indeed, the benefits of an inclusive curriculum described by research are myriad. Schools where an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum has been implemented report less anti-LGBTQ language, greater sense of belonging for LGBTQ students, and fewer safety-related

absences for LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2018). Furthermore, LGBTQ students who attend classes where LGBTQ issues are included in the curriculum report feeling more comfortable discussing LGBTQ issues with their teachers (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Developing and implementing a curriculum inclusive of GSMs is not without challenges. Some teachers may be resistant to implementing an inclusive curriculum because they fear pushback from parents, they may feel unqualified to address LGBTQ issues, or they may be avoiding increased workload (Kuehn, 2020). LGBTQ+ teachers are more likely to implement LGBTQ-inclusive education than cisgender heterosexual peers (Tompkins et al., 2019). This finding was especially relevant to the current research because it paralleled the premise of the research, that GSM leaders could have a positive impact on GSM students.

If schools can implement a curriculum inclusive of LGBTQ people, the potential positive impact extends beyond LGBTQ youth (Lilienthal et al., 2018). Lilienthal et al. (2018) suggested the incorporation of reading materials and discussion around LGBTQ characters and topics as a specific way to create an inviting classroom for all students. The participants in Beck's (2020) study believed that inclusiveness provided a well-rounded education to everyone. Finally, Kuehn (2020) suggested reinforcing educators' obligations to care for all students to build consensus around teaching an inclusive curriculum.

International Schools

The context of the current research was the international school. Arriving at a precise definition of what is or is not an international school is difficult (Hayden & Thompson, 1995). Determining whether a school is international can involve examining the location of the school, the national origin of the faculty, students, and management personnel of the school as well as the curriculum (Hayden & Thompson, 1995). A functional definition of international schools can

also be considered. Some of the seminal research into international schooling by Hayden and Thompson (1995) considered the role of international schools in education to promote international or intercultural understanding. Grant et al. (1995) described the purpose of international schools as providing a pre-collegiate education to students whose families live outside their home nations. Bunnell et al. (2016), building on work by Hayden and Thompson (2013) described international schools as belonging to one of three types. Type-A international schools are those that serve primarily an expatriate population residing in a non-native country for a relatively short period of time; type-B international schools are ideological in nature and implement an international curriculum such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme; type-C international schools tend to serve a largely indigenous and middle-class aspiring clientele and are generally for-profit institutions (Bunnell et al., 2016). Hayden (2006), however, suggested that any attempt to come up with a definition of international school was fraught with risk; inevitably, such a definition would be vague and subject to counterfactual examples that were readily available. For the purposes of the current research, participants in this study were drawn from students who attended at least one year of high school in a self-identified international school.

Whatever the type of international school, the market for international schools is growing. ISC Research (2023), a U.K.-based firm specializing in data, trends, and developments about international schools, placed the number of international schools at more than 13,000 with a student population of 6.5 million as of January 2023; whereas the number of international schools in 2013 was only about 8,700 with no more than 4.2 million students (ISC Research, 2023). Given the growth in number of international school students, it is surprising that no

studies examining the experiences of GSM students in these schools were available in published, peer-reviewed journal at this time of this current research.

Leadership in International Schools

Leadership in international schools is challenging and filled with tensions. Morrison (2018) highlighted the inherent conflict between the role of leadership and management in international schools, noting that managers were largely concerned with creating structures and processes that created stability, whereas leaders were tasked with introducing institutional change. The role of leaders and managers in international schools are complicated by the cross-cultural and foreign socio-political environments in which they operate (Morrison, 2018). The research of Gardner-McTaggart (2018) noted several other difficulties for international school leaders. First, leaders faced the challenge that a highly transient faculty posed to the establishment of organizational values; secondly, conflict existed between finding an advantageous position in the marketplace and the values espoused by international schools: "Schools exist in a tension between the marketplace and the equitable" (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018, p. 160). Indeed, Gardner-McTaggart wondered whether international schools could achieve an equitable and balanced approach, or whether they were self-interested institutions, solely concerned with reproducing self-serving mechanisms of cultural hegemony. This wondering was particularly relevant to the current study because it illuminated the tension of the role experienced by GSM leaders in schools to both perpetuate normative cultural systems and oppose those systems through their own identities and activism.

GSM Personnel in International Schools

Although not focused on GSM students in international schools, Mizzi et al. (2021) investigated LGBTQ teacher's sense of belonging in international schools and concluded that

even though LGBTQ issues pervaded relationships and pedagogy within the school institution, those same issues were "nowhere to be found in official recruitment and institutional discourses" (p. 13). Despite this institutional muteness on issues of gender and sexuality, the teacher participants in Mizzi et al.'s research actively led LGBTQ initiatives for students in the school. Of the 14 teachers in the study who led these initiatives, 11 reported that afterward, some students disclosed their sexual orientations or gender identities to them (Mizzi et al., 2021). This underscored the potential for impact of GSM leaders in schools in general and international schools specifically. The current research sought to add to this research by documenting the experiences of GSM former students at international schools. Contributing to the literature in this way helped to remediate the dearth of research described by Fenaughty et al. (2019) exploring GSM student experiences outside the United States.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter focused on the two perspectives represented in this research: those of GSM leader and the GSM student. The findings in the studies referenced in this chapter represent an evolving situation for both. In this review of literature, several themes have been identified: first, educational institutions, even in countries that are accepting of GSM people, are heteronormative in nature (Aerts et al., 2012; Anderson, 2014; Jourian & Simmons, 2017; McWilliams, 2014). The identity of the leader becomes a part of the person's leadership and therefore GSM identities are inextricably a part of GSM leadership (Bolt, 2018; Grabsch & Moore, 2021; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). As GSM leaders advance in their careers, they feel more capable to disclose their identities (Anderson, 2014), advocate, and make change in ways that positively impact GSM students (Wells, 2017).

GSM students are not a monolith. There are different needs in the community because the members of the community face different issues. This is particularly true of those whose gender identities are expressed in ways that challenge cisnormativity (Fenaughty et al., 2019). Support for GSM students takes many forms. This current study was necessary because it explored a form of support for GSM students that has not been examined in a thorough way in the literature prior to now (Aerts et al., 2012; Anderson, 2014; Beck, 2020; Brown, 2016; Fenaughty et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020; Mulcahy et al., 2016; Porta et al., 2017; Poteat et al., 2017; Price et al., 2019; Renn & Bilodeau. 2005; Tompkins et al., 2019; Wells, 2017; Wilkerson et al., 2017; Russell, 2010). Within the context of the international school, GSM leaders have the potential to impact on GSM students (Mizzi et al., 2021).

The current research drew on queer theory as a theoretical framework. Queer theory challenges heteronormativity (Berlant & Warner, 1998) and seeks to disrupt gendered institutional practices (Courtney, 2014). The conceptual framework of the study explained how the main components of the study interact. In this case, the conceptual framework described how the leadership of GSM leaders impacted upon GSM students' sense of belonging. Viewed through the theoretical framework, the potential impacts on GSM students' sense of belonging can be seen as acts of transformative and queer resistance within the heteronormative context of educational institutions (O'Malley et al., 2018).

The current study sought to contribute to the literature by exploring how former students at international schools who self-identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority experienced a sense of belonging at school and understand changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. The phenomenon of sense of belonging was explored by examining the lived experience of students who interacted with GSM

leaders in international school. The current study sought to explore the idea that visible GSM leadership may be a potential support for GSM students, who face challenges unknown to their heterosexual/cisgender peers.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Schools can be hostile places for GSM youth due to increased victimization (Kosciw et al., 2020). Myers et al. (2020) defined victimization as acts or threats of acts including physical and sexual assault, theft, bullying and other forms of harassment. Identifying as GSM increases the likelihood of victimization of students at school (Myers et al., 2020). GSM students who experience victimization report a lower sense of belonging at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). The problems addressed by this research were the lack of sense of belonging in school for GSM students (Kosciw et al., 2020) as well the gap in academic literature about GSM students and leaders (Anderson, 2014; O'Malley et al., 2018). Henrickson et al. (2020) described the precarious state of representation of gender and sexually diverse populations in research; research paints an incomplete picture of these populations. Due to the stigmatization or even criminalization of these diverse identities, participants may be cooperatively involved in the concealment of important details of their stories within research, resulting in a limited recounting of their lived experiences (Henrickson et al., 2020). The purpose of this qualitative study using interpretive phenomenological analysis was to explore how former students at international schools who self-identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority experience a sense of belonging at school and understand changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. Chan and Farmer (2017) suggested that research questions for studies using IPA involve personal meaning making for a particular group of people experiencing a particular phenomenon. The research questions for the current study allowed for GSM participants to reflect on and make meaning of their experiences with sense of belonging in international schools:

- RQ1: How do GSM former students at international schools experience sense of belonging in school?

- RQ2: How do GSM former students at international schools perceive and make sense of any changes in their sense of belonging after interacting with GSM leaders in international schools?

The methodology used in responding to these research questions was IPA as described by Smith et al. (2022) and further defined in the context of conducting research with GSM persons by Chan and Farmer (2017). IPA is rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, 2011). According to Smith (2011), "IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience" (p. 9). The idiographic nature of IPA allows the researcher to preserve individual differences in the experience of and sense making surrounding the phenomenon in question rather than lose those rich details to a more generalized finding that may not account for personal subjectivities. In this study, IPA was employed to make sense of the participants' experience of sense of belonging in international schools where visible GSM leadership was present.

Studies that use phenomenological methods also attempt to find common meaning amongst multiple individuals for their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since phenomenological studies rely on the subjective experiences of the individual participants as well as the identification of objective commonalities between the individual experiences, these studies challenge the subjective-objective dichotomy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers using IPA recognize that accessing the lived experience also involves reconning with the meaning-making of the participant about the phenomenon in question (Smith, 2011). IPA is particularly

relevant to those studies whose purpose is to explore issues relevant to a particular group experiencing a common phenomenon (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Smith et al., 2022). More specifically, IPA allows the researcher to determine what meanings and interpretations the participants attribute to their experiences (Frechette et al., 2020). In the case of the current research, the phenomenon under examination was the sense of belonging at school of former students at international schools.

The research questions devised for this study subdivided the experiences of the participants by seeking to understand sense of belonging in school in general and sense of belonging in relation to a visible GSM leader within this school. Chan and Farmer (2017) explained that secondary research questions in studies employing IPA can explore theoretical possibilities. Furthermore, according to Frechette et al. (2020) this kind of dividing of research questions, or parceling, allowed for a back-and-forth iterative movement from part to whole during data analysis, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

One rationale for the use of a phenomenological method was to be able to describe the multifaceted and individual experiences of a phenomenon and sense making surrounding that phenomenon of former students of international schools through their own eyes. Engaging with human science through phenomenology assumes that lived experiences are more complex than singular descriptions allow and accounts for the ineffable (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Describing and interpreting the lived experiences of GSM students can contribute to extant information about a lived experience that is, according to Anderson (2014) conspicuously absent from research. The dearth of research was particularly evident in the international schools setting where no published studies were available exploring the lived experiences of GSM students and only limited studies explore the experiences of GSM faculty (see Mizzi et al., 2021). According to

Emery and Anderman (2020), IPA can foreground the experiences of marginalized and underrepresented populations and therefore critically highlight issues of equity.

The methodology of the current study was therefore appropriately related to the theoretical framework by the selection of the participants and in the context of the setting. If queer theory is a useful tool for challenging heteronormativity (Berlant & Warner, 1998) and disrupting gendered institutional practices (Courtney, 2014), then the participants of this study must be placed within an ecological space where they experience both heteronormative institutional practices and the phenomenon being studied. Ahmed (2006) described the function of queer phenomenology as a disorientation device insofar as what is described by queer phenomenology deviates from the normative. Bodies are shaped by the objects that are near; our norms of interaction are shaped by proximity and repetition. Considering the heteronormative ordering of schools and school leadership, the queering of the educational space provides an arena where phenomenology can explore different lived experiences. Thus, queer phenomenology seeks to describe the lived experience of what heretofore has been both described and presented as socially deviant (Ahmed, 2006). And yet, the description of lived experience is not the end goal of IPA or queer theory, which require an in-depth exploration of meaning in order to challenge hegemonic systems of power relations (Chan & Farmer, 2017).

Site Information and Demographics

The setting of the study is the international school insofar as the participants of the study were all former students at self-identifying international schools. Hayden and Thompson (1995) noted that arriving at a definition of what is or is not an international school is difficult. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are various types and purposes of international schools (Bunnell et al., 2016). For the purposes of this study, however, an international school is defined as a school

that self-identifies as international and could be in any country, including the United States. In the current research, the rationale for selecting international schools was that prior research had not explored the lived experience of GSM students in international schools. The author of the study also had been employed by international schools for a significant amount of time. The author therefore recognized that GSM students in international schools were subject to marginalization due to intersecting identities and frequent transitions from one country to another. The researcher gained access to participants who have attended internationals schools through a social justice organization whose followers include alumni of international schools.

Participants and Sampling

The method employed in the current research was interpretive phenomenological analysis. According to Chan and Farmer (2017), "The methodological insights from IPA offer a significant purpose to formulate meaning derived from participants' experiences within the LGBTGEQ+ communities" (p. 286). For the current research, identifying participants was challenging due to the wide geographic distribution of former students at international schools. Participants were identified using typical sampling, which Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described as identifying participants who can provide close perspective to the phenomenon being studied. Chan and Farmer (2017) further described this type of purposeful sampling as based on the common experience of a group of people. To reach the requisite number of participants, and should it have been necessary, further participants were to have been identified using snowball sampling wherein one participant identified other potential participants who may contribute valuable information to the research questions under investigation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Chan and Farmer (2017) also referred to snowballing as one of the likely ways in which participants are identified for an interpretive phenomenological study.

Participants were identified by contacting the researcher after viewing social media announcements, emails, and/or the website of a social justice organization whose followers included alumni of international schools. The social justice group provided written permission and confirmation that they agreed to inform their followers of the option to participate in the current study (see Appendix A). The social justice group communicated details of the study across several social media platforms. Potential participants were instructed to contact the researcher via email to express interest in participation (see Appendix B). The social media communications were repeated three times after the initial posting over the course of 8 weeks, or until the target number of 5–8 participants was reached. After receiving an initial email from a prospective participant, the researcher responded via email and asked the participant to confirm their eligibility for the study (see Appendix C). Then, via email, the researcher scheduled the preliminary interview with the participant (see Appendix D). Before beginning interviews with each participant, the researcher sought informed consent and reconfirmed that the participant qualified for the study (see Appendix E).

As stated in the participant information sheet (see Appendix E), prospective participants in this study met five requirements to qualify for participation. Participants must have: been at least 18 years old at the time of the study; identified themselves as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority group and been at least somewhat aware of their own queerness while attending an international school; attended an international school for at least one complete academic year within the past ten years; been enrolled in an international school during their high school (Grades 9–12 or the equivalent) experience; been able to identify a leader in the international school they attended who belonged to a gender or sexual minority group.

While this current research did not encourage the reduction of sexual or gender identity to stable, essentialist categories, for the purpose of this study, the former student at the international school must have been able to claim membership in the community of gender or sexual minorities in some way, even if that nature or manner of that claim was unstable and unfixed. Although it was not necessary for the former student to have come out of the closet to other individuals or groups during high school, the participant must have at least been somewhat aware of their own queerness when in proximity to the GSM leader.

The requirement to have attended high school within the past 10 years limited the extent to which participants may have experienced differing evolutions of how GSM students and school leaders have been viewed due to shifting societal norms over time. Comparing GSM students' experiences in the 1990s with experiences in the 2010s would not allow for a trustworthy and contemporaneous accounting of sense of belonging in international schools for GSM students. Furthermore, the rationale for requiring students to have attended an international school during their high school years was to maintain some homogeneity amongst participants. While participants were not asked to provide details that could identify the leader, participants were asked how they came to know that the leader in question identified as a gender or sexual minority and to describe their interactions with the leader.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The research presented in the current study was qualitative in nature. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described the purpose of qualitative research as "developing a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon" (p. 16). In this current research, the central phenomenon was the student's sense of belonging in school. To understand the lived experiences of the students' sense of belonging in school, former students at international schools were asked

questions in a semi-structured manner (see Appendix F). Smith et al. (2022) described the semi-structured interview as the ideal data collection tool for studies that employ IPA. Participants were encouraged to complete the interview in a private space and were given the option to turn off their cameras during the interview. Using open-ended questions allowed the participants to voice their own experiences in a manner that was not constrained by the views or perspectives of the researcher (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The open-ended interview was appropriate to the phenomenological design of the study because the participants could communicate their own lived experiences. The semi-structured interview involved asking both open-ended and closed-ended questions in a manner that gave participants permission to communicate and the interviewer the possibility to explore uncharted territory (Adams, 2015). Participants were interviewed in depth during two sessions to prolong the exposure between the researcher and the participant. Only data from participants who complete both interviews were used in the study. Employing a multi-stage interview process allowed the interviewer and participant to gain familiarity with each other and increased comfort when discussing personal experiences. Additionally, prolonged exposure to the researcher increased the trustworthiness of the findings (Schwandt et al., 2007). Due to the wide geographic distribution of the participants, interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing software, which allowed for both encryption of data and provided a transcript of the interview. The questions in the interview focused on the lived experiences of the participants during their time attending an international school in proximity to a visible GSM school leader (see Appendix F).

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed through Zoom videoconferencing software and then analyzed using MAXQDA software. Initial thoughts and reactions were documented by the researcher.

Then, emerging themes were identified. At that point, a member checking process occurred during which the participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the transcript and the emerging themes. Then, the researcher began to compare and contrast the smaller, discrete experiences of the participants with the broader experiences of the participants as a whole. This method aligned with IPA's rooting in phenomenology and idiography as articulated by Miller et al. (2018). Van Manen (2016) described the phenomenology of relationality as an existential human theme that is explored by questioning the connections between individuals, the meaning of community, and the ethics of being together. Sense of belonging in school in the current study was experienced from the point of view of the former student distinctly and markedly in relation with the GSM school leader.

Research employing IPA is centered around a detailed examination of a person's experience of and sense making surrounding a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). Through the analysis of transcript interviews, significant statements were identified that provided an understanding of the participants' various experiences with the phenomenon. These statements were then grouped into clusters of meaning that were developed into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes that were identified in the current study were viewed through the lens of queer theory in an attempt to understand the extent to which the queering of the traditional leader–student relationship created space for the students' sense of belonging to evolve in ways that are transformative and resistant to heteronormativity.

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described a six-step process in analyzing and interpreting qualitative data: prepare and organize the data for analysis; perform an initial exploration of the data through inductive coding; develop descriptions and identify themes by reviewing the codes; construct a narrative and/or visual that represents the finding; validate the

accuracy of the findings. The method employed in this current research broadly followed these steps, with important adjustments made to accommodate the aims of IPA.

Adding more precision to the qualitative methodologies of Creswell and Guetterman (2019), Chan and Farmer (2017) delineated six steps when interpreting qualitative data collected through interviews specifically within an IPA study: first, the researcher performs a line-by-line analysis of the transcript of the interview; second, initial coding is performed and exploratory comments are made; third, preliminary themes emerge from the codes and comments; fourth, the preliminary themes are organized within each data source. This step corresponds to the description of IPA provided by Miller et al. (2018), in which researchers first perform a detailed analysis of an individual's experience before patterns are identified between cases. Fifth, connections are sought between each participant. Sixth, overarching themes that are held in common between participants are articulated. While commonalities between individual cases are sought when employing an interpretive phenomenological approach, IPA also centers the unique experiences of individuals, including the varied interpretations for a particular phenomenon (Chan & Farmer, 2017).

Larkin and Thompson (2011) described the process of IPA as including a first-order analysis in which the participants described the experience of a particular phenomenon; then, a second-order analysis is conducted in which the focus shifts toward interpretation and the meaning that participants associated with a particular lived experience. Finding themes within the analysis of transcribed interviews should be a process of selection based on relevance and prevalence (Miller et al., 2018). The relationship between the two phases is further articulated by Frechette et al. (2020). During the process of phenomenological data analysis, the researcher enters a hermeneutic circle in which the research cycles back and forth between the bigger

picture presented by the data as a whole and the individual, key sections (Frechette et al., 2020). The result being the uncovering or disclosure of a phenomenon that may be shrouded in forgetfulness or hidden within everyday life (Frechette et al., 2020). Miller et al. (2018) described this process as one in which the research seeks to uncover some unnoticed interpretation that may slip past the awareness of the participants.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

Limitations

As previously discussed in the first chapter of this research, the current study was limited in several ways. This research was limited by the relatively small sample size of 5–8 participants available to the researcher because of the specific research design requirements for participation as well as the idiographic nature of IPA. This limitation affected the generalizability of conclusions to other settings beyond international schools. According to Frechette et al. (2020) generalizability is not the intended goal of interpretive phenomenology. Crafting a thick description of context and lived experience that allows the reader to determine the extent to which the study's findings are generalizable to other settings is one of the aims of phenomenology (Smith et al., 2022).

The disparate geographic locations of the participants as well as the presumed differences in the types of international schools attended by the participants further limited the generalizations that could be drawn from the findings presented in later chapters. To compensate for this limitation, the researcher attempted to provide a detailed description of the international schools of the participants as well as their geographic and cultural context when appropriate. Further, although it would have been preferable to speak directly to GSM students who were enrolled in international schools at the time of the research, the inherent risks involved in asking

minors to identify as belonging to a marginalized group compelled the researcher to situate the research within the group of participants who voluntarily self-identified as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority and were at least 18 years old during the data collection process. Therefore, the research was limited by the extent to which the participants could accurately recall and described their lived experiences in the past.

Delimitations

The research presented here was delimited by the sexual orientations or gender identities enacted by the participants. GSM identities are neither stable nor monolithic. The researcher sought to identify a diverse array of gender identities and sexual orientations; however, finding a truly representational sample of GSM former students at international schools was not possible because determining the extent to which GSMs make up the populations of international schools is research that has yet to be conducted. To provide as complete a picture of the interpretations of the experiences of GSM former students at international schools, the researcher provided a description of how each participant understood and described their gender identity and sexual orientation at the time when the student attended an international school.

Ethical Issues

All researchers need to have an awareness of ethical issues that are anticipated to arise while conducting research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In the case of conducting research with GSMs, who have not always been well represented in research, the task of conducting ethical research involves amplifying the voices of the marginalized rather than speaking for them (LGBT Foundation, n.d.). To avoid ethical issues inherent in working with marginalized populations, transcripts were anonymized and any reference to individuals or specific schools

were redacted from the transcripts. The process of anonymization included but was not limited to giving the regional location of a school rather than the exact location.

