

**In the Face of Anti-LGBQ Behaviour: Saskatchewan High-school Students'
Perceptions of School Climate and Consequential Impact**

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Abstract

In Canada, there is a dearth of research on school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) students. Using social networking, sixty students from high-schools in Saskatchewan participated in a climate survey. Results indicated that anti-LGBQ speech is widespread, as were other forms of harassment. The more victimization that was reported by students known, or perceived to be, LGBQ, the more deleterious were the consequences for their academic performance, social lives, participation in sports and extra-curricular activities, and overall enjoyment of school. Limitations associated with the study and directions for future research are detailed.

Key Words: lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, students, homophobia, homonegativity, Canada

In the Face of Anti-LGBQ Behaviour: Saskatchewan High-school Students' Perceptions of School Climate and Consequential Impact

Within Saskatchewan high-schools, policy condemning anti-lesbian/-gay/-bisexual/-questioning behaviour does not appear to be well-developed. For instance, it was in February 2013 when the Legislative Secretary of the Ministry of Education was tasked with a triple mandate that included engaging in public consultations and gathering promising practices in relation to anti-bullying, developing an anti-bullying strategy, and providing recommendations to the Minister of Education. The results of the report entitled "Saskatchewan's Action Plan to Address Bullying and Cyberbullying" were available in November 2013 (Campeau, Ministry of Education, 2013). A primary recommendation was to "update policies and procedures in the education sector to ensure consistency in the prevention, rapid response and intervention in bullying incidents" (p. 1). Important to the present investigation was the statement that, "Some students, such as First Nations and Métis students and those who identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), are particularly vulnerable (Campeau, Ministry of Education, 2013). Though there is recognition from the Ministry of Education that bullying prevention is of paramount importance, the extent to which the recommendations from the report will be implemented throughout the province is currently unknown.

In the meantime, the Ministry of Education has posted curricula for Grades 6-9 and 10-12 entitled "Anti-bullying Outcomes and Indicators." The Grade 6-9 curriculum illuminates ways in which to infuse anti-bullying content in the subject areas of *Arts Education* (dance, drama, music, and visual arts), *English Language Arts* (composition of texts), *Social, Cultural, and Historical Contexts*, *Health Education*, *Physical Education*, and *Social Studies*. In relation to the purposes of the present study, within the Social, Cultural, and Historical Context curriculum, students may explore the question "How have people been discriminated against because of their colour, gender, religion, or race?" Currently, there appears to be no mention of sexual orientation (or gender identity); thus, it seems it would be incumbent on the individual instructor to expand the scope of dimensions if interested in including sexual identity as a source of discrimination. The curriculum for Grades 10-12 includes three subject areas in which to insert anti-bullying education: *Arts Education*, *English Language Arts*, and *Wellness*. At this juncture, it is important to point out that the curriculum for Grades 10-12 is in "draft" form; however, the current iteration does not appear to provide opportunity for *discussion* about homonegativity, binegativity, or transnegativity. Consequently, how this curriculum will address anti-bullying on the grounds of students' perceived or actual lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) identities is not readily apparent. Without province-wide anti-LGBTQ policy and curriculum that addresses the nature of the harassment experienced by LGBTQ students in explicit ways, sexual and gender minority students and those who oppose anti-LGBTQ behaviour will not be the recipients of an education conducted in a safe and caring school. To better support the need for province-wide policies, Canadian researchers have begun documenting the nature of the high-school climate for sexual (and gender) minority students. Despite the compelling need for this research, it is in its infancy.