The researcher's relationship to the topic and participants was a source of potential ethical issues that could have impacted the findings of the research. First, the researcher identified as a gay male, and therefore a sexual orientation minority. While this identification gave some insider status to the researcher, it also potentially created a situation where the researcher's experiences could have been projected onto the experiences described by the participant. Smith et al. (2022) noted that in conducting research using IPA, the researcher must center the experiences of the participant first before interpreting the meaning of those experiences through the lens of the researcher's own experiences. Entering this hermeneutic circle that cycles back and forth between the experiences and understandings of the participant and then returns to the vantage point of the researcher is an important process within IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Secondly, the researcher has been as school leader in an international school in the Netherlands and India. Efforts were made to avoid any conflicts of interest or ethical issues in participant selection by excluding participants who attended high school at either of the international schools where the researcher has been employed.

One other ethical consideration was the potential inadvertent identification or outing of any GSM leaders in international schools. To avoid this, participants were asked to describe the nature of the relationship and interactions with a visible GSM leader at the international school they attended. Participants were instructed not to name the leader in question and were not asked questions about the person's role in the school that would allow them to be identified. While avoiding questions about the identity of the leaders who may have played a marked role in the former students' lives necessarily limits the current research, those limitations were needed to

provide protection to a marginalized group of individuals who have historically faced difficulties in schools. The research method and ethical considerations described above comply with the twelve ethical guidelines described by Henrickson et al. (2020), which include respecting the dignity of all research participants, engaging with the taxonomy and language of the participants, assuming that cisgenderism and heteronormativity will have impacted the lived experiences of the participants, and recognizing the intersectionality of the participants. The method described here also adhered to the principles for the ethical treatment of human subjects described in the Belmont report (National Commission for the Protection, 1979). The current research was exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and oversight (see Appendix G).

Trustworthiness

Credibility

In qualitative research, the term trustworthiness has been suggested as more appropriate than terms such as reliability or validity. Qualitative researchers who seek methods to increase the trustworthiness of their findings acknowledge that the means by which qualitative research can be assessed are often less straightforward than the means employed in quantitative research (Rodham et al., 2015). To ensure trustworthiness, Mason (2018) suggested that the methods used for data generation and analysis be appropriate to the research questions in addition to being "thorough, careful, honest and accurate" (p. 236). This means that the data must not be fabricated or misrepresented in any way during either the recording or analysis process (Mason, 2018).

To achieve such an appropriate level of thoroughness, carefulness, honesty, and accuracy, a member check was performed. Additionally, Costa (2020) described a multi-step interview process used in his dissertation that informed the method described here. The aim of the first interview was for the researcher to develop a general understanding of the participant's context

and for the researcher and participant to build rapport and trust. The second interview was used

to gain deep and detailed insight into the participant's experience with the phenomenon. After

the second interview, a member check is performed (Costa, 2020). In the case of the current

research, the participant was given the transcript of the interviews and asked to verify its

accuracy. The participant was also given the emerging themes and asked to make corrections to

accurately reflect their experiences and understanding. If no corrections were provided, the

researcher used the transcripts and themes as presented. Performing a member check in this way

increases the accuracy of the findings but also protects the double hermeneutic of IPA, which

allows for ultimate interpretation of the research to be one that the individual participants in

research would not see or acknowledge (Rodham et al., 2015). The multi-interview protocol

allows for prolonged engagement with the participant, ensuring further credibility (Schwandt et

al., 2007). The multi-part interview protocol for the current research is detailed in Appendix F.

Lack of response to the member check, however, did not preclude the inclusion of the data in the

findings of the current study.

 For research using IPA, another methodological consideration in achieving

trustworthiness is bracketing. In transcendental phenomenology, bracketing is used by the

researcher to remove personal views, beliefs, values, and knowledge about a particular

phenomenon from the analysis of data to get at the essence of the phenomenon in question

(Miller et al., 2018). Various researchers have described the role of bracketing in IPA differently.

According to Smith et al. (2022) bracketing is still an important consideration as part of an

ongoing reflexive practice. In contrast, Emery and Anderman (2020) go so far as to say that

bracketing "is not a step within IPA studies" (p. 225). The differences in approaches of Smith et

al. (2022) and Emery and Anderman (2020), however, may be more semantic in nature than

practical. IPA is a process of entering the world of the participant and the participant's expertise with their own lived experience to come to a greater understanding of the meaning making process for that participant (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) acknowledge that "By focusing on attending closely to your participant's words, you are more likely to park or bracket your own pre-existing concerns, hunches and theoretical hobby horses" (p. 60). In this way, the research is attending to the idiographic nature of each individual account (Emery & Anderman, 2020). The kind of bracketing described by Smith et al. (2022) is part of a reflexive process that Emery and Anderman (2020) acknowledge is necessary to describe the experience of a participant with fidelity before using the researcher's own experience with the phenomenon to interpret the sense making process of the participant.

To act reflexively, therefore, the identity of the researcher must be taken into consideration. The researcher identified as a cisgender, White, gay male who lived in the Netherlands at the time of this current research. Several other characteristics of the researcher were germane to this research project. The researcher was from the United States, but at the time of research, had lived and worked outside of the United States for 14 years. The researcher had been employed by several international schools; however, no participants who attended high school where the researcher had been employed were considered qualified to participate in the study to avoid any ethical issues or conflicts of interest. The researcher had previously engaged in projects primarily about music and arts education. Lastly, the researcher identified himself as an advocate for GSM students and educators in schools. Acknowledging the researcher's own desire to advocate for GSM students and school leaders was part of the researcher's horizon of significance, or what matters to the researcher. This horizon of significance, similar to what Ahmed (2006) describes as the bodily horizon, in turn shapes the meaning given to a situation

(Frechette et al., 2020). For example, the personal reasons for taking up this current research are part of what make up the researcher's horizon of significance; interpretive phenomenology derives new understanding from bridging together the researcher and the participants' horizons of significance (Frechette et al., 2020).

In this current research, since the researcher has had experience as a sexual minority working in an international school, the researcher practiced reflexive journaling during the interview process to identify the preconceptions and experiences with being a gay man in an international school context. Through acknowledging his own experiences, the researcher attempted to attend to the experiences of the participants and follow the guidance of Emery and Anderman (2020) for researchers engaging in IPA, which is to describe first and then interpret.

Transferability

The applicability of the findings within one IPA study to a different context is likened to the applicability of anthropological findings using ethnography because the report is particular to a certain cultural frame (Smith et al., 2022). The report attempts to speak about a particular phenomenon within a cultural frame rather than saying something universally applicable to all cultures (Smith et al., 2022). Despite the idiographic tendency to thickly describe the experiences of the individual in contrast to the generalized experiences of a phenomenon shared by many, phenomenology exists in a state of tension between what is experienced by the individual and what is shared by a group of people (Emery & Anderman, 2020). When speaking of broad themes, Miller et al. (2018) described the experiences of individuals as potentially sharing descriptive points of commonality, while in contrast, the interpretation of the experiences could be vastly different between individuals. Further highlighting the tension between generalizations that can be drawn from phenomenological studies and transferability, Miller et al. suggested that

researchers prioritize the selection of participants who can describe their experience of a phenomenon as well as their personal interpretation of the same phenomenon. This prioritization limits the extent to which findings can be generalized and calls upon the reader to determine how the study's findings may be connected to their own experiences (Emery & Anderman, 2020). Smith et al. (2022) also placed the onus on the researcher to provide a "rich, transparent, and contextualized analysis of the accounts of participants" (p. 45) that will allow the reader to determine the extent to which the findings are applicable contexts that are either similar or dissimilar.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the ability of other researchers to replicate the research presented (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Dependability, or reliability, is sometimes achieved through credibility and the use of triangulation, stepwise replication, and inquiry audits (Morse, 2015). The aim of the IPA is to provide a detailed examination of the human experience, including the idiographic as well as the broader themes that generalize multiple experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Rather than inviting future researchers to replicate a particular study, as has been the focus of some positivist research methods, IPA invites the reader to understand how a particular persona makes sense of a particular phenomenon in a particular context. Smith et al. (2022) stated that "IPA is committed to the detailed examination of the particular case" (p. 3).

Confirmability

Morse (2015) described confirmability as objectivity. While both dependability and confirmability are hallmarks of high-quality qualitative research, only conceiving of research that is objective and dependable in a traditional sense is not necessarily appropriate for studies using IPA. Indeed, because the person of the researcher is directly involved with the double

hermeneutic of IPA, the idea of objectivity is challenged by the very aim of IPA. While it is possible to describe the steps of this study in detail, the aim of studies using IPA is not to have the results replicated in additional settings; however, Smith et al. (2022) noted that effective IPA studies are ones that shed light on the broader context of a topic.

Standards of quality, however, can be applied to IPA. Nizza et al. (2021) described four main indicators of high-quality studies employing IPA. First, the narrative is compelling and based upon the selected extracts from interviews and their interpretation by the researcher. Second, importance is placed on the meaning of various experiences or existential accounts of the participants. Smith (2011) supported this claim in saying that IPA is part of the body of research that seeks to be closely tied to the data provided by participants. Emery and Anderman (2020) confirmed that one of the important indicators of a high-quality study using IPA is the ability to provide evidence for a theme that is derived from multiple participants. Third, a close analytical reading of the participant's words is used in analysis and interpretations (Nizza et al., 2021). These analyses and interpretations exist within both cognitive and affective domains (Smith, 2011). Within the interview protocol for this current study (see Appendix F), attention was paid to the development of questions that accessed both the cognitive and affective domains. Fourth, attention is paid to the convergence and divergence of data in and across interviews with participants (Nizza et al., 2021). In this current study, the indicators of rigor set out by Nizza et al. (2021) were applied to the collection, analysis, and reporting of data.

Summary

Given the effect of marginalization on GSM students, a greater understanding of their sense of belonging at school is the focus of this research. The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how former students at international schools

who self-identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority experienced a sense of belonging at school and understand any changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. IPA was used to respond to research questions that involve personal meaning making surrounding a particular phenomenon for a particular group of people. The phenomenon, in this case, was sense of belonging in schools, whereas the particular group being studied was former students at international schools. The current research related IPA to the research's theoretical framework, queer theory through informing the interpretation of the lived experience of marginalized people who operated in a system of compulsory heteronormativity. The study was conducted with former students at international schools who were at least 18 years old and identified as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority group.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how GSM former students at international schools experienced sense of belonging at school and understood any changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader. The problems addressed by this research were the lack of sense of belonging in school for GSM students (Kosciw et al., 2020) as well the gap in academic literature about GSM students and leaders (Anderson, 2014; Brown, 2016; Fenaughty et al., 2019; O'Malley et al., 2018). The following research questions guided the inquiry:

- RQ1: How do GSM former students at international schools experience sense of belonging in school?

- RQ2: How do GSM former students at international schools perceive and make sense of any changes in their sense of belonging after interacting with GSM leaders in international schools?

Data were collected during interviews with participants conducted on the teleconferencing software Zoom over the course of 5 weeks in the fall of 2022. To qualify to participate in this study, participants were required to be at least 18 years old at the time of the study, to have identified themselves as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority group and have been at least somewhat aware of their own queerness while attending an international school, to have attended an international school for at least one complete academic year within the past ten years, to have been enrolled in an international school during their high school (Grades 9–12 or the equivalent) experience, and to have been able to identify a leader in the international school they attended who belonged to a gender and/or sexual minority group.

The researcher gained access to participants who have attended internationals schools through a social justice organization whose followers included alumni of international schools. The social justice advocacy group, The Organisation to Decolonise International Schools (ODIS) published the advertisements for this study through their social media accounts and on their website with instructions for prospective participants to contact the principal investigator (see Appendix B). The social media posts were repeated three times over the course of 8 weeks. For this study, a minimum of five participants was needed and a maximum of eight participants would be accepted. After receiving initial contact from prospective participants, the principal investigator responded with more information about the study and an invitation to participate (see Appendix C). In total, nine prospective participants inquired about the study via email. One prospective participant was disqualified because she attended high school where the principal investigator was formerly employed. Another participant was disqualified because she did not attend an international school. Although another participant was initially thought to qualify for participation in the study, it was determined during data collection that he had not attended an international high school within a recent enough timeframe to participate in the study. The data that were collected during interviews with that person were not used and had no influence on the results presented in in this chapter or the discussion and conclusions presented in Chapter 5. Data for the current study were collected from six participants who met all requirements for participation over a 5-week period during the fall of 2022.

The participants' experiences are all different, yet there are common threads between them. To attend to the idiographic nature of the data, a description of each participant's lived experience is presented in two parts. First, there is a general description of the student's international school, its generalized location, and the grades during which they attended. The

participant's further description of the school, with information such as the size of the school and the curricular program is included. The country of origin of the teachers and the students is included in the description along with details about how students typically interacted with faculty. Providing such a thick description of the context of the participant's lived experience, is one way to allow the reader to determine the extent to which this study's findings are transferable to other settings (Smith et al., 2022).

Following the contextual description, each participant's sexual orientation and gender identity is described using the participant's words. As part of the interview process, participants were asked to describe their sexual orientation and gender identity at the time of the interview. By including this information where appropriate, the researcher hopes to reject an essentialist understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation within the research study through recognizing that both gender identity and sexual orientation can be understood in evolving ways. Next, each participant provided a description of their definition of sense of belonging in school and then described how they experienced sense of belonging in the international school they attended (RQ1). An overview of their interactions with a visible GSM leader within the school is then presented as well as the participant's perceptions and sense making about any changes in their sense of belonging after interacting with GSM leaders in international school(s) they attended (RQ2).

The second part of each participant's narrative is the presentation of the individual themes that emerged from the interviews with each participant. The presentation of such detailed single-case analysis is in line with the guidance about IPA offered by Miller et al. (2018), which advises researchers to include "quotes, metaphors, and other contextualized expressions" (p. 244) to honor individual voices before comparing patterns across cases. Where possible, the

participant's own words were used as evidence to support the presentation of the theme. In some cases, the participants' words have been paraphrased in the interest of succinctness and clarity. This chapter then presents the collective themes, in which patterns in between cases are explored. To prioritize both divergence and convergence within these, the participants' varied experiences will be included, where possible using their own words, with the goal to illuminate "ways in which participants' perceptions of the experience are similar and different" (Miller et al., 2018, p. 246). Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of the results.

Analysis Methods

To present these results, the process described by Creswell and Guetterman (2019) was used. First, the data were prepared and organized. Data were transcribed from interviews using Zoom teleconferencing software (version 5.12.2). Errors in the transcriptions were then corrected by the researcher on reviewing audio and video recordings of the interviews. Most of the original errors in the transcription included misplaced punctuation or incorrectly transcribed individual words or small groups of words. Participants were then given the option to choose a pseudonym. Only Emerald chose her own pseudonym. All other pseudonyms were assigned by the researcher.

Transcripts were anonymized to remove any references that could potentially identify specific schools, persons, or employers of school community members. To increase the trustworthiness of the transcription process and the findings of this study, each participant was provided with a preliminary draft of the transcribed interview and asked to verify whether the transcription was accurate and appropriately anonymized as part of the member checking process (see Appendix F). Four participants responded affirmatively that the data had been appropriately transcribed and anonymized. One participant indicated a place where the participant's real name

was used in the transcript instead of the pseudonym. This mistake was corrected. One participant

did not respond to the member check. As stated in Chapter 3, the lack of response to the member

check did not preclude the inclusion of the data in the findings of the current study.

Data were collected during two semi-structured interviews ranging in length from 20

minutes and 2 seconds to 57 minutes and 30 seconds. The mean interview length for the first

interview was 33m and 9s. The mean length of the second interview was 35m 54s. In total, 6h 54

minutes of recorded interviews were used to create the transcriptions used for data analysis (see

Table 1).

Table 1

Interview Lengths

Participant	Length of Interview 1	Length of Interview 2	Mean Length of Interviews 1 and 2 for Each Participant	Total Length of Both Interviews
Emerald	40m 10s	35m	37m 35s	1h 15m 10s
Claire	30m 20s	25m 44s	28m 2s	56m 4s
Lia	20m 2s	22m 42s	21m 22s	42m 44s
Deepika	36m 57s	39m 40s	38m 18s	1h 16m 37s
Theresa	34m 52s	34m 52s	34m 52s	1h 9m 44s
Daniel	36m 34s	57m 30s	47m 2s	1h 34m 4s
Total Interview Length	3h 18 m 55s			6h 54m 23s
Mean	33m 9s 167ms	35m 54s		1h 9m 3s

The mean length of the Interview 2 was slightly longer than that of the first interview;

however, most interviews fell within the range of anticipated time communicated to the

participants before the beginning of the interviews. Only one of the initial interviews fell outside

the range of the predicted interview length. Three of second interviews fell outside of the

predicted length, with one lasting longer than anticipated and two taking less time than

anticipated. During the data collection process, the researcher read through the participant information sheet with each participant and allowed for any questions or clarifications (see Appendix E). Each participant provided affirmative informed consent to the researcher for the recording and transcription of the interview and use of data in the current study.

The second step in data analysis according to Creswell and Guetterman (2019) is to perform an initial exploration of the data through inductive coding. After transcribing and anonymizing the data collected during the interviews, the software MaxQDA (release 22.4.0) was used to code the transcripts. Through the inductive coding process, a total of 1,027 segments of text were coded using a total of 513 individual codes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Transcript Word Length and Numeric Summary of Coded Segments

Participant	Total Word Length of Transcript	Total Coded Segments	Individual Codes
Emerald	7,931	213	94
Claire	8,509	174	82
Lia	7,557	134	77
Deepika	14,686	154	72
Theresa	9,441	159	88
Daniel	11,573	193	100
Total	59,697	1,027	513

Next, the researcher developed descriptions and identified themes by reviewing the codes and validated the accuracy of the findings, again, following the steps of Creswell and Guetterman (2019), and adapting those steps to align with the aims of IPA. As part of the member checking process, along with the transcripts of the interviews, preliminary individual themes were presented via email to each participant. Participants were given the opportunity to correct any inaccuracies and verify that the preliminary themes accurately represented their experiences and understandings (see Appendix F). Five out of six participants responded to the

member check via email. This step is in alignment with the method laid out by Creswell and Guetterman (2019) in which the researcher validates the accuracy of the findings but deviates from Creswell and Guetterman insofar as the participants are not presented with the superordinate collective themes, but rather preliminary subordinate individual ones that are idiographic in nature.

The method of this qualitative research study is interpretive phenomenological analysis. According to Smith et al. (2022), the semi-structured interview is the ideal data collection tool for studies that employ IPA. Through the open-ended questions of semi-structured interviews, participants give voice to their own experiences in a manner that is not constrained by the views or perspectives of the researcher (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Participants in the current study were asked approximately 22 questions with possible follow-up questions (see Appendix F). Responses to the questions provided data to the researcher that were used to create idiographic, subordinate themes, or themes that were individual to each participant, as well as superordinate, or collective themes that were supported by evidence from multiple participants. According to Smith and Osborn (2003), the themes identified from each individual participant represent a more abstracted capturing of the essence of each text. The themes presented here, in alignment with the description of Creswell and Poth (2018), preserve the differences in the experience of and sense making surrounding the phenomenon in question, sense of belonging in the international school. The themes are supported with evidence from the statements of the participants.

Presentation of Results and Findings

Six eligible participants were recruited for participation in this study. The six participants in this research attended schools in five different countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe

and graduated between 2017 and 2021. These former international school students represented diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. During high school, one student identified as a trans woman, four participants identified as cisgender male or female, and one student identified as cisgender female but expressed that they did not feel completely comfortable with describing their gender identity within a male/female binary construct. The former international school students used a variety of terms to describe their sexual orientations during high school. Three students described themselves as bisexual. Emerald, who identified as a trans woman, described her sexual orientation as almost exclusively attracted to women, but did not use any further label. Claire was resistant to provide a label for her sexual orientation during high school, describing it at various times throughout her interview as questioning or perhaps pansexual. Daniel also used the term pansexual to describe his sexual orientation in high school. Lia and Deepika used the terms gay in addition to the other terms they used to describe their sexuality.

Students attended the international schools they discussed in their interviews for an average of 5.86 years. All the students interviewed during this study graduated from international schools. Only Theresa attended two separate schools during her high school experience, while the rest of the participants attended only one international school during their high school experiences (see Table 3). Several students had also attended other international schools prior to attending a different international school during high school.

Table 3

Summary of Participants' Demographic Details

Name	Location of School	Grades	Sexual Orientation During High School	Gender Identity
Emerald	Türkiye	8–12	Almost exclusively attracted to women	Trans woman
Claire	Thailand	9–12	Questioning, Pansexual	Cisgender female
Lia	China	5–12	Queer, lesbian, gay	Used she/her pronouns but didn't completely feel comfortable with that.
Deepika	Hong Kong	8–13	Bisexual, gay	Cisgender female
Theresa	China	2–9	Bisexual	Cisgender female
	Germany	10–12		
Daniel	Germany	8–12	Bisexual/pansexual	Cisgender male

Individual Experiences and Themes

The narrative that follows attempts to capture the experiences of sense of belonging in international schools for the six participants in this study. During the interviews, each participant described their experiences attending an international school, their understanding of sense of belonging in school, and the impact of a GSM leader on their sense of belonging. The individual themes that have been identified are supported with evidence from the interviews with the respective participant. Emery and Anderman (2020) suggested that the identification of themes and patterns in IPA begins by looking at each individual case. These individual cases are presented first before looking across the data collected from all participants (Emery & Anderman, 2020). The data presented here are organized to acknowledge and center the individual experiences of participants first before collective themes are identified.

Emerald's Experience

Emerald identified as a transgender woman. She attended an international school in Türkiye during Grades 8–12. Emerald described her graduating class as comprised of 70–80 individuals who were mostly of Turkish origins with a few international students. After the beginning of Grade 10, several of the international students left the school, leaving only a few international students. According to Emerald, about 50% of the faculty at her school came from Türkiye, while the rest of the faculty came from various other parts of the world, including many English-speaking countries like the United States, South Africa, and Australia.

The school offered both the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). Until Grade 10, Emerald understood the school to be an appropriate academic fit for her and achieved an A average for her IGCSE certificates. Her results during the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) were not as strong. Emerald attributed the lower achievement during her IBDP years (Grades 11-12) to the psychological difficulty she experienced at the time due to her trans identity. In her view, the school was unwilling to acknowledge the struggle of being a trans person in school. Despite feeling unsupported by the school administration, Emerald liked certain teachers. "I mean I had my chemistry teacher, ninth and tenth grade was probably the most amazing teacher I've still had," Emerald noted.

Although she identified several excellent teachers at the school, Emerald did not perceive the school to be well-administered. She described the school, saying, "In general, like, it's not a well-run school. It's very hierarchical in all the bad ways." The hierarchical nature would also impact Emerald's experience as a trans person attending the school. At the same time, Emerald's

admiration of her teachers was not without exception. According to Emerald, there was a

difference in her feelings toward her Turkish teachers due to her minoritized gender identity:

> With teachers it was a different story because I was scared of teachers um, especially
>
> Turkish teachers because Turkish people are a little more conservative; not, not as a
>
> blanket statement, but some of them were practicing Muslims. I didn't know for sure if
>
> they were, um, if they would be friendly to it, you get what I mean.

Emerald described herself as a transgender woman who is almost exclusively attracted to

women. She also mentioned that she was largely out of the closet to her peers, even if, as she

stated, "People just didn't want to admit it." Emerald understood her gender identity to be a

liability for the school personnel, specifically in the critical gaze of her parents, who did not

support or acknowledge her gender identity. After the school made accommodations to support

Emerald's trans identity at school, her parents made threats to report the school to the Turkish

ministry of education. In response to that, Emerald said:

> I don't, honestly, I am not, I don't think I'm really in a place to really evaluate how much
>
> of a liability it was in reality, but at the very least, I don't think um. I think a parent
>
> threatening to go to the ministry of education in a notoriously, you know, right-leaning
>
> country and complain about the school, um, honoring LGBT students, I think that would
>
> be taken a little more seriously than it would at least here.

Emerald described sense of belonging at school as having general positive feelings about

school. She specified that, for a GSM person, the positive feelings must be reciprocal between

the people at school and the GSM person, saying, "I guess specifically in the context of LGBTQ

people, it's specifically being supportive of exactly what you are… ." Emerald further

elaborated, "Uh, it means, I guess, having a supportive community where everyone

acknowledges you, and not necessarily likes you but at least respects you for you are."   At the international school in Türkiye, Emerald described her own sense of belonging at school as "frazzled and inconsistent." Providing further detail, Emerald explained that within her closer friend group, her sense of belonging was strong. Outside of that group, however, "it wasn't great," she said. "I felt, um, I really felt like I was in a sort of grey area where I didn't know where I belonged. I didn't know who I belonged with. I didn't know, I didn't really feel like there was a place for me in the community," Emerald elaborated. When asked to explain why she didn't feel like she had a place in the community, Emerald explained that it was because of lack of acknowledgement of her trans identity.

Emerald interacted closely with a visible GSM leader in her international school, whom Emerald discovered identified as queer by seeing the teacher's chosen non-binary pronouns on the social media site, Instagram. The GSM leader served as Emerald's Extended Essay (EE) supervisor during the IBDP. Emerald recalled several important interactions with her visible GSM leader, including seeing the leader start a GSA club at school. Emerald also understood this leader as being able to navigate challenging and ambiguous situations with sensitivity and skill. For example, since Emerald had communicated that she wanted to be called her chosen name and her parents were insistent that she would be referred to by her deadname, Emerald's EE supervisor would check in to see if it was safe for her to refer to Emerald using her chosen name by asking her at the beginning of a video call if Emerald had her earbuds in order to determine whether anyone else could hear their conversation. While Emerald was appreciative of the effort of the GSM leader, she also recognized that the effort had less impact on her sense of belonging in school because of how late it came in her school experience.

Emerald: Individual Themes

An analysis of Emerald's descriptions of how she experienced sense of belonging in school and how she interacted with a visible GSM faculty member led to the identification of three themes (see Table 4).

Table 4

Individual Themes Emerging from the Interviews with Emerald

Theme Number	Theme	Research Question Addressed
Theme 1a	For students with minoritized gender identities, experiencing acknowledgement, respect and support are important for establishing belongingness in school. Sense of belonging at school is an overall positive feeling about attending school and being supported because of who you are instead of despite who you are.	RQ 1
Theme 1b	Homophobic and transphobic views that negatively impact GSM students' sense of belonging are sometimes permitted into the international school establishment because of local cultural contextual factors	RQ 1
Theme 1c	Gender minority students' sense of belonging benefits from school policies that intentionally and explicitly support GSM students and a faculty that is well-trained in practical anti-bias action.	RQ 1

Theme 1a: Importance of Acknowledgement. First, for students with minoritized gender identities, experiencing acknowledgement, respect and support are important for establishing belongingness in school. According to Emerald, sense of belonging at school is an overall positive feeling about attending school and being supported because of who you are instead of despite who you are. To experience a sense of belonging requires a supportive community where individuals with varying identities are seen, acknowledged, and respected. For

Emerald, who recognized that her gender identity was widely viewed as both transgressive and a liability within a conservative culture, acknowledgement was an important component of belonging. "I'm not trying to say that people should like you," Emerald explained. When asked why she viewed acknowledgement as a key component of belonging, she said:

> Because there is always going to be people that criticize you, but just acknowledging and, um, at least acknowledging that someone's identity is real and you're not going to personally change that is, I guess, the key to having a sense of belonging.

In interacting with the visible GSM leader at her school, Emerald recalled that the leader's acknowledgement of Emerald's identity with other students by being "very strict toward other students" about the use Emerald's chosen name and pronouns. For Emerald, using her chosen name rather than her deadname was an important way that acknowledgement was operationalized by others at her school.

Theme 1b: Homophobia and Transphobia in the Local Culture. A second theme emerging from the interviews with Emerald is that homophobic and transphobic views that negatively impact GSM students' sense of belonging are sometimes permitted into the international school establishment because of local cultural contextual factors. International schools are shared spaces where people from diverse backgrounds meet and interact. Not all the people who interact share the same values, and conservative or traditional values surrounding gender identity can negatively impact sense of belonging for students. For example, Emerald recounts the story of Turkish teachers at her school who both held homophobic/transphobic views and allowed those views to be expressed by students at school. In describing some of the situations that negatively impacted her sense of belonging, Emerald recalled the practice of some

Turkish teachers to allow the use of homophobic slurs in their classes. Furthermore, describing an interaction between a Turkish teacher and a student, Emerald said:

> I remember hearing about one exchange between a teacher and a student. A student who brought up a rumor that another student was gay and the teacher was like… the teacher responded with "Allah korusun," which is Turkish for "God forbid," basically.

Emerald understood the cultural divide between the Turkish teachers at her school to be a result of lack of interaction between international faculty and local faculty, a language barrier between Turkish-speaking teachers and English-speaking teachers, and a failure of school administration to establish a shared culture wherein GSM students were supported by all teachers. Recalling administrative inaction, Emerald said:

> And it definitely made me feel like there was a portion of the school, students, and teachers, because there was a subculture that existed driven by those teachers and even in the student side of things that was really, um, sheltered from the overall culture of the school.

When further questioned about what she meant by overall culture, Emerald clarified her belief that the administration, rather than set forth a policy that would support trans students like herself, tried to create policies that would not cause any cultural rifts between groups in the school.

Theme 1c: Benefit of Clear School Policies and Training. A third theme emerging from the interviews with Emerald is that Gender minority students' sense of belonging benefits from school policies that intentionally and explicitly support GSM students and a faculty that is well-trained in anti-bias practices. In her story about the cultural divide between Turkish teachers and international teachers, Emerald went on to clarify that the administrators of the school were

also disappointed by the actions of the Turkish teachers. Explaining further, Emerald said, "It felt like um the administrators felt the same way about the cultural difference as I did. Because, and that's why they told me, 'Use these gender-neutral bathrooms,' instead of straight up use the women's bathroom." Whereas Emerald had hoped to be able to use the women's bathroom, she felt that allowing her to do so would be too much of a liability to the school insofar as allowing a tans woman to use the women's restroom facilities could be offensive to Turkish teachers. Emerald shared, "I mean of course we had a bunch of Turkish teachers that weren't familiar with the concept, and could quite possibly not be very happy that someone being trans using the women's bathroom." The act of allowing her to use the gender-neutral bathroom did not feel like a policy that fully supported her trans identity, and rather than being a bold step toward identity affirmation, only allowing access to a gender-neutral facility seemed to Emerald like an act of appeasement rather than a policy of support. Furthermore, while the authentic example of GSM leaders was appreciated and could be inspiring, in Emerald's experience, all faculty had a duty to support students with minoritized gender or sexual identities. For Emerald, this theme underscored the importance of teachers in creating supportive school climates:

> I mean honestly as a student, it's the teachers that really define your experience and they define what you learn. They're the ones who set the tone for the classroom, and what other students can actually do. Um, so I mean, it's also teachers that are supposed to sort of realize, "Hey, this student is struggling. Let's see, you know. Let's have a one-on-one. See what's going on. See what I can do to get this student to improve."

This memory aligned with Emerald's suggestion made during her interview that international schools should consider implementing better training in anti-discrimination practices in a similar

way to which she received anti-bias training as an employee in a large commercial company in the United States where she was employed during the time of this interview.

For Emerald, the ability of the GSM teacher/leader she identified to both navigate ambiguous situations in the face of unclear school policies and unsupportive parents had an impact on Emerald's feeling acknowledged, and, in turn, her sense of belonging at school. Comparing her EE teacher and the homophobic Turkish teachers, Emerald said, "I guess the main difference is knowledge and education." Emerald suggested that schools should be intentional in creating policy changes. She stated that schools cannot wait until someone makes them make a change in policies affecting GSM students. According to Emerald, "They can't just wait for someone to bust down the door and make them change policies." In her eyes, she envisioned minorities as the primary beneficiaries of policies and training that would serve to break down cultural walls. In her words, how teachers are hired and trained was "really crucial."

Claire's Experience

Claire was a cisgender female who went to an international school in Thailand during Grades 9–12. Claire recalled the school in Thailand to be a larger international school with approximately 2,000 students in attendance. According to Claire, the students had access to facilities that were almost "over the top" and a mix of teachers from various English-speaking countries such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand along with some Europeans. Approximately 50% of the students were from Thailand, while the other students came from the United States, various European countries, Australia, and New Zealand. Claire noted that very few students were from Africa or South America, while there were many students from other Southeast Asian countries.

Although students at the international school Claire attended came from different places, Claire noted the lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity with some discomfort:

> I think, like, it is something I've like been trying to like, understand more is, like, the discomfort of having, like, um, grown up in these other countries, like, not my home country, and being white and, like, going to these like elite institutions that are full of, like, a lot of white kids or very wealthy kids.

The interactions between faculty and students within the school also gave Claire pause. Claire compared the faculty's interaction with students in her school in Thailand to the interactions students had with faculty at the international school Claire attended in India. Whereas in India, teachers would typically greet students in the hall, in Thailand, teachers would move "through the halls really quick with their head down, and not really like interact with the students." Claire attributed this lack of interaction to the shy demeanor of some faculty members but understood the interactions to be "strange" considering her previous school experiences. Academically, Claire felt that she fit in at the school. She described herself as "well-prepared" from her middle school experiences. Except for mathematics, a subject for which she received tutoring outside the school, she said that she did not find her other classes very difficult.

During school, Claire did not openly identify as a gender or sexual minority. In retrospect, she thought that she may have been pansexual in high school. She described her perspective, saying, "I think now, looking back, I would label it as pansexual, but I think to me I was like 'Oh, well, if I'm attracted to a male like a male-identifying transgender person, is that just being straight?' At the time she participated in this study, she identified as queer. Reflecting on her high school experience during the interview, Claire attributed her hesitancy to label her sexual orientation to a lack of understanding about what it could mean to be queer: "So I feel like

my, like, idea of what, like, being queer had to look like, or whatever it was, very, like, small." In relating a story about a close friend who was transgender, Claire questioned whether she could possibly have romantic feelings for a person who was trans and what implications that may have for any label she chose to describe her sexual orientation. Claire described her experience as, "Like, I don't know, just not really having a good understanding of, like, how, um, diverse and, like, broad the sexuality spectrum is, and, like, all the different ways it can look or feel."

Claire understood sense of belonging to mean feeling comfortable with people around who are supportive and want what is best for her. She further clarified that "having some like-minded people around you as well" was part of how she defined a sense of belonging at school. When asked to describe her sense of belonging at the international school she attended in Thailand, Claire said:

> Um, I think like the first year I didn't really feel particularly connected, or like I belonged. Um. And then, as I made good friends, I felt like I, I belong with, like, when I was with those people, but not necessarily, like, feeling a deeper connection to the school overall.

Claire explained that the longer she attended school, the more improvement she experienced in her sense of belonging. The increase in sense of belonging, however, included some setbacks and bumps in the road. Like other students who attend international schools, a transient student population meant that Claire's friend group was reconstituted at several junctures during her high school experience. After an episode where certain friends moved away and others reorganized and joined other friend groups, Claire described the difficulty of figuring out her place at school as hard and lonely. In addition to the positive contribution that finding a group of friends made to her sense of belonging, becoming more active in extra-curricular activities and sports also

provided her connections within the school and, in Claire's words, "increased my sense of belonging."

Claire also described other situations that had a negative impact on her sense of belonging initially at school and improved over time. For example, during passing periods when Claire was not in class, she explained that she felt exposed: "Kind of like a fish in the fishbowl. It is very, like, seen, but not in, like, a good way." Claire also understood the lack of interactions with teachers as one of the contributing factors to a diminished sense of belonging at the school and in comparing the experiences that promoted or undermined her sense of belonging at school, Claire reflected: "I guess just, like, warmness, and people being more also, like, sensitive, or, like, aware of how their behavior impacts people or, like, students especially, or peers."

Claire recalled interacting with several GSM school leaders during her time at the international school in Thailand. Foremost, Claire interacted with a drama teacher during Grade 9 who was "definitely out." The teacher was the leader of the school's musicals, and although Claire considered the teacher to be out about his sexual orientation, she also noted that "Students, would just kind of assume, which is, like, definitely based off like stereotypes, um, of being, like, more flamboyant and things like that, but also, like, he did definitely, didn't, like, hide it." Claire understood the interactions between herself and the GSM leader to be typical teacher–student interactions and not necessarily important or impactful on her sense of belonging at school. Indeed, Claire described some of the activities done within the drama class being led by the teacher as embarrassing.

Claire: Individual Themes

From the interviews with Claire, two subordinate themes emerged (see Table 5).

Table 5

Individual Themes Emerging from the Interviews with Claire

Theme Number	Theme	Research Question Addressed
Theme 2a	The patriarchal and heteronormative ordering of high schools diminishes sense of belonging by inhibiting students who may perceive themselves as being a gender or sexual minority from exploring a more expansive gender understanding or non-heterosexual orientation.	RQ 1
Theme 2b	All school personnel have a responsibility to intentionally establish a welcome and accepting culture within the international school.	RQ 1

Theme 2a: Patriarchal and Heteronormative Schools. First, the patriarchal and heteronormative ordering of high schools diminishes sense of belonging by inhibiting students who may perceive themselves as being a gender or sexual minority from exploring a more expansive gender understanding or non-heterosexual orientation. In high school, Claire experienced a diminished understanding of what being queer could mean due, at least in part, to a restrictive heteronormative ordering of the social structure at school. Claire described the situation in the school, saying:

> Um, but I definitely feel, like, it reinforces a lot of like heteronormative values, and, like I always joke with my mom that it's like the good old boys' club, just because a lot of like bullshit with. Like. Male administrators being, like, dismissive, um, and sexist, and being all besties who go golfing together.

In one heteronormative experience, Claire recounted the school tradition of pairing up male and female student athletes on different teams as husbands and wives. To Claire the experience of

having to "buddy up" and perform kind acts for her husband was "stupid" and something that she was not interested in.

In Claire's perception, the heteronormative boundaries also regulated the extent to which queer faculty could discuss their own lives in authentic ways. She said, "I feel like there weren't that many people who felt comfortable exploring their, like, gender sexual, sexual identities in our high school." Claire attributed the regulation to the heteronormative values reinforced by the school. These values were evident in the lack of representation at school of authentic queer experiences. While Claire mentioned that teachers at the school did not generally discuss their personal lives, she specifically points out that the lack of personal discussion was particularly evident to her with GSM teachers/leaders, saying:

> I feel like a lot of my teachers didn't talk that much about their partners, like, um, straight or queer, but, like, I feel, like, definitely, it seems more common with queer teachers that they really didn't, like, talk about it, or, like, bring it up. And I don't know if that's because, like, they weren't, like, married or weren't, like, in a, like, partnership where it's, like, yeah, we're, like, gonna be together for life or whatever. And it was more, like, having, like, a thing, or, like, I don't know, not, like, a more defined relationship, maybe more of, like, an open relationship. And that's why they didn't want to talk about it with students, or, like, what it was.

Claire recognized a lack of discussion about queerness and limited representation of authentic queer life at school. On reflection later, she described her understanding during high school of what being queer meant as "small" due to the limited representation of different kinds of queerness in the school community. She therefore did not relate the queerness she saw represented in her community to her own identity at the time.

Essentially, the school Claire attended inhibited her from developing a fuller understanding of her own queerness due to the heteronormative social structures that were continually reinforced. Claire described a context in which she was fearful of expressing a non-normative sexual identity because of the social situation at the school:

But, um! I think I subconsciously knew I would definitely be ostracized if I, like, expressed a queer identity, because, literally, like, anytime, it was, like, "Oh, this person is actually bi." And it was, like, a very, like, feminine student, or whatever, like. I feel like there'd be so much, like, gossip around it, or, like, people, like, couldn't shut up about it, and I definitely didn't want that sort of attention.

When asked if she could remember experiencing an open, authentic representation of queerness from one of her teachers that did not come from a place where sexual orientation or gender identity is assumed or inferred, Claire responded, "Um, honestly, I can't remember that happening. So, I'm assuming no, because I think I probably would have." This sort of GSM representation would have, according to Claire, normalized a marginalized status. When discussing the reasons why the visible GSM leader in her community did not have an impact on her sense of belonging, Claire stated that queer identities were never explicitly discussed:

Claire: I don't think they really increased, in terms of like queer identity, my sense of belonging.

Douglas Beam: Yeah? Why is that?

Claire: Well, because, like it felt like a secret almost, even though it's not, like, it was obvious, but, like, it wasn't even acknowledged.

Theme 2b: A Welcoming School Culture. A second individual theme centers on the importance of teachers in creating welcoming spaces in which all students can belong. Emerging

from the interviews with Claire was the idea that all school personnel have a responsibility to intentionally establish a welcoming and accepting culture within the international school. Succinctly put, Claire stated, "I feel like teachers especially have kind of a responsibility to, like, set the tone, um, because, like, if they're not friendly or warm, like, that doesn't necessarily encourage students to be that way."

Additionally, Claire understood forming close relationships with teachers as one way to increase sense of belonging at school. She cites specific examples of an English teacher who was "very supportive," who "cared a lot about students' wellbeing," and, was "accommodating and understanding." Claire also recalled a counselor who was empathetic. Claire understood the actions of these teachers to have a positive effect on her sense of belonging at school insofar as those interactions made her felt cared for.

Being able to identify positive examples of empathy, caring, and support stood in juxtaposition to Claire's description of typical high school students:

> I think, like, people in high school are pretty, like, self-centered, and, like, not everyone ever grows out of that, um. But, so, people are just very cognizant of what's going on in their own life and not focused on, like, um, how their interactions and stuff, like, make other people feel because they're so focused on whatever's going on with them, whether that be, like, a test or social stuff, or whatever.

Given the self-centered proclivities of students in high school, Claire understood teachers as a possible counterbalancing force as well as an example for students. Even though she understood that not all students would follow the example set by teachers, Claire saw the act of being friendly as an impactful action taken by people who have the power to do so. Even the example

of greeting a student by name stood out in Claire's mind as a humanizing action that could improve sense of belonging.

Lia's Experience

Lia attended an international school in China from Grade 5 through 12. Lia recalled each grade level to have approximately 100 to 120 students and that about 80% of the students were from Asia and 20% were from other places in the world. In total, there were around 400 students in the high school. The teachers came from the United States, Canada, Australia, and various other Commonwealth countries. According to Lia, the interactions between the teachers and students was much less formal than at their previous international school, which was a British international school in the same Chinese city as the international school from where they graduated.

Lia felt "positively" about attending school. At the time that they attended school, they did not have a strong sense that the school was academically competitive. This perception changed when they graduated and went to university and discovered from their university peers that the test scores and IBDP results achieved by their peers at their international school were higher than those of students they encountered in their university in the United States.

In high school, Lia described their sexual orientation as "queer, or lesbian, or gay." When asked about their gender identity, Lia said, "I was not super sure about it. Um, I did. I used she/her pronouns, um, but then I didn't feel completely comfortable with the she/her pronouns." Asked about their gender identity now, Lia identified as nonbinary. They were largely out of the closet in high school, but their parents did not know about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Lia described themself as not very straight passing, and therefore, they felt like many of their peers recognized their queerness from a young age; they said:

Like you know, with my partner, with [REDACTED—name of participant's partner], um, she's like very feminine, very straight passing, and I think I never, I was, since I was like past the age of five, I was never straight passing.

Lia recalled beginning to have conversations with their friends about their queer identity in sixth or seventh grade. When asked why they did not come out to their parents, they did not provide a clear response about their personal situation, but clarified not many other students were out and those that were out were not always well accepted within the community due to religious or conservative values. In discussing important experiences about being GSM in an international school, Lia did not understand school in general to be an important place for their queer identity formation. Rather, Lia and their friends looked for queer representation in media. "We'd talk, if a TV show came out, or a movie came out that had, like, good representation that was important," they recalled. Despite not understanding school as an important venue of queer identity formation, Lia remembered dating many of their friends in middle school and high school.

Lia defined sense of belonging at school as feeling comfortable in one's community and environment. They clarified their definition of sense of belonging at school, saying, "I think, feeling, like, not anxious. Feeling at ease. Um, just doing what you're doing. Um, I think feeling secure." Asked about their own sense of belonging at the international school they attended, they described their sense of belonging at school as "pretty good." Lia, providing further details about their own sense of belonging at school, explained that they understood sense of belonging to improve over time, saying, "I think, um, like in the earlier, like at the very beginning, I think, you know, just when you're starting high school, I think nobody really feels a sense of belonging because it's a new place."

Lia felt that they were able to participate in the community by having friends, attending classes, and being involved in cubs. Those actions helped improve their sense of belonging at the international school they attended. Lia noted, "I think those who I surrounded myself with helped make me feel comfortable in my community which gave me that sense belonging."

Lia interacted with a GSM leader at school who was an AP economics teacher and openly discussed her wife in class. In addition to being a teacher, the GSM leader was a coach of sports teams and led clubs at the school. Lia's primary interactions with a GSM leader occurred in class. While Lia did not describe the connection they had with the visible GSM leader at the school as close, Lia recognized their current passion for economics, the subject they were majoring in at university, in part "stemmed from her course." On learning that there was a visible GSM leader at the school, Lia recalled thinking "it was neat," and further recognized the GSM leader as a good teacher, a role model for "a lot of kids," and a teacher who received overwhelming positive feedback in the community. Despite the esteem Lia held for the GSM leader at their international school, when asked about whether their interactions with the GSM leader had an impact on their sense of belonging at school, Lia responded, "I don't think so. I think by the time senior came around I had already created my own community in the way that I would want it or needed it." In this description of their sense of belonging, Lia pointed to both the importance of community and the agency they felt to shape that community.