In 2012, Taylor and Peter published the first national study assessing Canadian high-school students' perceptions of school climate pertaining to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students. Even with this study, and a relatively small handful that address this topic somewhat peripherally (e.g., Bortolin's [2010] study of 15 heterosexual young adult males reflecting on their high-school experience; Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Dreschler's [2012] retrospective study of American and Canadian young adults' participation in

Gay-Straight Alliances, and Smith & Smith's [1998] institutional ethnography of gay and bisexual male students and the development of the ideology of "fag"), there remains a dearth of published research detailing whether Canadian LGBTQ sexual minority high-school students, as well as those suspected of being LGBTQ, perceive "hostility, indifference, acceptance, and support" (Taylor & Peter, 2012, p. 129). In the present study, we sought to complement Taylor and Peter's pioneering work by examining the extent to which high-school students experience anti-LGBTQ speech (i.e., its frequency, location, and sources) and other forms of homonegative behaviour (e.g., malicious gossip, vandalism, and death threats). We also assessed whether these forms of discrimination had affected students' academic performance, involvement in sporting/extra-curricular activities, social lives, and overall enjoyment of school. Further, we examined the extent to which anti-LGBTQ behaviour was confronted by staff, students, and study participants, and whether study participants perceived support from teachers and school counsellors, presumed to be allies, were they to confront homonegative behaviour.

We also assessed the extent to which students perceived their schools to be welcoming and safe for LGBTQ students, from both the perspective of those identifying as LGBTQ and those who identify as heterosexual. Finally, we examined the perceived utility and merits of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in the lives of our high-school participants.

We utilized both close-ended *and* open-ended questions where appropriate: our use of open-ended questions allowed us to provide contextual information about anti-LGBTQ behaviour from the perspective of those who are, or are suspected of being, LGBTQ. By providing a thematic analysis of our open-ended responses, we offer insight not available in the Taylor and Peter (2012) study; specifically, their research was quantitative in nature and did not include analysis of the smaller number of open-ended questions that "invited students to explain their experiences and perspectives" (p. 129).

Method

Participants.

Sixty students (43 female; 16 male; 1 did not disclose gender) participated in the study. The ages of participants ranged from 14 to 20 years ($M = 16.42$; $SD = 1.20$, median = 16.5), and all were attending high-schools in the province of Saskatchewan. A majority of the participants were in their senior years of high-school, and lived in towns of varying sizes, of which the most commonly reported was a city with a population in excess of 100,000 people. On the basis of the populations of cities in the province of Saskatchewan, it appears that approximately 50% of participants were living in the city of Saskatoon. Approximately 53% and 47% of participants indicated their sexual orientation to be heterosexual or GLBQ, respectively. Two students omitted a response to the sexual identity question. Of the students who identified as LGBTQ, almost all of them were "completely out" to their friends. When it came to LGBTQ students disclosing their sexual identity to teachers, approximately two-thirds indicated that they were "completely out," with approximately one-third reporting that they were not. Finally, approximately 75% of participants indicated that they were enrolled in schools that had an active Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), with over 50% reporting active membership. Stratified by self-identified sexual orientation, close to 80% of LGBTQ participants had a GSA, with the remaining 20% indicating that they did not. A vast majority ($\approx 90\%$) of GLBQ students with a GSA indicated that they were active members. A large proportion ($\approx 70\%$) of heterosexual students indicated that they were attending high-schools with a GSA, of which approximately 65%

reported active membership. Six heterosexual students did not provide a response to the question of active membership. Table 1 contains an overview of the demographic information.

The research was approved by the university's Research Ethics Board (REB). All participants were informed about the nature of the study and what would be required of them should they elect to participate (e.g., estimated time to complete the survey). Participants also were informed that their responses would be kept confidential, their identities would remain anonymous, and they could withdraw their participation at any time without penalty or consequence. Students were recruited via the social networking site "Facebook" and no remuneration was provided.

Measures.

An online survey comprised of 44 questions about school climate was created. Several items assessing school climate were adapted from the 2007 GLSEN survey (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008), as well as a review of a previous survey that had been undertaken by Kosciw and Diaz (2006). After the survey was developed, it was submitted to peer review, and the perspectives of experts who specialize in measurement and psychometric testing at the researchers' home University was sought. Two individuals, in addition to the research team, provided their opinion about the survey items.