Lia: Individual Theme

From the interview with Lia, one individual theme emerged (see Table 6).

Table 6

Individual Theme Emerging from the Interviews with Lia

Theme Number	Theme	Research Question Addressed
Theme 3	Queer students sometimes accrue different types of power, giving them status within the school community, allowing them to shape the social spaces that they occupy.	RQ 1

Individual Theme 3: Queer Students and Power. Lia's lived experiences at the

international school in China highlighted the interplay of queerness and power. "I think I was

very proactive in shaping my environment that I surrounded myself with into something that

made me feel comfortable," Lia said. Queer students like Lia sometimes accrue different types of

power, giving them status within the school community, allowing them to shape the social spaces

that they occupy. For Lia, they accrued power by being a leader in many of the clubs at the

school. At the same time, being a queer student in an international school meant that they were

perceived by others with caution. "I think, with a lot of my friends' parents, a lot of them wanted

my friends to be, like, wary and be careful around me," Lia said. Despite the liability of their

queerness, Lia was known to be a leader and a strong student in the community:

> I think it was, I held most of the leadership positions at my school, um, by the time senior
>
> year came around. So, at that time everyone's parents knew, but they didn't want their
>
> friend, they didn't want the children to not be friends with me because I was, like, oh,
>
> that student, or you know that person in the community that they their children to, to be
>
> like.

Lia's status in their community allowed them to shape the school into "a place that I wanted it to

be more like." They did this by participating as a leader in student government. While serving on

the executive council of student government, Lia was able to open the gender-neutral bathroom to students who wanted to use them. Lia understood actions like this to be impactful on perceptions of gender in the community by destigmatizing the concept of gender.

Lia understood the kind of power that they accrued as not accessible to all students in the community, saying, "But then not everyone can be a leader, right? That's kind of not how it works." For Lia, their access to power had a relationship to the cultural background of their peers. In the international school they attended, the transgressive nature of identifying as a gender and/or sexual minority in a culturally conservative context was mitigated by the power Lia accrued as a leader and strong student due to the kind of respect Asian students had for teachers and leaders. They described the cultural context, saying:

> I think because of a lot of students we're Asian. I think there's a lot of passiveness with that. A lot of the teachers kind of say something, and then everyone kind of does it. But that reflects in other ways of. Like, you know, your club leader says something, and then you do it. It's a lot of, it's very hierarchical, and there's a lot of respect for your leaders in that.

Asked if the experience of feeling agency to shape the environment is something commonly felt by students in their school, Lia expressed doubt. While many people may want to be in positions of authority, Lia understood their own drive to be more significant than that of others, saying "I think I wanted it more." Lia explained the impact of their drive to achieve further, saying that it led them to be more proactive and eager to attain positions and influence their community. They further understood there to be a connection between their queer identity and the power they accrued to make changes in the school community. Their queer identity was part of what drove them to gain influence to create spaces of belonging for others.

Deepika's Experience

Deepika attended an international school in Hong Kong. The school followed a British/Australian numbering system, so Deepika was enrolled in Grades 8–13, the equivalent of Grades 7–12 in the United States and many other international schools. Prior to attending the international school in Hong Kong, Deepika attended an American school in a large city in China. Deepika recalled that the international school in Hong Kong was one in a network of schools that catered to expatriate populations as well as local elite students and families. Students at her international school in Hong Kong came from China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Deepika understood attending an elite international school in Hong Kong like the one she attended to afford the children of local Hong Kong and Chinese parents an opportunity to gain access to high quality universities in places like Europe. Deepika explained that the international school was understood to be a differentiating factor for the students. The students' parents, having found success in Hong Kong, then used that money to buy access to an international school, which would, in turn, provided a way for the student to gain access to elite colleges and universities.

In total, Deepika remembered that there were 60 to 70 students in her year group. The small size of the year groups at the school allowed the students to know each other well. "I knew everybody's name, and everybody knew my name. Yeah. So, I, that was my favorite part about [REDACTED—name of participant's international school]," Deepika recalled.

The school offered the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) and Diploma Programme (DP). Deepika understood the international school she attended in Hong Kong to be more academically competitive than her previous international school in China. According to Deepika:

It put some a bit of pressure on me when I first came in year eight. Took me year, from

year 9 until, like, year 10, to start doing, like, well in school, because the competitive

aspect of it completely threw me off guard.

Teachers at the school were mostly White from the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia, with only some Chinese language teachers from the local area. Deepika described interactions with teachers to be increasingly less formal as students progressed through the grade levels. For Deepika, this change in how teachers and students interacted was represented in the change in the uniform requirement for students:

In MYP, the relationship with the teachers is different than the relationship compared to,

you know, when you're in IB. So, we're allowed to go outside. We can wear the clothes

we want to wear. We don't have to wear uniform. Teachers talk to you a different way.

As will be discussed later in this section, the increasingly informal interactions with students affected the ways in which teachers discussed information about gender and sexuality.

Deepika described her gender identity as cisgender female, indicating that she had always used she/her pronouns and had never considered identifying any other way. Throughout the course of high school, she became increasingly comfortable with the idea of being sexually attracted to both men and women. While she did not use a specific label to describe her sexual orientation in high school, Deepika described her evolving understanding of her romantic and sexual attraction to both men and women and described her sexuality as "alternate," saying:

Year 10 was when it started picking up. It was, like, my third year, fourth year of living

in this city, where I was, like, oh, started learning more about that, and then started

learning more about myself, and started making friends with the people of that sort in my

school. But it wasn't easy to do that because they were, like, cliques. It wasn't easy to

figure that out for myself. It took me a while. It took me until at least I graduated to be one hundred percent comfortable with, like, vocalizing that. Otherwise, it was like, 'Oh, I don't know.'

Although Deepika described an evolution in the way she understood her sexual orientation, after reflecting, Deepika described her actual sexual orientation as effectively stable, saying, "But I feel like it's always been, I've always been gay, honest to god, like, since a young age." Deepika attributed the evolution in how she understood her sexuality to her friends, family, and exposure to social media. At the time of the interview, Deepika tentatively described her sexual orientation as pansexual.

Deepika described sense of belonging at school as different for every student. For her, sense of belonging at school included elements related to cultural background, like being surrounded by people who shared similar upbringings and perspectives. She said:

I think that a room where I feel belonged in, and it is a room that everyone, where everyone in that room is exactly like me in the sense of culture and that sense of understanding, and a sense of upbringing in the sense of like, there's also like, do they share the same perspectives I share.

Deepika's description of sense of belonging in school had strong ties to her racial identity, which will be discussed as an individual theme of Deepika's experience. Deepika identified as belonging to the Sindhi caste. At her international school, Deepika's sense of belonging was greater than at her previous school because she was surrounded by people who shared similar racial backgrounds. She recalled the situation, saying:

Because in [REDACTED—name of participant's international school in Hong Kong] I had my comfort friends, my brown friends, my Indian friends. There was a more, there

were 10 or 12, I think, Indian people. Sindhi, Indian. That was a massive deal. When I

came to Hong Kong, there were Sindhi people. They weren't just Indian. They weren't

like just a different caste, like they weren't like Punjabi and Guajarati. Nah, man, most of

them were Sindhi.

Deepika's sense of belonging was not limited, however, to places where there were other people

from her own caste. In the context of the international school, Deepika began to feel a more

expansive sense of identity that will be further discussed in the presentation of Deepika's

individual themes.

Deepika interacted with several visible GSM leaders at the international school she

attended, including a senior administrator at the school who also served as Deepika's EE

supervisor. Deepika described close interactions working with her EE advisor, and additional

close interactions with a teacher/leader at the school who supported Deepika through challenging

experiences as Deepika came to terms with coming out to her family. According to Deepika, her

teacher positively influenced Deepika's acceptance of her own sexual orientation. Deepika's

description of her interactions with GSM leaders in school included language that placed these

GSM leaders in the role of a parental figure:

It was my preachers and my teachers that I learned from on a daily basis. Starting to, um,

starting to identify with these people. I'm starting to identify with the people that I used

to learn from, that I still am learning from that. Are, I still, who are like sort of my, you

know, parents in a different building.

Deepika understood this change in how she viewed the GSM leaders at her school to be

impactful on her sense of belonging at school. Through the influence of the people at the school,

including the GMS leaders, Deepika started to feel a sense of belonging "with groups that you wouldn't have felt a sense of belonging with before."

Deepika: Individual Themes

From the interviews with Deepika, two subordinate themes emerged (see Table 7).

Table 7

Individual Themes Emerging from the Interviews with Deepika

Theme Number	Theme	Research Question Addressed
Theme 4a	Sense of racial belonging can be as important for GSM international students as other components of sense of belonging, such as academic fit, acceptance, and a close friend group.	RQ 1
Theme 4b	For international school students, identity becomes more expansive, allowing them to identify with others who may or may not share their racial, ethnic origins, or even similar gender identities and sexual orientations and thereby increasing the number of places where they feel a sense of belonging.	RQ 1

Individual Theme 4a: Sense of Belonging and Race. First, sense of belonging for GSM students at international schools can also have a strong racial component. Sense of racial belonging can be as important for GSM international students as other components of sense of belonging, such as academic fit, acceptance, and a close friend group. In Deepika's experience, she recognized that sharing a similar cultural background and perspective with others were elements that created sense of belonging. Deepika spoke about how she identified as belonging to the Sindhi caste, but also spoke broadly of the experience of attending an international school as a student with brown skin and how she was able to relate to other brown and Black

international students. Speaking of the intersection of race and belonging in the context of the international school she attended in Hong Kong, Deepika said:

> So, while my, my Caucasian friends in Hong Kong have a different upbringing than me, I do relate with them, but not in the same sort of identifying with each other way that I do with [REDACTED—name of Nigerian student at international school]. I see myself in her. She sees herself in me. When we speak about certain things. It's just a mutual understanding. I don't have to, for example, explain or over explain certain topics of comfort, identity. When we, when we get, like, serious about how we see each other in this city, in a city that shuns, sort of, brown and Black people…

Deepika attributed the mutual understanding she experienced with her Nigerian friend to result from shared ethics, perspectives, and morals. Deepika and her friend both had parents who expected them to dress modestly and to come home before their curfews. Deepika's description of her relationship with her Nigerian friend also referred to the cultural context of the city in which the international school was located. The status of being shunned for racial reasons in the city allied Deepika and her Nigerian friend.

Although initially making friends with some White students, Deepika recognized more similarities between her and other brown students and gravitated toward them. She described her progression of friend making, saying:

> And then, then it becomes, like, who I get closer with. It's just on a basis of how much of our moral understanding is similar. And then that just so happens that it's more brown people than it is Caucasian or Chinese people.

Asked if racial identity is a component in sense of belonging, Deepika responded, "A massive component!" Deepika understood that sharing similar looks and ways of speaking created a comfortable environment for her, one in which she felt like she belonged.

Individual Theme 4b: Expansive Identities and Increasing Spaces of Belonging. A second individual theme emerging from the interviews with Deepika concerned the multiple, intersecting identities of international school students. For Deepika, her identity became more expansive, allowing her to identify with others who may or may not share racial or ethnic similarities, or even gender identities and sexual orientations, and thereby increased the number of places where she felt a sense of belonging. For Deepika, who initially identified strongly with other members of the Sindhi caste at her school, she began to make connections with other students from other places:

> Those are the people I first identified myself with, and then it was people like [REDACTED—Nigerian friend from her international school], and then it was people like [REDACTED—another friend from her international school], who was, who had, you know, a where was her mother? From somewhere in Africa, Ghana, I think, a Ghanaian mother and a Belgian father. I identified myself with her. I identified myself with, you know, when I say identified, I mean, like, saw myself in. They saw something of them and me. And that was just like, that's where that sense of belonging is. And that, that's where that comfort is. So first, there were my comfort friends, and then it was people that I just talked to, and then it became, like, I was able to make Chinese friends, just in a sense of, like, belonging, understanding.

The process of making connections was understood to be a process of fitting in. While Deepika recognized that she did not have problems fitting in at the school, she also reflected on how her

experiences of identifying with certain groups changed over time. Recalling the experience of developing a sense of belonging with more groups of people, she said:

> When you see, when your sense of, when you, a sense of your belonging develops your sense of self develops as well, and then you start to see yourself, so then you start to identify yourself with groups that you wouldn't have identify with before. So, you sort of feel sense of belonging with groups that you wouldn't have felt a sense of belonging with before.

Deepika further explained the process of how this identity expansion occurred for her by describing the learning process, the importance of interacting with people, and her own choices. She said:

> So, when you, when you start to learn, when you start to identify with the people that you were, you know, taking knowledge from that you're learning from that does. And then you are choosing to, sort of, learn that as an identity, then that improves your perspective on yourself. Develops it, not improves.

Deepika understood there to be a relationship between the person as an entity that develops through interacting and sense of belonging at school. In learning from people, a person's sense of self develops and then, in turn, there are more places where a person belongs.

Theresa's Experience

Theresa attended an international school in China during Grades 2–9. After starting her high school experience in China, she moved with her family to Germany and attended an international school there until completing Grade 12. During her interview, Theresa focused largely on her experiences at the international school in Germany; however, her experiences at the international school in China served to frame her experiences at the international school in

Germany by offering points for comparison. Some of the differences between the two schools included the size of the school and the amount of academic pressure that Theresa felt. She described the international school in Germany as "small" and "protected in a lot of ways" when comparing her experience at the international school in China, which "had a lot more kind of pressures" from "the Chinese culture clashing with the sort of elite international school education culture." Theresa described the experience of attending an international school in China as full of expectations.

The international school in Germany had only 60 students in Theresa's graduating class. Like many international schools, the international school Theresa attended in Germany was comprised of students from many nations. Largely, the students who attended the school had parents or guardians who worked for multinational companies or intergovernmental organizations. So, even though the students came from many places, Theresa understood the past experiences of the students to be similar, even describing them as "uniform."

Teachers at the international school in Germany came from mostly English-speaking countries like the United States and the United Kingdom. German teachers were also represented among the faculty, especially as teachers of German language. The community of the school was tight-knit, and students interacted closely with teachers. Theresa attributed the close interactions to the small size of the school. She explained further that while some teachers interacted with students in a typical way during class and then did not interact with students much outside of class, other teachers acted more friendly with students, noting that some teachers "almost, like, crossed some, like, teacher–student friendship boundaries." Theresa did not characterize the close interactions as negative, however, noting that students could "just go have a chat with a teacher, and they would know what was going on with you."

Theresa identified as a cisgender female and described her sexual orientation as bisexual in high school. She related her bisexual orientation to her identity as a third-culture kid, not feeling like she fully belonged in either culture of her German mother or Chinese father. She described her self-perception, saying, "Like, I am just bi, bi, bi in every category in my life. And trying to find validation, acceptance, belonging in each of these categories, um, is always a struggle." Theresa recognized sense of belonging in school as having components of authenticity and self-efficacy:

> I think a sense of belonging at school means, like, being able to be yourself, find out who you are, um, while having that be recognized and supported by other people, and feeling like, you know, when you get up in the morning you know where you're going, who you're going to see, and what you're going to do.

When asked to describe her sense of belonging at the school, Theresa recognized that the dominant White and German culture at school made it difficult for her to feel a sense of belonging at school, especially early in her experience at the international school in Germany. As with Deepika, Theresa's own racial identity figured into her sense of belonging. According to Theresa, "I think initially, the, uh, sense of belonging issues came mostly from being, um, mixed. Um, you know, not speaking fantastic German at the beginning." She further stated, "Yeah, I think initially, culturally, I really felt like I didn't belong, right?" Theresa shared that over time her sense of belonging improved, saying, "I think, towards the end, I had a great sense of belonging. Um, and initially, I mean, it was really about settling in." The diminished sense of belonging also resulted from the different experiences of shifting from an international school in China to an international school in Germany, specifically due to Theresa's different expectations for education as well as having different educational priorities. When first attending the

international school in Germany, Theresa recalled writing in a diary, "Everyone here is so unmotivated, lazy." Her initial perceptions changed over time. Eventually, Theresa came to recognize more positive aspects of the approach to schooling in the German international school. "People know themselves. There's more freedom for me to just move around the city by myself," she recalled. The freedom she found at the international school in Germany also manifested in forms of personal self-expression; Theresa recalled:

> Like, um, and, and seeing, you know, oh, the girl with the blue hair is not crazy, she just, uh, wants to, like, express herself, and maybe I can also, like, I don't know, dress edgier or wear bold lipsticks, you know, which I do to this day.

What improved her sense of belonging over time was being involved in groups like the Model United Nations (MUN) and having a close friend group. Theresa described her friend group as a "weird little safety bubble" within the school that comprised people, "many of them who've now come out later."

Theresa interacted with several GSM leaders at the international school she attended in Germany and China. According to Theresa, "Almost all the principals and leaders at my international schools happen to be gay to some extent." She described the interactions she had with the administrators as not very close. Theresa interacted more frequently with an English teacher/leader who was also the leader of the GSA at school and described the connection she had with this person as "more ideological" because of the teacher's feminist views. Rather than openly identifying as a GSM person, Theresa described this teacher/leader as "never completely explicit about her sexuality." Theresa also observed that this visible leader was not well liked in the community because of her feminist, activist views:

>You know, I was like, oh, yeah, like, everybody, like, hates this woman for being this
>
>angry feminist. But at the end of the day, like, I feel that, like, you know, I, like, she was
>
>almost, like a, like a symbol of, like, a, of, of something that I also believed in, you
>
>know?

While Theresa recognized the GSA leader as a role model, she also witnessed that the GSA

leader was widely disliked in the community. As for the other GSM leaders at the international

school in Germany, they were not explicitly out of the closet in the community. When asked how

people understood the leaders to be queer, Theresa responded that their sexual orientations were

understood through rumors in the community. For Theresa, seeing GSM leaders who were only

assumed to be queer or who were largely disliked in the community was consequential. Theresa

described GSM leadership as impactful on her sense of belonging insofar as the example

provided by the GSM leaders at her school made her more determined to take control of her own

story in an active way to create her own sense of belonging and validation.

Theresa: Individual Themes

From the interviews with Theresa, two individual themes have been identified (see Table

8).

Table 8

Individual Themes Emerging from the Interviews with Theresa

Theme Number	Theme	Research Question Addressed
Theme 5a	For GSM students at international schools, the extent to which they belong is shaped by the extent to which they have control over their personal narrative.	RQ 1
Theme 5b	Finding a group of people to fit in with improves sense of belonging at school, even when the actions of that group are later understood to be problematic.	RQ 1

Individual Theme 5a: Control of Personal Narrative. For GSM students at international schools, the extent to which they belong is shaped by the extent to which they have control over their personal narrative. For Theresa, this idea was manifest in the way she came out of the closet to the students at the international school in Germany by making out with her girlfriend in front of her peers at a party they attended. When asked to what extent she was out of the closet in high school, Theresa described her openness with her peers, saying, "Oh, yeah! With, with the year group, completely. Even with teachers. I mean, we were not private in front of anybody at the end of the, at that time." For Theresa, the way she came out of the closet was a way to take control of her own narrative, or, as she said, "Just being so public with it so that we could control that conversation."

Theresa understood the outcome of her choice to "control that conversation," to be a more frictionless experience as a sexual orientation minority in high school. When asked about important moments as a GSM student at an international school, Theresa recalled:

I mean, in general, I think what I remember most is that it was quite easy, right? Like, I

know that it can be really difficult, and I've heard from so many people in the

community, right? Surprisingly, we kind of coasted through it.

For Theresa, being able to take control over how people learned about her sexuality was

something that gave her power amongst her peers to stop rumors before they started. "And I

think with, with my bisexuality," she said, "It was also sort of, like, you can't, you can't, tell, uh,

make rumors about me if I've literally told you. And I'm clearly okay with it." She further stated

that for minoritized students, controlling one's personal narrative was particularly important,

saying, "If you were not completely, completely fitting the box, you have to be pretty intentional

about driving your narrative." Theresa directly connected the ability to tell her own story with

her ability to create a sense of belonging for herself at school. When asked about whether her

interactions with GSM leaders at her school were impactful on her sense of belonging at school,

she referred to their assumed sexual orientation, saying, "Yeah, yeah, I think it made me feel like

my sense of belonging was something that I had to like, validate, or like, be really explicit about

maintaining, right? By grabbing my narrative, uh, like that."

 Individual Theme 5b: Fitting into a Group Improves Belonging. A second individual

theme, that finding a group of people to fit in with improves sense of belonging at school. For

Theresa, her sense of belonging at school improved because of the groups she fit in with, even

though she later recognized the actions of one of those groups to be problematic. Theresa

described herself as having "only had guy friends" from a young age. While this social situation

changed during adolescence, according to Theresa, "It felt like I could hang out with men in a

more authentic way." So, in high school, Theresa found herself hanging out with a group of

"very cis-, very straight group of boys to the point that I watched, like, you know, after sports

they'll show like weird, soft-core porn." According to Theresa, "I had this weird moment with them where I was one of the boys to that extent." Theresa described the relationship between her interactions with her male peers and her own gender and sexuality, saying, "Being able to connect on more of like a gendered level, of, absolutely all of that had so much to do with, like, gender euphoria, and uh, having my sexuality recognized." Theresa understood the decision to socialize with her male peers in this way to be related to her perception of her own gender and sexuality.

The impact of finding a male peer group, even one that she identified later as demonstrating problematic behavior toward other girls, was an increase in sense of belonging:

> I think, [pause] I think in a weird way, I felt very, like, that sense of belonging. Which, you know, now, I'm like, what the hell, right? But I think I felt that because they were just very, like, letting their guard down around me.

The politically complex nature of social interactions in high school was further illustrated by the hotel accommodations for the Grade-12 trip that Theresa attended. While she felt politically aligned with a group of girls who allied themselves with the feminist leader of the GSA, she felt socially connected to the group of boys. The group of girls was housed in one hotel, while the group of boys was housed in another. For Theresa, the political pressure she felt to ally herself with the girls was counterbalanced by the social pressures of high school. She summarized the situation, saying:

> And I was in the hotel with the girls, but I spent over half the trip with the other hotel, and I was the only person who moved between those hotels, right? Like to have a fun time, I wasn't going to, like, get myself excommunicated, which is not a good enough reason.

For Theresa, the political liability of associating with the feminist-allied students was outweighed by the sense of belonging she felt with the problematic boys.

Not all of Theresa's experiences fitting in with groups at school involved the problematic behavior of peers. Theresa also described her experience with the Model United Nations (MUN) as important for improving her sense of belonging at school. She understood that many of the students involved in the MUN group shared qualities, including being queer, that Theresa recognized in herself.

Daniel's Experience

Daniel attended the same international school in Germany as Theresa. His perceptions and understanding about school, however, were unique to him and differed from those of Theresa. His experience at the international school in Germany during Grades 8–12 is also framed by the experience of attending school in the United States before moving to Germany with his family. He noted the difference in size of the schools and the impact the smaller international school had on relationships between teachers and students as well as amongst students, saying:

> But now, sort of, thinking back on it from having been there for a few years, I mean I, I just remember how closer everyone was, both the teachers and the students, just because there were far fewer of us. I mean, coming from the States, where there were perhaps a 1,000 people in your grade to the international school, where there were about 60 people in your grade, it, suddenly you get to know everyone, and even if you don't get along, you know everyone, right?

Daniel recalled the demographic makeup of the student body, who, although they came from "all different places" were still "predominantly White." Teachers at the school came predominantly

from the United Kingdom and United States. He questioned whether there were many teachers who came from non-English-speaking countries or identified racially as anything other than White. When asked if the teachers looked similar to the students, he mentioned the similar origins of German teachers and students but argued that the students were more diverse than the teaching faculty in part due to the difference in size between the groups.

The international school he attended in Germany was an IB school, and Daniel recalled that "there was a lot of pressure on the academic experience, especially in, in the last two years of the IB." While he recognized that the intense academic program created pressure for other people in his class, he understood the experience to be something that was in his capacity to manage. Because of the prestige that the school derived from having graduates attain high scores and matriculate into well-known universities, Daniel described a system wherein students who did not achieve academically were advised out of the IBDP and into the parallel American curriculum instead, "Sort of just so there were zero failures at the end of the year," he said. He further noted the mixed messaging surrounding academic experience and well-being that he received from school personnel. For example, he said:

> We got the talk that nothing is more important than your health, your well-being, but at the same time, got the reverse messaging in the day-to-day, right, where suddenly everything was not as important as your grades, and how well you're doing at school.

Despite the pressure to achieve, Daniel understood his academic experience to be positive overall.

In high school, Daniel described his gender identity as cisgender male and his sexual orientation as bisexual or pansexual. About the evolution of his sexual orientation, he said, "It's, sort of slowly progressing from I might also like men to, you know what? I, I don't really care

about gender, kind of into everyone." For Daniel, sense of belonging at school was having

people he fit in with, either in a large group or in smaller groups. He described wanting to be

included in the interactions his peers were having. Summarizing his definition of sense of

belonging at school, Daniel said, "I guess belonging is not feeling left out of something."

Daniel's understanding of sense of belonging related to some of the characteristics of

international schools. First, the small cohorts of students in each grade level allowed students to

be known. Second, because of the cultural outsider status within the local community of students

in international schools, students had less ability to seek out close connections in the local

community. Daniel understood the characteristics of international schools to contribute to two

possibilities for belonging. On one hand, the school may provide students with a place where

they could belong; on the other, an international school may be a place where someone could

potentially feel alienated and isolated, without the prospect of forming positive connections with

others due to the outsider status of those within the international school community vis-à-vis the

local community. For Daniel, the difference between schools that contributed to increasing

feelings of belonging and those that do not was the people who made up the school. He

understood international schools to be places that take on the character of the people that occupy

them. Thus, a school comprised of people who were more open to an expansive range of

identities and orientations could provide a positive overall experience for all students. Describing

his understanding of international schools, he said:

> They don't have large cohorts, and so it can be hard to escape certain, I, yes, certain
>
> group-think type mindsets where you know, if, if your entire school, or if your entire
>
> grade is super sex positive, and very LGBTQ+ friendly then that's great, and that's
>
> probably a phenomenal experience for you. But if they aren't, that's not a space that you

can escape to because if you're at an international school, you're probably not interacting with the local community, which means your entire community exists within that school, and if you, without a space where you feel safe, or the space where you feel accepted, and where you feel a part of, um, of a whole or of a group, if that is something that's important to you, you, I can imagine that you might have a, a hard time.

As for his own experience, Daniel recalled not having a strong sense of belonging at school. Asked to describe his sense of belonging at the international school in Germany, he said, "Initially when I started there, not that great." He did not relate his experience of lack of sense of belonging to being a sexual orientation minority, however, saying, "I am not particularly good at putting myself out there or making friends very quickly, and that's more of an introvert thing than anything to do with the fact that I'm in any way not straight." Although, he discussed experiences like participating in extra-curricular activities where he was able to make friends, he hesitated to describe strong feelings of belonging associated with the school or his peers. One reason he mentioned having difficulty integrating with the people at the school was because of the already well-established connections between peers who had attended the school for a long time. Whereas some international school students whose families were temporarily living in Germany because of work for multinational companies and governmental or intergovernmental organizations, other students whose parents worked for local businesses attended the school longer term. Daniel described the social ramifications of this contrast saying:

I think by the end of it, I, I felt like I did have people where I mostly belonged. I had friends, but I got along with them well, I still do get along with them quite well, but I've never quite belonged in that group.

Another reason for his lack of sense of belonging was the social lives of students at the school.

For Daniel, being invited to participate in events contributed positively to his sense of belonging

at school. He remembered that forming close friendships certain people helped establish a friend

group. He also described social situations in which his interest diverged from his peers. Parties

that involved drugs and alcohol did not appeal to Daniel, and, as he described, "I was no longer

particularly interested in following their trends. When it was all video games, and whatever else,

it was fine. But yeah, I think once the partying started, I started dropping back just a little bit."

Even now, Daniel described feeling like an outsider when chatting on social media with friends

who also graduated from the international school in Germany.

Daniel identified several GSM leaders at the international school in Germany. He

interacted closely with an out, gay English teacher who was also the leader of several clubs at the

school. He also understood the sexual orientation of one of the male administrators at the school

as gay. Asked to recall important interactions with GSM visible leaders at his international

school, Daniel discussed several interactions with his English teacher that provided him

academic support, like receiving feedback on early drafts of assignments. He also recalled the

kindness of his English teacher, his ability to generate excitement, his non-judgmental demeanor,

and his strict but supportive nature. Daniel described his English teacher as "someone who

would very readily listen to you. And then also, you know, provide advice, if that's what you

want, or just let you, let you be with it if that's, that's all you needed."

Daniel recognized that his interactions with his English teacher did have ramifications for

his own growth and observed that "around that time, I started subconsciously or unconsciously

kind of losing a bit of that internalized homophobia." He further described his English teacher as

a person who encouraged him to join an after-school TedX club where students would work in

teams to prepare informative public presentations. He described the situation and outcomes of the interactions, saying:

> He was running the, the TedX program, and he was the one to encourage me to, to go and do a talk. Um. And that was, that was actually quite, quite nice. I don't know if it helped me feel like I belonged. But it, it definitely gave me a sense of purpose, and it helped me with my confidence. I think prior to that, I would never have considered getting up on stage.

Asked whether his interactions with his English teacher was impactful on his sense of belonging at school, Daniel said:

> I would argue it was. I think, not in the immediate, um, a little bit in the immediate. I think it, he, as I said, he was always a fairly anchoring presence, and so I think I, I knew that I could come to him with problems and that helped me feel like there was a place that I could belong within the school. I always knew that if I needed to, I could essentially escape to his classroom, and I think, having, having knowledge of that space existing helped me accept everything else that was going on, and to start kind of accepting the other people around me as well.

Daniel understood the impact of his interactions with a visible GSM leader at his international school to have both immediate and long-term consequences. Describing how those interactions affected him over time, he said:

> More long term down the line, I think he, his, his openness with his sexuality helped me accept my own, and by accepting my own I felt a lot more comfortable in my own body. And with who I was, and that also helped me sort of find my place within the school, um,

and within the people, like, within the people there. And it, I wouldn't say it made me

feel more or less like I belonged. Yeah, I guess it sort of did.

The positive outcome and influence on sense of belonging were not found, however, in Daniel's

interactions with the gay administrator at the international school he attended in Germany.

Unlike Daniel's English teacher, who was open about his sexual orientation, the administrator

was assumed to be gay through rumors in the community. Daniel recalled negative associations

with the gay administrator, saying, "Again, that was also bad representation. He did not do good

things for the school and oftentimes lashed out at people." Daniel understood the reason for the

negative interactions between the gay administrator and the community to be related to the

administrator's sexual orientation. "It became a thing of he's insecure with being gay," Daniel

said. "And so, therefore, he's lashing out at people. And whether or not that was true, that is the

story that everyone went with."

Daniel: Individual Theme

From the interviews with Daniel, one subordinate theme was identified (see Table 9).

Table 9

Individual Themes Emerging from the Interviews with Daniel

Theme Number	Theme	Research Question Addressed
Theme 6	Internalized homophobia and negative self-perception can impact the extent to which a person feels like they belong at school despite mitigating factors like a supportive family and teachers.	RQ 1

Individual Theme 6: Negative Self-Perception and Internalized Homophobia Impact

Sense of Belonging. For Daniel, internalized homophobia and self-perception impacted the

extent to which he felt like he belonged at the international school despite mitigating factors like a supportive family and teachers. Recalling earlier experiences, Daniel said, "When I lived in the States, I was, it was sort of that typical everyone's homophobic kind of thing." He described hearing peers saying, "That's gay" as a reaction to anything that was disliked. "You're gay" was also used as the punchline of many jokes. His awareness of students with homophobic views extended to his time at the international school in Germany, although he understood the homophobia in international schools to be more covert. Existing in the kind of space where being gay is the punchline of a joke had an effect of both putting Daniel on the defensive and causing him to internalize the homophobia that surrounded him. Daniel carried that internalized homophobia with him from the United States to Germany.

During the interview, Daniel described himself as "a massive nerd," and as someone who was "not a huge party person." He was also academically driven and described himself as obsessed with grades. In high school, he also characterized himself as having "a little bit of a superiority complex." These self-perceptions, coupled with the difficulty of navigating social experiences in high school where he was not always included had a negative impact on his sense of belonging at school. According to Daniel:

> I think those, the key experiences that made me feel like an outsider, or made me feel like I didn't belong, were the ones where it seemed like everyone but me. Even though that wasn't the case, I knew plenty of other people who also were part of that sort of out-crowd. But, you know, it's something, it's hard to divorce your personal feelings from the reality, from, from the situation.

Daniel also understood himself to be fearful of how other people perceived him, and he related this fear to internalized homophobia:

Even as I was coming out, there was still a bit of that internalized homophobia that I was

feeling of, like, one of the reasons I didn't come out was because I knew how others

perceive that, and I'd rather be invisible to that perception and, or, in in the odd case

where, you know, I absolutely had to play along with it, so that I could not be the target

of it.

Daniel experienced a diminished sense of belonging despite several positive forces that

mitigated internalized homophobia in Daniel's life at that time. He described his family as "fairly

liberal," saying they "would be quite supportive if I did come out." He understood his family to

be "fairly positive to other sexual identities." He also had exposure to gay friends of his parents

while growing up. Daniel recognized that his experiences growing up in a family that was not

homophobic is not everyone's experience, saying:

I've been, I've always been, uh, somewhat exposed to that, that, I would argue that gay

people exist, right? Which is something a lot of people, which is something that some

people aren't exposed to, or that some people are just never taught, or you know, some

people are also taught to hate them, and I just I never had that. I sort of just, to me, it was

always just, oh, yeah, I, mean, David's, David's a good friend. Oh, and he, I mean he's

also gay. But like, I mean, David is David.

In addition to his family, Daniel also had positive interactions with a visible GSM leader at his

international school that he described as impactful on his sense of belonging at school. Still, even

with the combination of mitigating forces against homophobia, the pervasive homophobia in

schools influenced how Daniel thought of other GSM people in his community, and how he

understood GSM persons' sense of belonging at school. Asked about his reaction to learning that

there were GSM leaders at the international school he attended in Germany, Daniel described

how that experience was filtered through his personal experience. For Daniel, in the context of school, gender and/or sexual minority status could be weaponized:

> But there was always that subtle undertone of, you know, if, if you're not straight, you don't quite belong. And, so I think that those two experiences sort of, of those two schools, coupled together even with my very liberal household, and my fairly liberal upbringing where it was normalized to me, it sort of became, like, the, the one side of my family who are very liberal, and it's like, okay, well, friends, if they're gay, it doesn't matter, because you know they're friends. We know them. They're gay. But then the school side of it is oh, but also gay is bad. So, if I don't like someone, then them being gay is far more significant than if I did.

For Daniel, a combination of personal factors, including how he perceived himself, and the stigma attached by himself and others to identifying as a sexual orientation minority impacted how he felt he belonged at school. In the end, despite having an improved sense of belonging at school due to a variety of factors, Daniel still described himself as "a little bit like an outsider" who "never fully felt like I belonged in that school."

Collective Themes

Having examined the data from each interview on a case-by-case basis, Emery and Anderman (2020) suggested identifying themes across cases. In doing so, researchers using IPA should prioritize searching for areas of convergence and divergence amongst participants (Miller et al., 2018). The participants of this study have all interacted in some way with visible GSM leaders in the international schools they attended. Although each of them experienced sense of belonging in school and understood the impact of visible GSM leadership on their sense of belonging in different ways, three collective themes can be identified that encapsulate the

common experiences of the participants and build upon the individual themes identified in the previous section (see Table 10).

Table 10

Collective Themes Derived from the Experiences of Multiple Participants

Theme Number	Theme	Research Question Addressed
Theme 1	Queerness, even in international schools with visible gender and minority leaders, is not normalized.	RQ 2
Theme 2	Compulsory heteronormativity is reinforced by the local culture and the diverse cultures of the people interacting within the international school and impacting sense of belonging for students within this context.	RQ 1
Theme 3	The extent to which interactions with GSM leaders in international schools have a positive impact on sense of belonging for GSM former students in international schools is related to the closeness of the leader–student relationship formed.	RQ 2

First, queerness, even in schools with visible gender and minority leaders, is not normalized. Second, compulsory heteronormativity is reinforced by the local culture and the diverse cultures of the people interacting within the international school and impacting sense of belonging for students within this context. Third, the extent to which interactions with GSM leaders in international schools have a positive impact on sense of belonging for GSM former students in international schools is related to the closeness of the leader–student relationship formed.

Collective Theme 1: Queerness Not Normalized

　　All participants in this study shared the experience of having identified visible GSM leadership at the international schools they attended. Even with queer leadership as a normalizing force, queer identities remained non-normative. This theme is derived from data collected from each participant and built on three of the subordinate themes presented in earlier parts of this chapter (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Derivation of Collective Theme 1

Collective Theme 1: Queerness, even in international schools with visible gender and sexual minority leaders, is not normalized.

Theme 3 (Lia): Queer students sometimes accrue different types of power, giving them status within the school community, allowing them to shape the social spaces that they occupy.

Theme 5a (Theresa): For GSM students at international schools, the extent to which they belong is shaped by the extent to which they have control over their personal narrative.

Theme 6 (Daniel):Internalized homophobia and negative self-perception can impact the extent to which a person feels like they belong at school despite mitigating factors like a supportive family and teachers.

One way that queerness is not normalized is through queer exclusion. Emerald observed that queer voices are not included in the international school she attended in Türkiye. She understood the school to be poorly administered "to the point where people who are seen as GSM are not necessarily included." Emerald further noted that the visible GSM leader she identified had begun making shifts away from the culture of queer exclusion, but those changes had started largely after Emerald had left the school or when Emerald was too old to appreciate the change. Claire discussed a similar idea to Emerald, that queer voices were not represented at the school. When asked what perpetuates heteronormativity in schools, Claire responded by noting the lack of queer representation at the international school she attended in Thailand as evidenced by few visible queer staff or peers, and a lack of queer representation in books or in the curriculum. She also observed a surface level acknowledgement that queer people existed at the school but experienced no follow-through on including queer voices in conversations within the school, or, as Claire said, "Not really talking about anything significant."

While Claire and Emerald experienced queer exclusion, Daniel experienced marginalization through homophobia. Daniel noted that the international school he attended was not as homophobic as other schools he had heard of, and that he did not know of any violent incidents directed toward GSM people at his school. And yet, even in his experience, "There was always that subtle undertone of, you know, if, if you're not straight, you don't quite belong." Daniel further commented that his international school was a safe enough space for him to come out of the closet, but not a totally safe space due to the presence of individuals and groups who would make homophobic statements or who were known to have homophobic feelings. That the people who attended school felt it acceptable to express homophobic views in certain situations illustrated the extent to which queerness was not normalized within the school. The extent to

which queerness was not normalized in his school solidified Daniel's own internalized sense of homophobia. Daniel's experiences of internalized homophobia described in the presentation of Theme 6 can be viewed as signals that queerness was not normalized in the international school he attended.

The non-normalization of queer identities manifested in in additional ways for Claire and Deepika. Claire perceived a situation in which queer school personnel felt that they needed to hide their personal lives from students. When asked if teachers talked about their queer identities, she confirmed that they did not. Deepika described hearing about a queer teacher's partner only in the last two years of her academic program despite having been in the teacher's classroom prior to her final two years in high school. The idea that queerness should not be discussed with certain students demonstrates a tacit understanding that queerness is transgressive in nature and must be hidden from younger, more innocent students.

Rather than communicating openly about being queer, for students and faculty, a person's queer identity was often the subject of a hidden social response. For Emerald, the extent to which queerness was not normalized was evident in the hidden social response to her coming out as trans. Emerald understood there to be negative reactions to her trans identity happening behind her back. When asked how she found out about the hidden response, she said, "Um, mostly because my friends told me or they were venting about it to me. Um! And also, just because I would just notice eventually, because people got a little more bold with it."

Claire described the hidden social response of students regarding queerness as one of the reasons why she did not explore her queer identity further. She noticed that for students she observed, coming out as queer inspired gossip amongst other students. Describing her fear of the hidden social response, Claire said, "I think I subconsciously knew I would definitely be

ostracized if I, like, expressed a queer identity." Claire also discussed a visible queer student leader at her school and the negative covert social response to her. Similarly, Lia noted a hidden social response at the school they attended, however, instead the rumors and gossip were situated in the parent community of the school. Lia described a situation in which parents of their peers would talk about them behind their back and then Lia's friends would inform them about the gossip. For Emerald, Claire, and Lia, being queer was fodder for gossip in the community. As described in subordinate Theme 3, Lia had accrued power through their strong work as a student and their leadership, providing them social status in the community. Yet, their queerness was still viewed as a liability, signaling the extent to which queerness remained not normalized at their international school.

Deepika described covert social communication as a way that people within the community discovered information about the non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities of people within the community, including GSM leaders. Discussing how leaders' sexual orientation became the topic of a hidden social response, Theresa used the term "speculate" in a similar way to which Deepika described the "rumors" in her community. Asked if the talk about sexuality was rumor, Theresa confirmed, saying, "Yeah, yeah! It was all rumors." Theresa noted that queer people were not forthright about their sexual orientation in the community. This hiding of queer identities further contributes to how queer identities are not normalized within the international school. Emerald described her surprised reaction to identifying a visible GSM leader in her school. That a queer student should be surprised by the presence of a queer teacher in the school further indicates that queerness itself was not centered and celebrated in schools.

Queerness was the subject of rumors and hidden communications for many of the participants. One exception to the hidden social response to queerness can be found in Daniel's story. On coming out to certain peers at his school he recalled thinking that rumors about his sexual orientation would spread throughout the school; he noted during the interview, however, that the students he came out to did not share his disclosure. Even though Daniel's sexual orientation was not perceived to be the subject of rumors, Daniel still identified hidden messaging about the sexual orientation of several leaders in the school who did not directly come out to the community but were assumed to be gay.

The exclusion of queer people from the school and the hidden social responses about queerness in the international school demonstrate the extent to which queerness is not normalized inside the international school. Without queer normalization in the international school, several participants recalled looking to social media for greater queer representation. Lia noted the queer "visibility and representation" when recalling discussing queer media with their friends. Emerald discovered that there was a leader in the international school she attended who identified as non-binary by looking at the person's Instagram account. Claire, who recognized that social media can be problematic in some ways, described ways in which it can help GSM students by providing a venue where they can be "more comfortable exploring their sexuality." She further noted the diversity of types of relationships that can be viewed on social media. Lia described the importance of social media for their queer identity in comparison to their experiences at the international school. Discussing their interactions with their friend group, they said, "We'd talk, if a TV show came out, or a movie came out that had, like, good representation that was important." In comparison for Lia, however, school was considered less relevant in their queer identity formation. When asked about where she found information on queer subjects,

Deepika responded enthusiastically, "The Internet!" Daniel shared an experience of searching for information about gender and sexuality on the internet as a prelude to coming out to his peers as bisexual on a school trip. While comfortable spaces to explore more expansive sexual orientations and gender identifications were available through social media and the online world, similar spaces were less accessible in the international school.

The desire for queer representation and normalization within the international school also demonstrates the extent to which queerness was not normalized in the international school while participants were students. Bringing queer representation into school via its personnel or curriculum remains a challenge for school personnel. Claire recognized that the burden of normalizing queerness should not be placed solely on the shoulders of queer people in international schools. She shared her observation of how her queer teachers often did not share personal information. Even so, there was a desire amongst participants for authenticity within the school space. For Claire, visibility could have contributed to a more expansive understanding of what it means to be queer. When talking about what would be helpful for teachers to do to provide better queer representation, Claire discussed the nuance of the issue. On one hand, she observed, no single person is responsible for taking on the task of queer visibility for a school. On the other hand, simple acts like sharing family configurations other than typical, heteronormative ones, according to Claire, "Would be nice."

Claire further noted that seeing queer representation in her teachers would help students "see that being queer looks a lot of different ways." Discussing how she would react to hypothetically seeing visible queer representation within school, such representation would have an impact on her sense of belonging at school, she said that she thinks that kind of visibility would help her sense of belonging by showing that there are different versions of normal.

That queerness is not normalized is evident in that many of the queer leaders identified by participants were only assumed to identify as a gender and/or sexual minority. Their GSM identities were not directly mentioned by the leaders themselves. Theresa noted that of the queer leaders at the school, "None of them were like out and proud." Rather than experience gossip about the nature of her own queer sexual orientation, Theresa attempted to gain control of her own narrative by very publicly outing herself. Theme 5a is related to this collective theme because if queerness were normalized, queer students would not need to think about the process of coming out as it relates to remaining in control of their own narratives. For example, Daniel observed that students often assumed that leaders at the school were queer because of stereotypical traits like being "campy" or "bouncy" rather than by hearing directly from the queer leaders themselves. Daniel discussed one of the leaders he assumed to be queer, saying, "I don't know if he formally came out to the school." Similarly, Deepika discussed several leaders in her school who were assumed to identify as GSM because of rumor, or, in the case of one teacher, artifacts that she included in her classroom like pride flags.