Homonegative Speech-Frequency. An item asking about the frequency with which students had heard homonegative speech (e.g., "I have heard words such as "fag," "faggot," "dyke," "homo," "queer," or "gay used as an insult") was posed. This item used the following response options: "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "often," and "frequently," and higher scores indicate greater frequency of hearing homonegative speech. This item was adapted from the GLSEN survey and used previously by Taylor and Peter (2012).¹

Homonegative Speech-Location. Participants were asked where the homonegative speech occurred. Specific locations were provided: classrooms, hallways, locker rooms, gym/sports fields, and cafeteria/lunch rooms/lounge. A 6-point response option was used (0=not applicable; 1=never; 2=rarely; 3=sometimes; 4=often; 5=frequently). This item was adapted from the GLSEN survey, and used previously by Taylor and Peter (2012).

Homonegative Speech-Source. When homonegative remarks were made, participants were asked about their source. The response options were: "only by students," "only by staff," "mostly by students and sometimes by staff," and "mostly by staff and sometimes by students." This item was adapted from the GLSEN survey.

Harassment. Participants were asked to indicate whether they had been harassed due to their actual or perceived LGBQ identity. The harassment could take myriad forms including being the recipient of malicious gossip, cyber harassment, social isolation, and physical or sexual threats. Participants were asked to check all of the forms of harassment that applied to them. Several of the forms of harassment/violence (e.g., verbal abuse, vandalism/theft of property, and sexual assault) were adapted from Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995). However, due to the prevalence of recent forms of harassment, we felt additional items required inclusion (e.g., cyber harassment).

Harassment-Source. Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) examined the sources of social (e.g., mother, father, sister, brother, and so forth) and community (e.g., places of work) contexts of anti-LGB victimization. In order to uncover potential sources of anti-LGBQ harassment in the present study, participants were asked to indicate whether the harassment was perpetrated by younger boys, older boys, and/or boys in their year; younger girls, older girls, and/or girls in their year; people from other schools; and adults.

Harassment-Implications. The extent to which harassment had negatively affected participants' academic performance, sporting/extra-curricular activities, social lives, and overall enjoyment of school was assessed using 11-point scales (0=not at all; 10=severely). Thus, higher scores mean greater negative consequences for LGBQ students. These four questions were developed by the researchers as a means of assessing the impact that anti-LGBQ discrimination and violence has had on the student respondents. The scale score reliability for these four items was .79 (95% CI = .61-.90).

Perceived Hurt, Safety, and Welcome. Participants were asked how they would feel if they were called a "fag," "faggot," "dyke," "homo," or "queer" using an 11-point scale (0=not hurt at all; 10=extremely hurt), how safe an LGBQ student would feel at school (5-point scale: 1=not safe at all; 5=extremely safe, this item was reverse-scored so that higher scores mean less safety), and how welcoming participants perceived their schools to be for LGBQ students (5-point scale: 1=extremely unwelcome; 5=extremely welcome; this item was reverse-scored so that higher scores mean a less welcoming environment). These items were adapted from the GLSEN surveys (Kosciw et al., 2007).

Intervention-Source. Three close-ended questions were posed: (1) How often do staff members intervene when they hear homophobic language? (2) How often do students intervene when they hear homophobic language? and (3) How often do they intervene when they hear words such as "fag," "faggot," "dyke," "homo," "queer," or "gay" used as an insult? A 6-item response format was used (0=not applicable; 1=never; 2=rarely; 3=sometimes; 4=often; 5=frequently). Participants also responded to two open-ended questions that asked them to explain why they chose, and why they chose not, to intervene when they heard homophobic language. These items were adapted from the GLSEN survey (Kosciw et al., 2007).

Intervention-Perceived Support. Whether participants would receive support from their classmates, teachers, school counsellor, principal, and family was assessed using a "yes/no" dichotomous response format. These questions were developed by the researchers for the purposes of the present study.

Data Analysis. For the close-ended questions, percentages and correlations are reported where appropriate. The open-ended questions were analysed using thematic coding (Boyatzis, 1998), an approach that involves the discovery of recurring patterns within the data. In accordance with Marshall and Rossman's (1995) recommendations, we reviewed the written accounts multiple times and discussed them in order to extract prominent themes. In addition to considering the themes as they related to existing literature, the responses were reviewed in reference to the quantitative data, either to support the findings or provide a contrasting account.