Lastly, the lack of normalization for queerness is evident in the desire for queer representation earlier as described by participants. Lia recognized that although visible GSM leadership in their school came too late to have an impact on them, this may be because they identified as queer from a very young age. For students who are just coming into a realization of their queerness as they enter high school, they posited that visibly queer leadership could potentially be more impactful on a GSM student's sense of belonging. Deepika expressed a desire for queer visibility in leadership earlier. Similarly, Emerald noted that the visible GSM leadership at her school would have been more impactful had it happened earlier in her school career.

Collective Theme 2: Compulsory Heteronormativity

The international schools attended by participants in this study are in different parts of the world, yet all participants described experiencing heteronormativity as a regulating force within the schools. This second collective theme is derived from the experiences described by all participants and built upon three subordinate themes (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Derivation of Collective Theme 2

Collective Theme 2: Compulsory heteronormativity is reinforced by the local culture and the diverse cultures of the people interacting within the international school and impacting sense of belonging for students within this context.

Individual Theme 1a (Emerald): Homophobic and transphobic views that negatively impact GSM students' sense of belonging are sometimes permitted into the international school establishment because of local cultural contextual factors.

Individual Theme 2a (Claire): The patriarchal and heteronormative ordering of high schools diminishes sense of belonging by inhibiting students who may perceive of themselves as being a gender or sexual minority from exploring a more expansive gender understanding or non-heterosexual orientation.

Individual Theme 4a (Deepika): Sense of racial belonging can be as important for GSM international students as other components of sense of belonging, such as academic fit, acceptance, and a close friend group.

The regulating force of heteronormativity was experienced through interactions with people from the local community where the international schools or participants were located. For Lia, experiencing a lack of queer couples on the streets of the city where they lived in China reinforced and privileged heterosexuality in their immediate geographic proximity through the conservative nature of the culture of the city where they attended school. Lia also noticed the lack of queer spaces, saying, "I think there just wasn't any, like, representation in terms of like whether it was, like, gay cafes or bars or spaces." Further, the local culture regulated the extent to which Lia felt comfortable with queer public displays of affection.

Emerald understood there to be a sharp cultural divide between Turkish teachers and teachers from other places. This divide manifested in Turkish teachers allowing student to use homophobic slurs in their classrooms. Emerald's experience with homophobic teachers from the local culture surrounding the international school is included as evidence for Theme 1a. For example, Emerald also recalled, as previously mentioned, witnessing a Turkish teacher responding negatively to rumors that a student was gay. Emerald further understood her own identity as a trans woman to be judged by people in her community, "especially on the Turkish side of the school." The worry that Emerald experienced about her own gender identity also extended to being afraid for the job security of the GSM leader she identified at her school. Emerald described a situation in which the conservative local culture created a cultural divide within the school. According to Emerald, there was an overall culture of the international school, and a conservative sub-culture of the school that she associated with Turkish faculty. As an example of this culture, she discussed the administration's decision to allow her to use a faculty, gender-neutral restroom rather than allowing her to use the women's restroom. "I mean of course

we had a bunch of Turkish teachers that weren't familiar with the concept," she said, "And could quite possibly not be very happy that someone being trans using the women's bathroom."

Systems of compulsory heteronormativity are not only regulated by the local culture, but also cultures of the families within the international school. Deepika offered a broad generalization of how certain groups in the school were more accepting of gender and sexual minority identities, saying, "The Western expat kids were more comfortable with it than the Chinese kids." Claire experienced ways in which the culture within the school served as a regulating force because she was aware of some of the objections raised by parents to school programming meant to educate students about GSM issues or improve queer representation at the school. Claire attributed these objections to certain conservative groups within the school and predominantly from one nation.

In addition to the conservative forces exerted by certain racial, national, or ethnic groups within the school or in the local culture as experienced by Lia, Theresa, Claire and Emerald, heteronormative regulation associated with religious beliefs of community members also contributed to a compulsory heteronormativity at the school. For Lia, the Christian, Catholic, and Muslim religious beliefs impacted how the parents of their friends viewed Lia's sexual orientation. Further, Lia described a situation in which parents wanted their children to act with caution around Lia so that they wouldn't also "turn out gay." Lia also described the socially conservative views of their Chinese American friends who were Christian as influencing the prejudice they faced because of their minoritized sexual orientation and gender identity. Emerald's account of her interaction with teachers from Türkiye was perhaps the most startling in terms of the language she used, describing herself as "scared" of the Turkish teachers because of their conservative beliefs and their perceived unfriendliness toward GSMs. In these cases, the

religious beliefs of people within the school acted as a hegemonic device that impacted the experiences of the participants as GSM students at international schools, reinforcing a compulsory heterosexuality.

Heteronormative regulatory forces within the school were not exclusively originating from religious beliefs, but also involved misogynist and patriarchal cultural constructs. Lia related the experience of interacting with a group of Korean boys and the negative impact it had on their sense of belonging at school, describing the group as having a hyper-masculine culture. Claire also understood the culture of the administration of the international school she attended in Thailand to be sexist in nature and impactful on the rest of the culture of the school. The patriarchal and heteronormative ordering of her international school created a diminished sense of belonging for Claire as discussed in Theme 2a. Theresa also related a story about her neighbor who also attended the international school in Germany and her "horrible, misogynistic experience" at the school. A culture of misogyny is related to the student experience for Lia, Claire, and Theresa. For Daniel, the experience was less misogynistic and more homophobic. Daniel recalled a group of jocks at his school who only thinly veiled their homophobic attitudes. Group culture within the school, whether the groups were connected through the activities in which they participated or the ethnic origins they shared, regulated what was understood to be normative regarding sexual orientation and gender identity within the school.

In the cases of Deepika, Theresa, and Emerald, the forces of compulsory heteronormativity emanated from their parents and impacted their experiences at the international school. Deepika described her mother as a "modern woman," who was "accepting of me standing out from what she's known." For Deepika's mother, however, being gay was a "Western idea," and not something that she could accept in her daughter. The experiences

navigating coming out at home are some of the reasons why Deepika connected with a GSM leader at her international school.

While Theresa's experience of the local culture at her international school in Germany was noticeably different from others insofar as she felt empowered and enabled by the local culture to express herself in an authentic way, she also experienced pressure to remain closeted based on her perceptions of her father's Chinese culture. Theresa's experience delaying coming out to her Chinese father was attributed directly to the conservative nature of the culture. Asked why she thought her father may have a negative reaction to her coming out, she said, "I mean, one is he's Chinese, which is like, not, uh, doesn't, you know doesn't necessarily say everything, but I think there is more, kind of, conservatism towards that."

Emerald's account of her experience at school is directly connected to the conservative religious beliefs of her parents and their direct attempts to control Emerald's school experience. Emerald described her parents as, "helicopter-ish," and credited the Mormon religious environment in which she was brought up as one of the reasons why her parents were unhappy with Emerald's gender identity. The leaders of the international school in Türkiye found itself stuck in between Emerald, with her desire to authentically express her gender identity, and her parents, who were insistent in not acknowledging Emerald's trans identity at school or home.

The international school was a venue of compulsory heteronormativity for the participants in this study, and the internal culture of the school and the external culture of the local contexts of the schools were regulating forces for heteronormativity. Claire discussed how the practices and policies of the international school she attended were not adequate to resist the cultural forces that reinforced a compulsory heteronormativity. She remarked that the school was "not willing to have, like, a strong stance on, like, we are, like, an accepting community." Claire

characterized the school as acting out of a desire to appease families with conservative religious values and make sure that those families were not made to feel "uncomfortable." The discomfort to students with non-normative identities, however, was not too great a liability. According to Claire, the school administration was not willing to risk having disgruntled conservative parents remove their children from the school. She wished, instead, that administrators would be willing to take a firmer stance and say, "Okay! Take your kid out of our school. Like, your beliefs clearly don't align with ours."

Collective Theme 3: GSM Leaders in International Schools

The extent to which interactions with GSM leaders in international schools have a positive impact on sense of belonging for GSM former students in international schools is related to the closeness of the leader–student relationship formed. This collective theme is derived from the experiences described by all participants as well as subordinate Themes 1a, 2b, and 5b (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Derivation of Collective Theme 3

Collective Theme 3: The extent to which interactions with GSM leaders in international schools have a positive impact on sense of belonging for GSM former students in international schools is related to the closeness of the leader-student relationship formed.

Theme 1a (Emerald): For students with minoritized gender identities, experiencing acknowledgement, respect and support are important for establishing belongingness in school. Sense of belonging at school is an overall positive feeling about attending school and being supported because of who you are instead of despite who you are.

Theme 2b (Claire): All school personnel have a responsibility to intentionally establish a welcome and accepting culture within the international school.

Theme 5b (Theresa): Finding a group of people to fit in with improves sense of belonging at school, even when the actions of that group are later understood to be problematic.

Some of the former international school students described surface-level reactions on learning that there was a GSM leader at the school. For example, Lia described the experience of learning about the presence of a GSM leader in the school as "neat." They connected their pleasant reaction to the competence of the teacher and the esteem that the teacher had garnered in the community. Recognizing that "the overall feedback for her was overwhelmingly positive,"

Lia described the teacher/leader they identified as "a very good teacher as well," and, "a role model for, like, a lot of kids."

Claire's expectation that it is the responsibility of all teachers to create a welcoming and accepting culture in the school as captured in Theme 2b, stands in contrast with the interactions she observed at the international school she attended in Thailand. The secretive nature of the sexual orientation of the GSM leader identified by Claire was one factor that kept the interactions and experiences with this person from being impactful on her sense of belonging. When recalling whether she perceived the presence of a GSM leader in the school to be impactful on her sense of belonging in school, Claire did not understand the interactions to have increased her sense of belonging in terms of her queer identity. When asked why, Claire attributed the lack of impact to the failure to acknowledge queer identities and the secretiveness associated with being queer at school.

GSM former students at international schools recognized that the GSM leaders they identified had both positive and negative impacts on the school. For Theresa, the negative community reaction to one of the GSM leaders she identified stemmed from the negative perception of personal affairs associated with the GSM leader's coming out in the school community. Theresa recalled, "There was a huge drama where he left his wife to be with a man." Describing the impact on the community, and its implication for sexual orientation minorities in general, Theresa recalled that the narrative surrounding the drama "wasn't great."

Theresa also had a similar negative reaction to a teacher who was assumed to be a sexual orientation minority and was the leader of the school's GSA. The teacher, in taking on an activist feminist agenda at the school, became a social liability for Theresa. Even though Theresa felt politically allied to the teacher, the social liability represented in the feminist

activism was too great a social liability for Theresa to wholeheartedly support. Theresa remembered her own actions at the time with some remorse, saying, "It's kind of embarrassing to say. I think it made me like distance myself from some of those things." She also noted that the students who had allied themselves to the teacher/leader in question experienced ostracization within the school.

Meanwhile, Theresa had allied herself with a group of boys whose behavior was "quite problematic to other girls," and derived a sense of belonging from that association as discussed in individual Theme 5b. The idea that fitting into a group increases sense of belonging, in the case of this collective theme, illustrates that close relationships are both important for belonging and that GSM leaders who do not have close relationships with students are likely not to have a strong impact on sense of belonging.

Daniel, who attended the same school as Theresa, described the impact of one GSM leader he identified as negative representation for GSMs because of the leader's poor relationships with parents and students. Daniel doubted whether that GSM leader helped any student, straight or queer, feel comfortable at school. In contrast, Daniel interacted with another leader whom he felt was perceived differently in the community. He described his English teacher, who was also the leader of several clubs, as "a pretty solid influence of the school," and someone who had the respect of students in the school. Daniel understood the respect that the teacher garnered to create positive representation for GSMs. He noted about the teacher's sexual orientation, "It wasn't ever anything that anyone mocked, or questioned, or felt like it was, or rather, I never felt like it was in a negative light by people around me."

For students who had closer contact with the leader they identified, they described a more obvious positive change in their sense of belonging because of the interactions with the GSM

leader. Deepika described a closer relationship with the teacher/leader she identified, including being able to go to the teacher in a moment of crisis after she had come out to her parents. Deepika attributed her level of comfort in approaching the teacher to the teacher's queer sexual orientation. In this case, Deepika discussed the experience of hearing about the teacher's sexual orientation directly from the teacher rather than through rumor and innuendo. Deepika's interactions occurred simultaneously as her own realizations about her sexual orientation. When asked if the interactions made her feel more comfortable with being bisexual, she said, "Of course!" Later, when asked whether the interactions had an impact on her sense of belonging, she echoed her previous answer, saying "Of course, of course! Definitely developed it. Definitely changed it."

Emerald recalled interacting with her EE supervisor who was also the leader of the school's GSA. When asked how closely she felt connected to the leader she was describing, Emerald said, "Pretty much the most out of any teacher I had." When asked why, Emerald attributed the close connection to the teacher being Emerald's EE supervisor and "her just being a person I could relate to." While Emerald expressed some fearfulness about whether the school would accept a leader who identified as GSM, she was also reassured by the presence of a GSM leader because of the implication that someone with a minoritized identity could be open in the school about their identity. Emerald clearly stated that the impact on her sense of belonging would have been greater had the interactions with the GSM leader happened earlier in her school experience. Even so, Emerald described interactions with her teacher that she described as "very supportive, "and "intent in affirming me." The teacher showed support and affirmation by using Emerald's name rather than her deadname in all emails exchanged, and, where possible, around other students.

Daniel interacted closely with the GSM leader he identified who was his English teacher and the leader of the TedX club in which Daniel participated. This GSM leader openly discussed being gay with students. In a similar way as Deepika, Daniel described interacting with this visible GSM leader at a time when he was becoming more comfortable with his own sexual orientation and losing some of his internalized homophobia. Daniel discussed an early experience with this leader that he had even before high school, when Daniel was a new student at the school. Daniel recalled being on a field trip and lagging behind the group of students. Daniel remembered the actions of his teacher, who walked with Daniel and kept him company during the field trip. When the GSM leader became Daniel's teacher during the next year, Daniel recalled him being strict but supportive in class. Daniel characterized his interactions with the teacher as typical "in-class interactions," discussing assignments with the teacher, and interacting in clubs. Daniel also recalled feeling able to seek out advice from the teacher because of the teacher's demeanor and non-judgmental nature. He remembered the teacher to be "a fairly anchoring presence." The impact of the teacher on Daniel's self-perception was noted as time passed, saying, "More long term down the line, I think he, his, his openness with his sexuality helped me accept my own, and by accepting my own I felt a lot more comfortable in my own body."

Because of the interactions and his work with the extra-curricular club, Daniel's teacher helped him "find a place within the school." Daniel initially questioned whether his interactions with his teacher helped increase his sense of belonging at school, but then, as he talked further, he conceded that the relationship was impactful on his sense of belonging because it helped to solidify a feeling of who he was. In doing so, Daniel recalled not being so worried about finding places to fit in because he knew he had places where he did fit in. Through these realizations,

Daniel recalled that his interactions with others became easier and he became more at peace with himself.

Daniel described a situation in which interacting with teachers like the GSM teacher/leader he identified helped decrease the internalized homophobia he experienced. Even if the change was outside of Daniel's conscious awareness at the time, as he reflected after the experience, he understood the experience to be meaningful because it helped him become more accepting of his own sexual identity. The close relationship with a GSM leader proved to be impactful not only during his school experience, but even after both the teacher and Daniel had moved on from the international school in Germany.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study was to explore how former students at schools who self-identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority experienced a sense of belonging at school and understand any changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. Six participants who attended international schools in China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Germany, and Türkiye participated in two semi-structured interviews each.

During the interviews, the students were asked about how they experienced sense of belonging at school and how they perceived and understood any changes in their sense of belonging after interacting with GSM leader(s) at the international school they attended. They were asked to describe what sense of belonging means to them and to what extent they felt like they belonged in the school they attended. They were asked to describe their interactions with GSM leaders at the school and to describe whether they understood those interactions to be impactful on their sense of belonging. The data from the interviews were analyzed and then

organized into themes. The subordinate themes presented were idiographic in nature and emerged from the individual experiences of the participants. Those themes were followed by several collective themes that reflected the shared experience of the participants but also allowed for divergence and convergence within those experiences.

The data presented in this chapter demonstrate the diverse experiences of former students at international schools who interacted with GSM leaders at the international school they attended. The subordinate themes dealt with how each of the students experienced sense of belonging at the international school they attended (RQ1). The three collective themes, which dealt with both sense of belonging and GSM leadership in international schools, are:

1. Queerness, even in schools with visible gender and minority leaders, is not normalized.

2. Compulsory heteronormativity is reinforced by the local culture and the diverse cultures of the people interacting within the international school and impacting sense of belonging for students within this context.

3. The extent to which interactions with GSM leaders in international schools have a positive impact on sense of belonging for GSM former students in international schools is related to the closeness of the leader–student relationship formed.

For students whose marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities are understood to be related to a diminished sense of belonging in school (Kosciw et al., 2020), these data provide insight into their experiences in the international school setting.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore how former students at international schools who self-identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority (GSM) experienced a sense of belonging at school and understood any changes in their sense of belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand and make sense of the experiences of GSM former student at international schools, the aim of this study was to understand how queer bodies interacted in a decidedly unqueer space. In doing so, the problems being addressed were the lack of sense of belonging experienced by GSM students in schools (Kosciw et al., 2020), and secondly, the lack of research documenting the experiences of GSM students in schools in response to GSM school leadership specifically within the context of international schools (Anderson, 2014; Brown, 2016; Fenaughty et al., 2019; O'Malley et al., 2018).

Two research questions framed this inquiry:

- RQ1: How do GSM former students at international schools experience sense of belonging in school?

- RQ2: How do GSM former students at international schools perceive and make sense of any changes in their sense of belonging after interacting with GSM leaders in international schools?

To answer these questions, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six participants who had close experience with the phenomenon in question through having attended international schools.

After analyzing the data and presenting the resulting themes, three findings can be suggested in response to the research questions that framed this study. First, for GSM former students at international schools, the experience of sense of belonging was connected to identity-based factors. In addition to this finding, there is a sub-finding that GSM former students at international schools sought out exposure to queer identities in school and out of school. Second, for GSM former students at international schools, the experience of sense of belonging was connected to contextual factors. Finally, the third finding of this study is that GSM leadership can be a support structure that improves sense of belonging for GSM students at international schools.

Table 11

Findings

Finding Number	Finding	Research Question Addressed
Finding 1	For GSM former students at international schools, the experience of sense of belonging was connected to identity-based factors.	RQ 1
Sub-Finding 1a	GSM Former students at international schools sought out exposure to queer identities in school and out of school.	RQ1
Finding 2	For GSM former students at international schools, the experience of sense of belonging was connected to contextual factors.	RQ 1
Finding 3	GSM leadership can be understood to be a support structure for queer students, but only in certain conditions where identities are authentically enacted, and relationships are closely constructed.	RQ2

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

The individual themes presented in the previous chapter attend to the idiographic experiences of sense of belonging at school for each participant. Those individual themes were then used to build collective themes that were supported with evidence from multiple participants. The findings of the current study are related to and were derived from those collective themes (see Appendix H) through a double-hermeneutic cycle of the researcher making sense of the participants' making sense of their own experiences of a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). Thus, the researcher is engaged in a dynamic interpretive process in which commonalities across experiences are traced through the data and then connected with the larger corpus of literature to expand on what is known about a phenomenon (Emery & Anderman, 2020). As part of the data collection process for the current study, each participant was asked questions that were informed by the research questions about the topics of sense of belonging in the international school and GSM leadership. The data collected through semi-structured interviews are now placed in relationships to extant literature and interpreted through the lens of queer theory to further discuss the three findings of the current study.

Research Question 1: Sense of Belonging

The current study was framed by research questions that allowed the GSM former students in international schools to reflect on and make meaning of their experiences with sense of belonging in international schools. The first research question dealt explicitly with how sense of belonging was experienced in the context of the international school. Two findings and one sub-finding address this research question.

Finding 1: Sense of Belonging in International Schools Is Connected to Identity-Related
Factors

The identities of international school students are complex. Like the student participants in McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018), the participants in this study also represented multiple, intersecting ethnic, cultural, religious, and social class identities. The former students at international schools who participated in this study were not simply gender and/or sexual orientation minorities. They were also racial minorities in some cases. Several of them experienced difficulties associated with being multi-lingual learners. They all defined themselves to some extent as alumni of elite institutions and spent time living in places outside of those they identified as their home cultures. In other words, their identities were complex and intersecting. To say that there is a relationship between any of the identities they claimed and their sense of belonging at school is to say that there was a relationship between all their intersecting identities and their sense of belonging at school. The extent to which a bisexual Indian student experiences sense of belonging at school, for example, was dependent both on her Indian identity and queer identity both separately and in combination. In the experiences of the participants in the current study, the multiple, intersecting identities are impossible to disentangle. For the researcher who would study such complicated identities, the project of analysis cannot be from a unilateral perspective; or, as Boas (2013) recognized, "Racial projects are simultaneously sexual projects... they are also educational projects" (p. 22).

For some participants of the study, their understanding of their own gender and the fluidity of gender as described by queer theory, was only partially emerging. Like the students in McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018), they explored, contested, and performed various gender identities in school. The extent to which some participants experienced a stable gender identity

and/or sexual orientation varied from participant to participant. What was evident was a clear demarcation between normative, cisgender, heterosexual identities within the space of the international school and queer ones that transgressed lines of what was acceptable at school. A study by Fenaughty et al. (2019) pointed out how the outcomes of improved sense of belonging were experienced differently by different groups of students, with heterosexual cisgender students and sexual orientation minority students experiencing greater academic achievement due to improved sense of belonging than gender minority students. While it was outside the scope of the current research to determine which identities were more impacted by diminished sense of belonging due to their gender identity or sexual orientation, the experiences related by the participants illustrate how identity can be connected to sense of belonging for everyone.

Riley's (2019) definition of sense of belonging at school included aspects related to identity, such as being treated with respect and kindness. For Emerald in particular, the experience of having her gender identity acknowledged figured into her definition of sense of belonging and connected to the negative experiences of her parents trying to persuade the school to only acknowledge the gender associated with her sex assigned at birth. A similar connection to respect can be found in Daniel's experience hearing the word gay as part of the punchline of jokes or an insult to someone's identity. For Daniel, the lack of respect he encountered signaled a place where he could not belong, or where his sense of belonging was diminished. The lack of belonging connected directly to his identity. "Belonging," Riley (2019) said, "is that sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity" (p. 2). While Riley's work dealt with the experiences of students who had been excluded from school in some way and therefore experienced a loss of social capital within the social network of the school, the queer identities of the participants in the current study also represented a social

liability within the social network of school. The perceived threat to status and belonging that accompanied identifying as, or associating with anything queer was a prevalent theme in the experiences of many of the participants in the current study. Not only was queerness in schools not normalized, as discussed in collective Theme 1, for many, queerness was a liability.