Results

Table 2 contains the response frequencies to the questions about: hearing anti-LGBQ speech; the location in which anti-LGBQ speech occurs; and who is responsible for the anti-LGBQ speech (i.e., students, staff, more students than staff, or more staff than students).

Homonegative Speech. Approximately 73% indicated that they frequently or often heard homonegative remarks at their schools, with participants citing the following environments (in descending order) as the most likely in which homonegative language would be encountered: hallways, cafeterias/lunchrooms, classrooms, locker rooms, and sports fields. Participants perceived this form of homonegative behaviour to be perpetrated a vast majority of the time by "students only" (70%; $n=42$), with the remainder perceiving the anti-LGBQ speech to occur "mostly by students and sometimes by staff" (26.7%; $n=16$). The same pattern was found when

the frequencies were stratified by self-reported sexual identity: approximately two-thirds (64.3%; $n=18$) of LGBQ students indicated that this speech is perpetrated by “students only”, with the remainder (35.7%; $n=10$) indicating that it is perpetrated “mostly by students and sometimes by staff”. For the non-LGBQ students, three-quarters (76.6%; $n=23$) witnessed anti-LGBQ speech from “students only”, with the remainder (20%; $n=6$) reporting that this speech is perpetrated “mostly by students and sometimes by staff.” It should be mentioned that the two alternate response options “only by staff” and “mostly by staff/sometimes by students” were not endorsed.

Table 3 provides an overview of participants’ perceptions of who appears to be intervening on behalf of students exposed to anti-LGBQ speech. Overall, a majority of participants (72%; $n=43$) reported that their fellow students intervened “rarely” or “never,” followed by school staff (50%; $n=30$), and the participants themselves (30%; $n=18$). After indicating whether they would or would not intervene when witnessing homonegative speech, participants were asked to provide reasons for their decision. The following reasons were articulated: 1) personal; 2) interpersonal; and 3) moral. Personal reasons for intervening were reported primarily by sexual minority students. They perceived homonegative speech to be an attack on themselves or people like them:

I’m gay and I don’t like hearing it used to insult people. (Female, 14, grade 9, public school, lesbian, school has a GSA, not an active member)

Many heterosexual students cited interpersonal reasons for intervening as they interpreted homonegative speech to be a denunciation of their sexual minority friends:

I have my fair share of homosexual friends and I cannot bear hearing those words used to insult others. (Male, 17, grade 12, public school, straight, school has a GSA, not an active member)

Finally, several students based their reasons on higher-level moral principles. While these individuals may not necessarily have perceived homonegative speech as a personal attack on them or someone they know, they were cognizant that this behaviour might affect others:

I intervened because, if there were someone of that orientation in the classroom or hallway, it would just make the school a bad place for them to be. Intervening shows that someone cares and they support [that person]. (Female, 14, grade 9, public school, questioning, school has a GSA, active member)

In contrast, reasons for not intervening could be categorized as follows: (1) intervening is ineffective; (2) fear of backlash; (3) the offenses are not intended to be derogatory; and (4) homonegative speech occurs too frequently. Several students indicated that intervening in homonegative speech acts was ineffective, especially when they did not have a relationship with the offender. Though an active member of her school’s GSA, one respondent contended that the prospects of changing anyone else’s behavior are minimal:

It’s useless to even try to tell people why they shouldn’t use those words. (Female, 16, grade 11, public school, straight, school has a GSA, active member)

Some students reported that intervening, especially when the offender is a stranger, could even be counter-productive:

I may not intervene because there will be no gain in attacking strangers...over something as silly as a word. They wouldn’t learn anything, and possibly become more disdainful of the gay/ally community because of it. (Female, 17, grade 12, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

Not only did some students suspect that their intervention would be futile, but they also expressed fear of negative reprisal. Students expected a verbal, physical, and/or social backlash if they intervened, with many participants fearing for their own safety:

I was afraid of being attacked (verbally/physically) by other students who are against homosexuality and tend to make comments quite often. (Male, 18, grade 12, public school, gay, school has no GSA)

Another reason for not intervening that was reported by both LGBQ and heterosexual participants was the fear they would be assumed to be other than heterosexual:

I am/was scared of being judged. I am very supportive of the LGBTQ community, yet I am afraid others will view me as an LGBTQ. I'm not brave enough basically. (Female, 16, grade 11, public school, heterosexual, school has a GSA, active member)

While a number of students indicated that they do not participate in homonegative speech, they also chose not to intervene because they did not consider the speech acts to be serious or derogatory. The apparent intent of the offenders appeared to be a significant factor in whether students would intervene:

Most of them don't even mean it as using "gay" as an insult; it's just ingrained into their heads that it means "un-cool," not homosexual. (Female, 14, grade 9, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

This quotation reflects the pervasiveness of homonegative speech among youth; however, several students also alluded to the frequency of this speech in schools and indicated that they could not address all instances of homonegativity:

It's something that's around all the time. I really just don't have the time to stop EVERY person I hear saying stuff like that. (Female, 14, grade 9, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

Were students to confront persons responsible for making homonegative remarks, they anticipated considerable support from a variety of individuals. School counsellors, teachers, and principals were viewed as the most likely to be supportive. Respectively, 90% ($n = 54$), 88% ($n = 53$), and 83% ($n = 50$) of participants perceived these individuals as supportive. Participants anticipated the least support from fellow classmates and family members. Overall, only 48% ($n = 29$) of students reported that other students could be counted on for support. The support perceived by LGBQ and heterosexual students, separately, can be found in Table 4.

Students wrote copiously about the individuals they could rely on to support them if they chose to intervene when hearing homonegative remarks. These passages tended to reflect gratitude when support was forthcoming and anger when they felt abandoned by those whom they expected to defend their decisions. As reflected in the quantitative data, several students had positive evaluations of the adults in their school settings and heterosexual students in particular wrote favourably about their parents:

I trust my teachers, principal, and counsellor, and I consider them to be friends. They support me and [my] decisions, as do my parents. My parents are there for me, so whatever decisions I make, they back me up. (Female, 15, grade 9, public school, heterosexual, school has a GSA, active member)

However, some participants' responses were mixed, indicating that some support could be expected from certain individuals but not from everybody:

I am certain my school counsellor, principal and my family would support me because they are not homophobic and [they] promote equality. However, some of my teachers and

several of my classmates are clearly homophobic and would judge me negatively.

(Female, 16, grade 11, public school, heterosexual, school has a GSA, active member)

Fewer sexual minority participants wrote positively about their parents' support and many of them felt they could not reveal their sexual orientation because of their parents' beliefs:

My family hates homosexuals. I'm not openly out to them because I fear they might be ashamed of raising a "faggot" son and throw me out of the house. (Male, 15, grade 10, public school, gay, school has no GSA)

Further, in the qualitative responses, most participants, regardless of sexual orientation and whether or not their school had a GSA, believed that other students would not support them if they intervened when hearing homonegative remarks:

My classmates would hate me for [intervening] and then they would question my sexuality. (Male, 18, grade 12, public school, gay, school has no GSA)

Most of my classmates are the ones using such words and, if they aren't, then they won't back me up because then they themselves will get made fun of. (Female, 16, grade 11, public school, heterosexual, school has a GSA, not an active member)

In terms of other forms of homonegative behaviour, participants known, or perceived to be, LGBTQ reported experiencing (in descending order): verbal abuse (38.3%; $n=23$), malicious gossip (35.0%; $n=21$), being ignored or isolated (30%; $n=18$), given intimidating looks (30%; $n=18$), cyber harassment (18.3%; $n=11$), vandalism/theft of property (11.7%; $n=7$), sexual assault (8.3%; $n=5$), physical abuse (6.7%; $n=4$), death threats (5%; $n=3$), and being threatened with a weapon (3.3%; $n=2$). Three independent coders classified the ten behaviours on the basis of their perceived severity (i.e., mild, moderate, or severe). Pearson correlation coefficients were then conducted to assess the relationship between victimization and negative perceptions of school climate. Results indicated that the more severe the victimization students reported on the basis of their suspected or actual sexual orientation, the more their academic performance, $r(49) = .37, p = .008$, sports/extra-curricular activity participation, $r(46) = .37, p = .011$, social lives, $r(49) = .39, p = .005$, and overall enjoyment in school, $r(49) = .46, p = .001$ were perceived to be deleteriously affected.