Extant research suggested that at-school victimization is negatively correlated to sense of belonging at school (Heck et al., 2014). For several of the participants in this study, those who reported hearing homophobic language directed at themselves or at other GSM students, it is, therefore, understandable that they would feel a diminished sense of belonging at school given the connection between marginalized identity and negative language. While several of the participants recognized that bullying looks different in international schools than what they imagined it to look like in other school settings, the experience of being a GSM student in international schools remained something that each student had to navigate for themselves while enrolled.

Price et al. (2019) distinguished every-day discrimination, that can take the form of both explicit maltreatment and implicit microaggressions, and identity-based bullying, which is more harmful because it targets identities. While the experiences of the former students at international schools in the current study varied widely, instances of both discrimination and identity-based bullying were discussed by participants. In one case, one of the students felt agency to use their power to create spaces of belonging for other students. On the other hand, one student described how she withdrew emotionally over the course of her school experience to preserve her ability to cope with the difficulties in her life. The breadth of experiences suggest that feelings of stigmatization depended both on the identity of the person in question and the extent to which that identity was stigmatized in the community of the international school. The research of Price

et al. (2019) suggested a similar situation in their study of teacher–student relationships. Students with identities that were amongst the most marginalized did not benefit from teacher–student relationships as much as students who experienced less discrimination because the discrimination faced by the marginalized students was too great.

The findings of Fenaughty et al. (2019) that the chances of improved school achievement brought about by supportive school structures are greater for sexual minority students than gender minority students are borne out by experiences of the former international school students in this current study. Of all the participants, only Emerald reported academic difficulties during the final two years of high school. Emerald was also the only student who openly identified as a gender minority during high school. Except for Emerald, the participants in the current study did not report feeling unsafe at school, a contrast with the findings that were reported by Poteat et al. (2017), who related victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression (SOGE) with higher rates of truancy through feeling unsafe at school. Poteat et al. noted, however, that student's perception of negative SOGE-related school climate exacerbated negative outcomes for participants. The awareness of the participants of negative elements of school climate in relation to their own identities proved to be a significant part of the experience of attending international schools for all participants in the study and, as was evidenced in their narratives, impacted the participants' sense of belonging at school.

Sub-Finding 1a: Seeking Queerness Inside and Outside of School. Former students at international schools sought out exposure to queer identities in school and out of school. Recognizing their negative perceptions of school climate for GSM students in international schools, participants described their efforts to look for authentic representation of queer identities, especially in social media, but also in the school's curriculum and personnel. The

desires of former international school students to see themselves in others is corroborated by Kosciw et al. (2018) who noted the positive effects of an inclusive curriculum on the engagement of LGBTQ students in school.

The research of Steck and Perry (2018) described an inclusive curriculum as one where the lived experiences of LGBT people are voiced. The hiding of marginalized identities through the regulatory force of compulsory heterosexuality and the extent to which queerness was not normalized in the international schools, as discussed in collective Theme 1 of the previous chapter, suggest that identity acknowledgement is both important for sense of belonging and an area of deficit for the participants in this study. For GSM students, experiencing an inclusive curriculum is important because it allows them to feel more comfortable discussing GSM issues with their teachers (Kosciw et al., 2018). Speaking more broadly, the experiences reported by the participants of this study of making meaningful moments of connection with other queer folk, whether in a friend group, club, or with a GSM leader within the context of the international school were positively impactful on their sense of belonging at school. This impact highlights the need for the continued acknowledgement of diverse identities within the school, as well as ongoing commitment to dismantling school structures that reinforce heteronormativity and cisgenderism.

Finding 2: Sense of Belonging in International Schools Is Connected to Context

While the various identities of the GSM former students in international schools affected sense of belonging, the experience of sense of belonging was also connected to contextual factors. The various ways in which GSM former international school students defined sense of belonging in school inevitably contained some reference to the other people who shared their context. Daniel defined belonging as not being excluded. Emerald, Theresa, and Claire included

being supported by others in their definitions of sense of belonging. Lia emphasized feeling comfortable within the community, and Deepika stressed the importance of being surrounded by like-minded people. All students emphasized some contextual elements in their understanding of belonging.

Accounts of tightly enforced gender binaries as described by Johnson and Lugg (2011) are present in the experiences of the former students at international schools who participated in the current study. While only Emerald identified as gender non-conforming during high school, several of the participants have since claimed and enacted non-normative gender identities. In this way, gender can be seen as evolving, fluid, and performative. The time spent within the international school context encapsulated only a part of the individual evolutions of gender for the participant. Simultaneously, the context of school can be seen as one that promotes binary, and therefore, limiting understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality. The extent to which the international school context acted as a regulating and hegemonic force was experienced differently by each participant. For some participants, they were able to overcome regulation of gender and sexuality and come into their own as out, queer students during high school. For others, the oppressive force was regulation enough to push any open acknowledgement of queer sex, gender, or sexuality further into adulthood. When considering the power structures within the school that regulate discourses surrounding normative sexualities and genders, analysis of the experiences of GSM former students in international schools suggests that only certain people within the school are invited to introduce themselves fully within the school community, while others feel compelled to keep aspects of their identities hidden. The regulation imposed by heteronormativity in the school allows some identities to be fully visible in the school's student

body, personnel, and curriculum, while those who come out are subjected to hidden social responses, and those who remain in the closet are further marginalized.

Courtney's (2014) research suggested that the project of queer theory is to question the normalizing discourse of heteronormativity and the ultimate loss of power for certain stigmatized groups. If the participants in this study were forced into a context premised on a structure of binaries, then it follows that certain identities were privileged over others. This privileging emerged in the experiences of participants whether through misogyny, as displayed by students and school leaders, or cisgenderism that left certain identities unacknowledged.

While schools are often envisioned as sex-neutral or, as McWilliams (2014) said, sexmute, the experiences of the participants of this study demonstrated that messages about sexuality, sex, and gender are neither mute nor neutral. Participants in the current study encountered barriers to more expansive understandings of gender and sexuality in the context of the international school such as the beliefs of the teachers, the gossip of the parents, and the homophobic language of peers. The concepts of gender and sexuality are given meaning within the school, as is suggested by McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018). Meaning is assigned by those who interact within the international school—the students, faculty, leaders, and parents. The meanings assigned within the international school are relative to the experiences, beliefs, and norms of the multiple and varied cultures of the people who interact in the shared space of the international school.

When viewed through the lens of queer theory, for the former students who participated in this study, high school was a time where their presence in the international school actively troubled the structures that presume stable, heterosexual identities. Three participants described their desire for earlier access to queer leaders as something that would have positively affected

their experiences of belonging at school. Lia and Deepika noted that seeing queer leaders at school earlier would have improved their own queer identity formation. The experiences of the participants illustrated what Johnson and Lugg (2011) referred to as an "expectation of heterosexuality" that intensifies during adolescence along with "the regulation of sexual identity" (p. 234). The data collected from participants in the current study shed clarifying light on the experiences of students who deviated from those expectations and regulations. The participants' various reports of wanting to see queer representation in media and looking for the examples of queer leaders earlier than high school suggested that students recognized the uncomfortable pressures to conform to heteronormativity within their international school contexts.

Some participants found connection with other queer student in clubs and activities. While joining a GSA can provide students a place to meet their LGBTQ peers and therefore develop a sense of being part of a larger community (Porta et al., 2017), the participants in this study also found belonging in joining other groups at the school. Whether participating in MUN, sports, or arts activities, the participants of the study found belonging within the context of the school. For some, the politically charged nature of the GSA or GSA leader served as a deterrent to involvement with queer activism or activities that, from the vantage point of certain participants, threatened their sense of belonging rather than enhanced it. That participants recognized the political liability of queer activism demonstrated that they were aware of the heteronormative climate of the school and the opinions of their peers about GSM issues. Some queer representation in the school community was understood to be positive, while some representation in the community was perceived as negative. In those cases, Daniel pointed out that where there was a social liability, queerness could be weaponized in a negative way against someone else.

In addition to being keenly aware of the political climate of the school, the various participants were also aware that the diversity of the members of the school only encompassed certain elements like ethnicity and language. The participants recognized international schools as elite spaces for privileged persons. While the racial and ethnic backgrounds of students at international schools may be varied, according to Claire, their experiences were more uniform and privileged. The uniformity of experience was noted in the lack of socioeconomic diversity and by the almost complete exclusion of certain nationalities. Parker (2021) noted that the perception of campus climate regarding diversity was positively related to sense of belonging for LGBTQ students. Schachner et al. (2019) also suggested that equity, inclusion, and cultural pluralism were found to be associated with increased sense of belonging at in school. While the current research did not attempt to correlate diversity and belonging, the lack of certain diverse identities calls into question the extent to which certain kinds of diversity are excluded from the international school space. Given the lack of certain kinds of diversity as noted by the participants in the current study, true acceptance and inclusion of GSM students as part of the diverse makeup of international school student bodies could be questioned by those who wonder if queer students represent the right kind of diversity. This question of acceptance of diversity within the international school is similar to the question posed by Tooms (2007) about whether only certain queer leaders who maintain heteronormative rules are "fit" for leadership in schools.

Participants in the current study provided both positive and negative responses when asked about their experiences as GSM students at international schools. These experiences were invariably connected to multiple, intersecting aspects of identity, as previously discussed. Yet, the overall impressions of the environment were important for the participants of the current study when considering sense of belonging. This echoes the findings of Aerts et al. (2012).

Unsurprisingly, in their study of Flemish schools, Aerts et al. (2012) concluded that LGB students who perceived their school as having a friendly environment had a higher sense of belonging at school.

The difficulty of establishing a positive overall culture and climate for GSM students is most evident in the experiences of Emerald, who experienced transphobia from her parents, peers, and teachers. While the school made efforts at accommodating Emerald, those efforts were understood as attempts to ease a cultural divide rather than provide genuine support in acknowledgement of a marginalized identity. In this sense, the school administrators failed to understand what Lee (2021) referred to as epistemological cultural pluralism. Taking a decolonized, queer view on queer rights as human rights, Lee (2021) suggested that anti-colonial and culturally relativistic views on human rights have been used as an argument against the wider adoption of GSM rights in nations that are understood to be illiberal. An alternative view, which recognizes an epistemological cultural pluralism rather than a political cultural pluralism, which is subject to the geographic limits of a nation, is that the values of all individuals in one society are not uniform in nature (Lee, 2021). Therefore, understanding the nation-state as a defender of a uniform set of values becomes indefensible in face of the variety of values evinced by the people contained within that nation-state's borders. One intersection of queer and decolonial praxis is the idea that gender and sexual identities, like the social norms of the people of a particular nation, are neither stable nor uniform. The administrators of the Emerald's international school in Türkiye could have, in recognizing the relevance of epistemological cultural relativism, created an environment that supported Emerald's stigmatized identity in face of an over-simplified view of the cultural norms of Türkiye that does not account for the diversity of the Turkish people.

While political cultural relativism undoubtably impacted the decision to appease the Turkish teachers at Emerald's school, the situation also points to an economic tension that fundamentally shapes the operations of international schools, namely the economic viability of the institution. Gardner-McTaggart (2018) discussed the tension between the context of the marketplace and equitable school policies. In the case of Emerald, the location of the school in a country that she perceived to be conservative, religious, and transphobic, made navigating the implementation of structures of support for a trans student difficult for the school administration. The experiences of Emerald raised important questions for leaders in international schools; when considering the most marginalized identities in international schools, do the needs of one person outweigh the self-interest of the institution to bow to perceived norms of local cultures, no matter how oversimplified, heteronormative, and hegemonic? Further, how should schools support marginalized students when heteronormative values are inscribed in law?

Research Question 2: GSM Leadership in International Schools

The second research question that framed the current research dealt with how GSM former students at international schools perceived and make sense of any changes in their sense of belonging after interacting with GSM leaders in international schools. This research question explored the possibility that visible GSM leaders in international schools could potentially serve as supporting structures in improving students' sense of belonging in international schools. According to Chan and Farmer (2017), studies employing IPA can include secondary research questions that explore theoretical possibilities. The third finding of the current study addresses this research question and explores the conditions under which GSM leadership can serve as a support for GSM students for international schools.

Finding 3: GSM Leadership as a Support Structure for GSM Students

GSM leadership can be a support structure that improves sense of belonging for GSM students at international schools. In the previous chapter, collective Theme 1 described the reality that for the participants of this research, queerness, even in international schools with visible gender and sexual minority leaders, is not normalized. To experience school is to experience a pervasive heteronormativity and cisgenderism. Nevertheless, as Lugg and Tooms (2010) suggested, GSM leadership challenges heteronormativity and the leaders themselves trouble the unqueer narratives about leadership in schools. The queer people in the school are queering the school itself. That queerness is not normalized relates to the compulsory heteronormativity described in the experiences of the participants in this research and summarized in the words of Daniel: "There was always that subtle undertone of, you know, if, if you're not straight, you don't quite belong."

The necessity to continually come out of the closet within the school context due to overarching presumptions of heterosexuality as described by Wells (2017) is clarified by the descriptions of GSM leaders by the participants in the current study. This necessity to re-identify as queer in a heteronormative context can also be seen as related to collective Themes 1 and 2, discussed in Chapter 4. Many of the participants in the current study described international schools as small communities prone to rumor and gossip about sexual orientations. When queerness is the subject of rumor and gossip, it becomes transgressively viewed in light of pervasive and compulsory heterosexuality. It is therefore understandable that students like Theresa may prefer to try to control the narrative by publicly coming out about their own sexual orientations and gender identities rather than submit to a hidden social response of peers and community members. While the leaders who were out about their own queerness and who

developed close relationships with students were ones that students reported as positively impacting their sense of belonging, the leaders who were understood to be hiding their identities were viewed more negatively by students.

Extant literature provides many reasons why GSM leaders in school may choose to hide their authentic gender or sexual identity. For instance, GSM leaders may be tacitly complying with the sexmute masternarrative created in schools as described by McWilliams (2014). By not coming out, leaders may assume that they are not divulging any information about sexual orientations or gender identities that may be viewed as either deviant or predatory. Nevertheless, the former students at international schools in this study recognized and understood leaders to be queer even if that identity was hidden from the public, an act that may have contributed to further marginalization of closeted individuals by removing their self-efficacy as leaders in the community. Even if those assumptions of queerness were erroneously made, for the participants in this current study, they were a reality, and therefore potentially important in shaping participants' own queer identities in school.

Another potential reason why queer leaders choose not to come out of the closet at school is the historically predatory perceptions of non-normative identities (Dumaresq, 2014; Lee, 2020a). Leaders may be fearful of the impact that being openly queer at school could potentially have on their career trajectories (Anderson, 2014; Bolt, 2018). Anderson (2014) noted that perceptions of security, safety, isolation, and administrative or community support are some of the reasons that a GSM leader may choose to come out of the closet or not. Pryor's (2020) study about queer leadership noted that certain leaders in the study reported conflicting feelings about their role as queer leaders due to the heavy burden placed upon them. Avoidance of tokenization and the burden of being perceived to represent the whole queer community may therefore be

reasons that the GSM leaders described in this study were not fully out of the closet with their students. Henderson (2019) also provided a reason why some educators do not come out of the closet in describing the burden placed on GSM teachers to be a role model for GSM students when the teachers themselves may need support in face of institutional heteronormativity. Given the internal climate and external cultural contexts of several of the international schools as described by participants in this research, the decision of several GSM leaders to remain closeted seems understandable.

Whether a GSM leader is intentionally open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, or they are understood through rumor to be queer, the heteronormative context of international schools described in this research affirms the observations of Anderson, that in order to be out of the closet, GSM leaders must come out repeatedly (Anderson, 2014). For those leaders who were understood to be out of the closet, the descriptions of experiences provided by the former students at international schools imply that those leaders intended to be positive role models for queer students. This supports the findings of Brown (2016) who identified the potential for mentorship as a positive result of being out of the closet at school. Anderson's (2014) participants also suggested being out of the closet was a favorable condition for role modeling and creating safe and inclusive spaces for queer students.

The findings of this study closely mirror the findings of Brown (2016) insofar as the GSM leaders whom students understood to be out and open about their sexual orientations were the ones who were understood to be positively impactful on the participants. Participants in this research described situations in which a combination of authenticity and close teacher–student relationships, as described in collective Theme 3, promoted an increased sense of belonging in the international school. This finding also supports the findings of Bolt (2018), that openness

about sexual identity allowed the leader to be more authentic and that the leader's identity was understood to be inseparable from the acts of the leader. Grabsch and Moore (2021) also suggested that sexual orientation and gender identity are inextricably linked to leadership. Some of the gap in the academic research about authentic leadership identity as described by Grabsch and Moore (2021) is filled by this research in the sense that certain participants who experienced authentically queer leadership in the heteronormative context of the international school found it to be positively impactful on their sense of belonging. Other former students who experienced interactions with leaders they only assumed to be queer described fewer positive changes to their sense of belonging or no changes at all. The main difference between those who did experience the positive change to their sense of belonging and those who did not were the nature of the leader–student relationship and the extent to which the leader was seen to be authentically performing a queer identity. In the cases of Emerald, Deepika, and Daniel, they described leaders who were open about their own queerness and found ways to connect with students. For Claire, Lia, and Theresa, they did not understand the presence of visible GSM leaders in their communities to cause changes in their sense of belonging at school.

The connection between authenticity and efficacy in creating a stronger sense of belonging for queer students is not surprising given the findings of Beck (2020), who described identity as enacted through the acts of school leaders who advocate on behalf of GSM students. For several of Beck's (2020) participants who identified as GSM, they noted that their own leadership in advocacy was a result of their own lack of sense of belonging at school. Grabsch and Moore's (2021) findings that queer leaders may be motivated to take up activism for queer issues because they identified with queer followers are also relevant to the experiences of the former international school students in this study. Conversely, Tooms (2007) suggested that

leaders who were not out of the closet would be less likely to engage in any sort of queer leadership. The former students and leaders in international schools shaped the experience of sense of belonging through their interactions. In this sense, GSM leadership can be understood to be a support structure for queer students, but only in certain conditions where identities are authentically enacted, and relationships are closely constructed.

While queer leadership, according to Pryor (2020), can be enacted by any leader regardless of orientation, the former students in international schools who participated in this study described certain limitations to queer leadership insofar as not all queer leadership is impactful on sense of belonging at school. One limitation described by the participants in the current study was the closeness of the interactions between the GSM leader and student. The experiences of the participants in this study also echoed the findings of Price et al. (2019) in that the students in this study described the positive impact of having close leader–student relationships that promoted both agency and self-efficacy. Allen et al. (2018) described sense of belonging as most positively related to strong teacher–student relationships. Strong relationships between leaders and students seemed to have a similar impact on the sense of belonging in school for the former students in international schools in this study. Indeed, the students who understood their sense of belonging to be positively impacted by interactions with GSM leaders identified teachers who were concurrently taking on leadership roles rather than strictly administrative roles.

Implications

The findings of the current research suggest that changes need to be made in both the ways that international schools are structured and how students with marginalized and stigmatized identities are supported. The results of the current study support the findings of many

of the other studies that have investigated sense of belonging for GSM students in schools. The context of this study, however, is different than other studies in that the venue for this research is the international school. International schools are places where people with complex, intersecting identities come together. As such, understanding the perspectives and experiences of the many members of the international school community poses a challenge for the international educational leader. Navigating issues of gender and sexuality is fraught with the preconceived notions and blatant prejudices of school stakeholders from diverse backgrounds.

Nevertheless, greater awareness of GSM identities through visibility in pop culture and mass media has centered certain queer issues in schools and, in response to the centering of these issues, has changed the overall climate of schools (Kuehn, 2020). While awareness of issues and difficulties for GSM students has received more attention lately, the experiences of the former students of international schools detailed in the current research suggest that schools remain heteronormative spaces. The implication of this research, as seen through the lens of queer theory, is that power structures within the international school should continue to be scrutinized and deconstructed. A multi-level approach that involves leaders, teachers, and students will be required to create educational spaces that promote belonging for GSM students.

Kuehn (2020) described schools as "bastions of (false) positivity" (p. 6), where stakeholders may be reluctant to admit that problems exist. This is especially the case when school-related problems are associated with marginalized identities with whom many stakeholders do not identify (Kuehn, 2020). Day-to-day activities of the school year occupy so much time that change initiatives aimed toward creating greater inclusivity and care for students lose momentum or buy-in. Teachers and leaders are simply too busy to make important changes. Similarly, Allen et al. (2020) described the busyness of schools as posing a challenge to teachers

and leaders being able to share information about students who are struggling. Being able to identify which students are struggling due to marginalized or stigmatized identities is a first step toward enacting change that improves the situation. To do this, school leaders need to prioritize this work even with all the other priorities that exist within the school.

The findings presented in this research are important because they explain some of the possible results of the interaction between GSM leaders and GSM students in international schools and the conditions under which those interactions can be understood to have positive effects on a student's sense of belonging in school. For leaders of international schools, whether they identify as GSM or not, leading an international school community toward creating environments of greater belonging for GSM students will be complicated. Morrison (2018) identified several strategies for leading successful change processes: ensure feedback opportunities for staff, build relationships and trust, learn the school's culture, and create a sense of urgency. Incorporating some of these strategies and becoming more attuned to the lived experiences and needs of queer international school students will propel change initiatives forward.

The urgency for change is real. Evidence from the narratives of the participants in this research suggested that sense of belonging in the international schools is connected to both identity and context. Given the disparate educational outcomes for students who do not experience a sense of belonging and the central place that the international school occupies for students who may be cultural outsiders in the places where they live, the need to create spaces of belonging for all students is clear. The prioritization of students with multiple marginalized and stigmatized identities is needed in the face of heteronormative school practices and structures.

Recommendations for Action

The research presented here only begins to scratch the surface of the experiences of GSM students in international schools. As more and more international schools come into existence throughout the world, the need for research-informed praxis that positively affects GSM experiences in international schools will only become more prominent. Several shifts in practice, however, are already identifiable.

For educators and leaders in international schools, continued examination of the structures that stigmatize GSM students and privilege their heterosexual and cisgender peers is necessary. School leaders experience roadblocks to deconstructing hegemonic systems of heteronormativity in schools due to conservative stakeholders who use their power to limit change (Steck & Perry, 2018). Nevertheless, there are practical steps that can be taken to create better international schools for GSM students. These steps include changing how teachers are trained and what professional learning they experience once employed in a school. Training teachers to intervene when they observe identity-based bullying should become a priority for teacher education programs (Price et. Al., 2019). Once teachers are employed to work in schools, further professional learning is necessary. Ota-Wang (2016) described several areas of focus for whole-school training, including: methods for promoting awareness about the lived experiences of GSM students, education about how heteronormative school structures and policies marginalize GSM persona, promoting and maintaining an inclusive educational environment, creating safe spaces of advocacy, and skill development in dealing with GSM-related student issues or situations. The implementation of whole-school training programs has promoted more inclusive school climates, increased diversity acceptance, increased capacity for discussion of GSM issues, and reduced teacher apprehension about including GSM issues in the curriculum

(Lacey, 2016). For all school personnel, engaging in a critical look at the structures of the school is a necessary step toward creating schools that are structured for inclusion. Structured inclusion, according to Reneau and Brooks (2020) is "a process attempting to dismantle hegemonic structures and heteronormative notions that deny equity, inclusion, and liberation for marginalized individuals" (p. 99). Such a process of examination entails changing current curricula, physical structures, language rooted in binaries, and policies (Reneau & Brooks, 2020). For international schools whose contexts are complex and multicultural in nature, the work of creating places of belonging for all students will look different for every school. School leaders and teachers should pay close attention to the perceptions of GSM students regarding the environment of school and whether they feel acknowledged, included, respected, and supported. Being aware of the perceptions of GSM students can, in turn, influence policy, process, and practice.

Furthermore, school leaders can use their positions of power to plan collaborative inquiries around place and belonging (Riley, 2019). While Riley's (2019) work did not deal specifically with GSM students or international schools, the idea of co-constructing knowledge about what supports are needed for GSM students in international schools is applicable in this context. Partnering with GSAs in the school to investigate what it would take to make international schools places where all students feel a strong sense of belonging is a practical step for all school leaders regardless of their sexual orientation. Riley's recommendations about collaborative inquiry are rooted in three actions: building trust, fostering students' sense of agency, and utilizing the strengths of the community. These steps, according to Riley, are direct actions that contribute to feelings of place and belonging.

Recommendations for Further Study

The expanding sector of international schools is a context in need of further investigation. Equally so, the multiple, complex, and intersecting identities of GSM students and school employees in international schools demand further study. The lack of literature pertaining to the experiences of GSM students in international schools is a potential barrier to the effective implementation of research-based strategies appropriate for the international school context. Further qualitative and quantitative research to fully understand how GSM students experience marginalization and stigmatization in various contexts throughout the world is needed. The perspective of GSM students in international schools should be further documented using narrative study designs to contribute to the depth of understanding of the experience of attending an international school. So little academic work has been done in this area.

While more attention has been paid to issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the international school sector, those efforts could be assisted by further study of long-term and short-term change initiatives instituted in international schools and the impact of those initiatives on students. Allen et al. (2020) noted, "The greater the degree of connectedness the more likely students are to experience a sense of belonging" (p. 8). Knowing that connectedness with other individuals is key to sense of belonging, further research into how that connectedness manifests in the context of the international school is necessary. For students who are third culture kids and often transient, the experience of living outside one's home culture and making connections with other diverse students may be significantly different than the experiences of students who attend a national school with a more homogenous and less transient population.

Conclusion

Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, the current study examined former students at international schools' experience with sense of belonging in school and with visible GSM leadership. On analyzing the data collected in semi-structure interviews, findings point to the interconnectedness of belonging, identity, and context. The complicated, intersecting identities of international school students coupled with the multifaceted internal climate and external contexts of international schools create a place where belonging is varied and highly dependent on the quality of the relationships between the individuals in the international school community. The findings presented here fill a gap in the academic literature about the experiences of GSM students in international schools and about GSM leadership as a possible support structure for students.

The implications of this study are that international schools are places where heteronormative structures, policies, and practices privilege certain identities over others and in so doing, diminish the sense of belonging for GSM persons. Schools, while they are busily engaged in educating all students, are not venues where change happens quickly, easily, or voluntarily. Change in how marginalized students feel a sense of belonging will require leadership through re-imagining schools as radically different from the heteronormative status quo that they now embody.

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APPENDIX A: ODIS APPROVAL LETTER

September 19, 2022

Dear Organisation to Decolonise International Schools (ODIS),

I am a doctoral student at the University of New England working on my dissertation which deals with gender and/or sexual minority former students at international schools. The title of my study is *Gender and Sexual Minority Students and Leaders: Sense of belonging for GSM students in international schools with visible GSM leadership.* I am looking to interview former students at international schools. I am exploring how former students at international schools who identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority experience and understand their own sense of belonging in international schools where there is a visible leader who also identifies as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority. Through completing my dissertation, I hope to provide better understanding of the experiences of GSM former students at international schools as well as outline some policy and practical implications for improving sense of belonging for those students who find themselves with marginalized identities.

My purpose in contacting you today is to request that you advertise for my study through email and social media. Specifically, I am looking to interview former students at international schools who identify as a gender and/or sexual minority and who attended an international school with visible GSM leadership within the last 10 years. The participants must currently be at least 18 years of age. All email communications will come from my University of New England address, and participants will communicate with me directly at [REDACTED] during the study duration. Upon study completion and approval by the University of New England, the dissertation will be published online.

In order to protect the identities of the participants I will use pseudonyms for all participants' names in all instances and secure all data and any notes made during the recorded Zoom interview in a password-protected database file. Each participant will be interviewed twice on Zoom. I expect the Zoom interview length for each interview to be between 30-45 minutes. During the interviews, there will be time for any questions the participant may have about the research or research process. All notes and recordings will be deleted after all interviews are transcribed and verified accurately through a member-checking process. Excluding the specific data mentioned above, the remainder of the study data will be maintained for three years after the study's conclusion. The identity and privacy of all participants will be protected and is of utmost importance. There are no monetary benefits provided to the participants for this study, and the study poses only minimal risk to the participants. Any international schools mentioned in the study will be identified only by country or region.

At this time, can you provide a signed letter detailing your agreement to send information through your email lists and social media platforms communicating the details of my study as well as my contact information. In order to improve the chances of recruiting an adequate sample of participants, please send out the same communication 4 times during an eight-week period. My target number of participants is 5-8 and I will accept the first 8 who qualify for the study. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

With Kind Regards,

Douglas Beam

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Candidate

University of New England

September 25, 2022

Dear Mr. Beam,

We agree to assist you in the recruiting of participants by advertising your study four times over a period of eight weeks using our email lists as well as our social media platforms. We also understand and agree to the details described in your letter.

Kind regards,

Xoài Elda David and Annaclara Fontoura Fernandes Reynolds

Founders

The Organisation to Decolonise International Schools

APPENDIX B: SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEBSITE POST

Post on ODIS Website

Website URL: https://odis.carrd.co/

If you are a member of the LGBTQ+ community and attended an international school, then you may be able to help with an upcoming doctoral research study about sense of belonging in school for LGBTQ+ students at international schools. If you are interested in sharing your experience, please take a few minutes to read the description of the study and the requirements for participation.

Research title: *Where do I Belong? Gender and Sexual Minority Students and Leaders in International Schools*

The purpose of the research is to explore how former students at international schools who identify as a gender and/or sexual minority (GSM) experience and understand their own sense of belonging in international schools where they attended. Additionally, I am interested in investigating the impact of school leaders who also identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority.

Outcome of research: Through completing my dissertation, I hope to provide better understanding of the experiences of GSM former students at international schools as well as outline some policy and practical implications for improving sense of belonging for those students who find themselves with marginalized identities.

Participation requirements: In order to participate in this research, you must:

- Be at least 18 years old;

- Identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority group and have been at least somewhat aware of your own queerness while you attended high school at an international school;

- Have attended an international school for at least one complete academic year within the past ten years;

- Have attended an international school for at least one complete academic year during your high school (grades 9-12 or the equivalent) experience;

- Have attended an international school where there was a visible school leader who also identified as a gender and/or sexual minority. The visible school leader could be a teacher or an administrator.

Method: If you agree to participate in this study, I will invite you to a series of confidential, recorded Zoom interview at a mutually agreeable time. Your decision to participate is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. Each participant will be interviewed two times. I anticipate each recorded Zoom interview length to be between 30-45 minutes, with time in the end for any clarifying questions that you may have. Participants will not be identified by name or school in the final report.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please let me know by sending an email to [REDACTED].

Social Media Post

If you are a member of the LGBTQ+ community and attended an international school, please click here (link to post on ODIS website) to read about a study about LGBTQ+ students and leaders in international schools. We are actively recruiting participants for new research.

This will be posted on Twitter, along with other social media platforms; so, it is limited in character count and will link to the full description of the research project on the ODIS website.

APPENDIX C: EMAIL RESPONSE TO VOLUNTEERS

Dear Former International School Student,

I am contacting you today to invite you to participate in a voluntary study to share your experiences as a gender or sexual minority student at an international school. I am a Doctor of Education candidate (Ed.D.) at the University of New England in the United States. The title of my research is *Where do I Belong? Gender and Sexual Minority Students and Leaders in International Schools*. Before telling you more about my research, I would like to thank the Organisation to Decolonise International Schools (ODIS) agreeing to promote this research through their email list and through their social media platforms.

In my research, I am exploring how former students at international schools who identify as a gender and/or sexual minority experience and understand their own sense of belonging in international schools where they attended. Additionally, I am interested in investigating the impact of leaders who also identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority. Through completing my dissertation, I hope to provide better understanding of the experiences of GSM former students at international schools as well as outline some policy and practical implications for improving sense of belonging for those students who find themselves with marginalized identities. In order to participate in this research you must:

- Be at least 18 years old;
- Identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority group and have been at least somewhat aware of your own queerness while you attended an international school;
- Have attended an international school for at least one complete academic year within the past ten years;

- Have attended an international school for at least one complete academic year during your high school (grades 9-12 or the equivalent) experience;

- Have attended an international school where there was a visible school leader who also identified as a gender and/or sexual minority.

If you do not meet all the requirements for the study or have questions about the requirements, please let me know as soon as possible.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will invite you to participate in two confidential, recorded Zoom interviews at a mutually agreeable time. Your decision to participate is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. Each participant will be interviewed two times. I anticipate each recorded Zoom interview length to be between 30-45 minutes, with time in the end for any clarifying questions that you may have.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please let me know by replying to this email. Please also take a moment to review the attached *Information Sheet*, which outlines the purpose, the study's relevance, and additional interview process details. I will then set up a time for the initial interview and answer any questions surrounding the attached Information Sheet. During the initial interview, we will schedule a time for the second interview. I appreciate your consideration and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Douglas Beam

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Candidate

University of New England

APPENDIX D: SCHEDULING EMAIL

Dear Former International School Student,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. At this time, I would like to schedule an initial interview. The length of your interview will be between 30-45 minutes. I will make sure to save some time for any clarifying questions you may have. The interview will be recorded and transcribed through the Zoom video-recording software. This first interview will be followed by a second interview, which we will schedule at the end of the first interview. After both interviews, I will provide you with the opportunity to review the preliminary themes that have emerged from your interview, and you will be asked to respond via email to confirm whether the themes reflect your experiences. Your decision to participate is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. We will discuss the information sheet that I included in my previous email together before beginning the recorded Zoom interview.

Please let me know a few times when I may conduct a recorded Zoom interview. I will share the meeting link and details through email once we have agreed on a time and date.

With Great Appreciation,

Douglas Beam

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Candidate

University of New England

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Information Sheet Version Date:	14 October 2022
IRB Project #:	**IRB # 0922-21**
Title of Project:	*Where do I Belong? Gender and Sexual Minority Students and Leaders in International Schools*
Principal Investigator (PI):	Douglas Beam
PI Contact Information:	REDACTED

Introduction

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes.

- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with pertinent details about this research project.

- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.

- Your participation is completely voluntary.

- The use of the word 'we' in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

- If you decide to participate, you have the right to withdraw from this research project at any time without penalty.

- If you decide to withdraw from this research project, any data collected will be deleted and will not be used in the project.

What is the purpose of this project?

The general purpose of this research project is to explore how former students at international schools who self-identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority (GSM) experienced a sense of belonging at school and understand any changes in their sense of

belonging at school after interacting with a visible GSM leader in their school. The objectives of this research were determined after carefully reviewing academic literature and identifying the problem that students who identify as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority typically experience a lack of sense of belonging in school. Furthermore, there is a gap in available research about GSM students and leaders in international schools. The research does not involve any deception about the purpose or methods regarding the research. This research is presented as a dissertation in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) at the University of New England. Upon completion of this research and approval by the University of New England, the dissertation will be published online.

Why am I Being Asked to Participate in This Project?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you have the following characteristics. Participants must:

- Be at least 18 years old at the time of the study;

- Have identified themselves as belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority group and were at least somewhat aware of their own queerness while attending an international school;

- Have attended an international school for at least one complete academic year within the past ten years;

- Have been enrolled in an international school for during their high school (grades 9-12 or the equivalent) experience;

- Have been able to identify a leader in the international school they attended who belongs to a gender or sexual minority group.

What Is Involved in This Project?

If you agree to participate in this research study, you will be interviewed during two separate occasions. During the two interviews, we will ask you to answer demographic questions and questions about your experiences during your time in an international school and you will also be asked about your interactions with any leaders in your school who openly identified as belonging to a GSM group. Each interview will be recorded on Zoom and will take approximately 30-45 minutes, with time in the end for any additional questions you may have. After the two interviews, I will provide you with the opportunity via email to review the transcript of your interview for accuracy as well as the initial themes that I have identified. I will ask you to confirm whether those themes accurately reflect your experiences and provide clarification where they may not reflect your experience. You will elect to participate in the research study by responding to the email invitation you have received. Before conducting the interview, I will share this information sheet with the initial recruitment email. Before the interview, I will also review the Information Sheet content and answer any questions. After reviewing the Information Sheet, I will obtain a verbal acknowledgment from the volunteer participant that they would like to proceed with the recorded interview.

What Are the Possible Risks or Discomforts Involved from Being In This Project?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include disclosure of personal information. You will be asked to describe how you identify as a gender and/or sexual minority. There is an inherent risk in openly identifying as a gender and/or sexual minority due to stigmatization and, in some cases, criminalization of GSM identities. This research does not pose any greater risk than what is already present, and, through anonymization and data protection measures, I am seeking to minimize any risk. Also, there is a slight risk that

upsetting or uncomfortable memories may be recalled during the interview process. Steps will be taken to mitigate these risks that are further outlined below. You have the right to skip or not answer any question, for any reason.

What Are the Possible Benefits from Being in This Project?

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help us understand what policies and practical responses are effective to mitigate the social inequities experienced by GSM students.

Will You Be Compensated for Being in This Project?

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

What About Privacy and Confidentiality?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

The following additional measures will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality:

- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure that others cannot overhear the conversation. I encourage you to seek out a private space while being interviewed;

- You have the right to turn off your camera at any point in the interview or for the entire duration of the interview;

- No data will be collected without your knowledge and consent;

- Paper records will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked office accessible only by the PI;

- Participants and any persons referred to in the interview will be referred to using a pseudonym;

- The PI will use a password-protected computer only accessible by the PI.

- Any schools will only be identified by country or region so that the school cannot be directly identified;

- We will take precautions to protect your data by securing the data only backing up the data on a physical external hard drive that is password protected, stored in a secure location, and will be kept in the possession of the PI;

- Data from the Interview software will be encrypted;

- All audio/video recording will be deleted at the earliest opportunity after all transcripts have been verified for accuracy;

- We will use a master list of participants and pseudonyms to identify participant data. The master list allows us to identify which participants provided what data while keeping the data coded so that if a person gained access to the data, but not the master list, the person would not know who provided the data. The master list will be stored only on the principal researcher's external hard drive, which is password protected, and stored in a locked cabinet in the home office of the PI. The master list will be stored on a separate external hard drive from the video recordings and transcripts of interviews which will

also be stored on a password-protected external hard drive and kept in a separate locked cabinet in the PI's home office. The master list, which contains all personally identifiable information obtained for recruitment, scheduling, data collection and member-checking purposes will be destroyed at the earliest opportunity during the project after all transcripts have been verified for accuracy. The data included on the master list will be your name, email, and school attended.

What If You Have Questions About This Project?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

What If You Have Questions About Your Rights as a Research Participant?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Name of Interviewer: Douglas Beam

Pseudonym: [Former International School Student]

Location of International School:

Date of Interview: TBD

Location: Recorded Zoom Meeting

Introduction

Hello, [Former International School Student]. First, thank you for volunteering to meet with me for my research study. I am a Doctor of Education student at the University of New England. The title of my research study is *Where do I Belong? Gender and Sexual Minority Students and Leaders in International Schools*.

I'd also like to thank you for reviewing the information sheet. We have had a chance to check the information sheet before this interview, and I can address any concerns. At this time, do you have any follow-up questions or concerns to express?

This research study will document your experience and understanding of sense of belonging in the school you attended as well as how your interactions with a visible gender and/or sexual minority leader in your school may have changed your sense of belonging.

Will you allow me to record this Zoom video interview for only research and transcription? If you would like to, you may turn off your camera if that makes you more comfortable.

Again, thank you, and I will begin with several demographic questions. Please respond with a 'yes' or 'no' that you are ready to proceed with the recorded interview. (Hit record on Zoom, confirm transcription is turned 'on').

Preliminary Interview

- What international school did you attend?

- When did you attend that school?

  o What years?

  o What grades?

- Why did you enroll in this school?

- What details do you recall about the school?

  o Where did the students come from?

  o What did the students look like?

  o How many students attended the school?

  o Where did the teachers come from?

  o How did the teachers interact with the students?

- How would you describe the experience of attending the school?

  o How did you feel about going to school?

  o How would you describe the academic experience for you?

  o How would you describe the social experience for you?

  o Can you tell me more about that?

- At the time you attended the school, how would you describe your gender identity?

- At the time you attended the school, how would you describe your sexual orientation?

- To what extent were you out of the closet in your international school?

- How do you describe your gender identity and sexual orientation now?

- Can you tell me about some any important experiences about being a gender or sexual

  minority student that you remember from your time at the international school?

- o How did you feel about that?

- Why was this important? To what extent were you out of the closet in your international school?

- For the purposes of this study, we are defining a leader as one who holds influence and therefore has the capacity to move others to think and behave in a particular way. This could be an administrator or a teacher in your school. Please do not tell me the name of the person you are thinking of. Was there a leader in your school who you know identified as a gender or sexual minority?

- How did you come to know that this leader identified as a gender or sexual minority?

Second Interview

- What does it mean to you to have a sense of belonging at school?

- How would you describe your sense of belonging at the international school you attended?

- What sorts of experiences were particularly important for improving your sense of belonging at school?

- What sorts of experiences were detrimental to your sense of belonging at school?

- What are the main differences between the experiences that promote or undermine sense of belonging at school?

- In the last interview, you said that you can think of at least one leader at your international school who identified as a gender and/or sexual minority. How did you interact with that individual?

  - o How often did you interact with this person?

  - o How closely did you feel connected to this person? Why do you feel this way?

- o What kinds of interactions did you have with this person?

- Can you tell me what it was like when you first realized that there was a leader at your school who identified as a gender and/or sexual minority?

  - o What did you think about having a GSM leader at your school?

  - o How did it feel having a GSM leader at your school?

- Would you describe your experiences and interactions with a GSM leader as impactful on your sense of belonging at school?

  - o If so, how did your experiences with a GSM leader(s) change your sense of belonging at school?

  - o If not, why do you think that your interactions did not have an impact on your sense of belonging?

Member Check – Conducted via Email

- The participant is given the transcript and initial themes of the interviews.

  - o Are there any inaccuracies that I can correct?

  - o Do the themes accurately represent your experiences and understandings? If not, what would you say to represent your experiences and understandings more accurately?

APPENDIX G: IRB EXEMPTION

UNE UNIVERSITY OF **NEW ENGLAND**

INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Institutional Review Board
Julie Longua Peterson, Chair

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: October 20, 2022

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Douglas Beam
FACULTY ADVISOR: Laura Bertonazzi, EdD

PROJECT NUMBER: 0922-21
RECORD NUMBER: 0922-21-01
PROJECT TITLE: Where Do I Belong? Gender and Sexual Minority Students and Leaders in International Schools
SUBMISSION TYPE: Exempt Project
SUBMISSION DATE: 9/28/2022

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: 10/20/2022

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2(ii)

The UNE Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

Additional IRB review is not required for this project as submitted. However, if any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the protocol, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other IRB-reviewed documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment to the IRB to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

Please feel free to contact me at (207) 602-2244 or irb@une.edu with any questions.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director, Research Integrity

APPENDIX H: FINDINGS AS RELATED TO THEMES

Finding 1: For GSM former students at international schools, the experience of sense of belonging is connected to identity-based factors.
Sub-Finding: Former students at international schools sought out exposure to queer identities in school and out of school.

Finding 2: For GSM former students at international schools, the experience of sense of belonging is connected to contextual factors.

Finding 3: GSM leadership can be understood to be a support structure for queer students, but only in certain conditions where identities are authentically enacted, and relationships are closely constructed.

Collective Theme 1: Queerness, even in international schools with visible gender and sexual minority leaders, is not normalized.

Collective Theme 2: Compulsory heteronormativity is reinforced by the local culture and the diverse cultures of the people interacting within the international school and impacting sense of belonging for students within this context.

Collective Theme 3: The extent to which interactions with GSM leaders in international schools have a positive impact on sense of belonging for GSM former students in international schools is related to the closeness of the leader-student relationship formed.

Individual Theme 1a (Emerald):	Individual Theme 1b (Emerald):	Individual Theme 2a (Claire):	Individual Theme 2b (Claire):	Individual Theme 3 (Lia):	Individual Theme 4a (Deepika):	Individual Theme 5a (Theresa):	Individual Theme 5b (Theresa):	Individual Theme 6 (Daniel):
For students with minoritized gender identities, experiencing acknowledgement, respect and support are important for establishing belongingness in school. Sense of belonging at school is an overall positive feeling about attending school and being supported because of who you are instead of despite who you are.	Homophobic and transphobic views that negatively impact GSM students' sense of belonging are sometimes permitted into the international school establishment because of local cultural contextual factors.	The patriarchal and heteronormative ordering of high schools diminishes sense of belonging by inhibiting students who may perceive of themselves as being a gender or sexual minority from exploring a more expansive gender understanding or non-heterosexual orientation.	All school personnel have a responsibility to intentionally establish a welcome and accepting culture within the international school.	Queer students sometimes accrue different types of power, giving them status within the school community, allowing them to shape the social spaces that they occupy.	Sense of racial belonging can be as important for GSM international students as other components of sense of belonging, such as academic fit, acceptance, and a close friend group.	For GSM students at international schools, the extent to which they belong is shaped by the extent to which they have control over their personal narrative.	Finding a group of people to fit in with improves sense of belonging at school, even when the actions of that group are later understood to be problematic.	Internalized homophobia and negative self-perception can impact the extent to which a person feels like they belong at school despite mitigating factors like a supportive family and teachers.