Participants also were asked to identify who was responsible for their harassment, and these frequencies appear in Table 5. The high-school boys who reported being victimized in our sample, were targeted most often by boys and girls in the same year of high-school. Boys also reported that they were victimized approximately 38% of the time by younger boys and people from other high-schools. For the high-school girls who reported victimization experiences due to their perceived or actual sexual orientation, boys and girls in their same year of high-school were deemed most responsible for the harassment, followed by older boys and people from other schools. Surprisingly, approximately 19% of the female high-school students ($n=8$) reported being harassed by adults while no boys cited this perpetrator group.

To explore the impact of these victimization experiences on our study participants, we asked them to explain how they perceived their academic performance, sporting/extra-curricular participation, social lives, and overall enjoyment of high-school to be affected. In regard to students' academic achievement, being victimized due to one's actual or perceived sexual orientation appeared to affect students' attendance, participation, and concentration. For instance, a number of participants confided that they could not adequately focus on their academic tasks because of the constant barrage of homonegative speech:

It is very hard to concentrate when all you hear is "Look at what the faggot is doing now" and "Oh, he is so gay" or "You are too gay to even function" and everything

people ever say about you is negative about your sexuality to the point where it cannot be ignored... I wish I could get rid of it so I could concentrate in school and actually know what is going on in class or even feel like going to school. (Male, 16, grade 10, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

While acknowledging that homonegative speech adversely affected his concentration, it also led to an aversion to school in general. Based on his account, it is not surprising that some students reported skipping school to avoid homonegative speech. For instance, one student described her use of this coping strategy and its consequences for her scholastic achievement:

[Homonegative speech] caused me to hate going to school so I started to skip classes to get away from it, causing me to miss important information. (Female, 17, grade 12, public school, lesbian, school has no GSA)

It is important to mention that heterosexual students are also affected by homonegative speech. For example, their concentration appears to be hindered by the prevalence of this negativity:

[I found it] hard to concentrate in class because the kids behind me were calling each other "fag," and it bothered me. (Female, 16, grade 10, public school, heterosexual, school has a GSA, active member)

In relation to extra-curricular activities, one heterosexual participant cautioned that students' ability to cope with homonegative speech would affect the activities they join. She elaborated by suggesting that this type of behaviour is unavoidable among some groups:

One has to be VERY selective as to what groups and sports teams they choose to belong to if they do not want to be subjected to negative comments either about themselves or about others within their group/team. It takes a strong person to be willing to stand up to that and to join a group knowing that that is something that they will have to endure. (Female, public school, heterosexual, school has no GSA)

This participant did not clarify whether it is only LGBQ students who must consider these factors when becoming involved in extra-curricular activities and/or sports; however, it appears that heterosexual students are not immune to the perceived effects of homonegativity in this realm. For instance, one straight student who was a target of fictitious rumours about her sexuality stated:

No one would wrestle me because of what they heard. (Female, 16, grade 11, separate school, heterosexual, school has no GSA)

Further, some participants reacted by completely avoiding the sports activities where these speech acts occurred, despite this leading to missed opportunities:

I quit participating in the sports that I loved to do. (Female, 19, grade 12, public school, lesbian, school has no GSA)

The perceived effects of homonegative speech on the social lives of students appeared to be particularly salient for LGBQ students, with many of them reporting a loss of social relationships. Heterosexual students also experienced a loss of social ties if there were rumours that categorized them as part of a sexual minority. The next comment describes the escalating isolation that was a common experience for participants once they were "outed" to their peers:

I lost basically ALL of my friends (NO JOKE) when people slowly started to "out" me. The rumors flew and then came the hate comments and finally everyone quit being my friend. (Male, 18, grade 12, public school, gay, school has no GSA)

Homonegative speech served to remind LGBQ youth who were not out about the treatment that could be expected for any students who openly disclosed an orientation other than heterosexual.

As evidenced in the next two extracts, respondents anticipated physical retaliation and isolation if their sexual orientation was revealed to their peers:

Because I can't truly be myself, or I will get beaten up. The only reason I haven't been beaten up yet is I haven't openly said it except for my really close straight friends or my GSA friends. (Male, 16, grade 10, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

It's mostly just friends that I have had for a really long time just ignoring me, and I understand why. It's something new to them, and being one of the only gays at my school, [they] are not used to dealing with [it]. It will just take time. (Male, 16, grade 10, public school, gay, school has no GSA)

When asked about students' overall enjoyment of school, the following quotation, which reflects a common perception from a number of participants, describes one student's feeling that homonegativity will remain an integral component of her high-school experience:

I hate the people [at my school]; I hate the atmosphere; I hate the teachers for not doing anything; I hate the students for encouraging it; and I hate seeing it happen all around me no matter how hard I try to stop it. I'm sick of being made fun of and it seems that if I go to school, that's all that is going to happen. (Female, 17, grade 12, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

Participants were asked about how safe and welcoming they perceived their school to be for sexual minority students. Approximately 39% of LGBQ students perceived their school to be quite or extremely unsafe for LGBQ students, compared to 20% of non-LGBQ students. Interestingly, approximately 47% of non-LGBQ students felt that an LGBQ student would feel quite or extremely unwelcome, compared to 36% of LGBQ students.

When asked to reflect upon how safe and welcomed LGBQ students would feel in their school, participants' responses ranged from very negative to very positive, likely reflecting the diversity of schools in the sample. In terms of safety, some students commented on the open hostility toward sexual minority students in their school:

[LGBQ students would not feel safe] because there is no place to hide. People will seek you out and try to destroy you. It's so sick I cannot begin to tell you of the hate crimes that are committed at my school. (Female, 17, grade 12, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

Other participants were not as explicit about the homonegativity in their schools; however, their responses appeared to reflect an adverse environment for sexual minority youth. For instance, to address the issue of safety, one student counselled LGBQ students to stay closeted:

I guess if people don't like them—like their attitude, or the way they dress—then they might make fun of them, but if they don't always publicize that they are gay to everyone all the time, then they would feel pretty safe.... (Male, 16, grade 10, public school, gay, school has no GSA)

Many of the positive responses came from participants whose schools have a GSA. Participants perceived these groups as serving as a protective barrier for sexual minority students:

I think a GLBQ student would feel fairly safe in our school, because we do have an active GSA, and there are active GSA members in the hallways all the time. (Female, 16, grade 10, public school, straight, school has a GSA, active member)

The presence of GSAs in schools not only seemed to affect how safe LGBQ students were expected to feel but also how welcoming and accepted they would be:

The GSA has been highly successful at tipping the balance of power toward acceptance. Faculty [members] are hugely open/accepting and the student body is becoming increasingly tolerant. (Male, 17, grade 12, public school, straight, school has a GSA, active member)

However, many students did not see their schools—public or separate (i.e., Catholic)—as welcoming to sexual minority students. This perspective was found predominantly in the responses of participants whose schools did not have GSAs:

The people are very abusive at the school to anyone that they feel is homosexual. (Female, 19, grade 12, public school, lesbian, school has no GSA)

There is constant use of gay slurs, mocking of gay students, and I have only seen one teacher do something about it despite there being posters discouraging the use of slurs. (Female, 15, grade 10, separate school, bisexual, school has no GSA)

Despite the positive influence of GSAs, its reach did not always extend to other areas within participants' school and they were not always able to combat the pervasive heterosexism to which many students alluded:

Most people assume everyone's straight. Teachers making analogies will assume that girls have boyfriends and that marriage is always hetero. It's like, unless you start talking, the subject of being gay doesn't come up (unless you're in the GSA). (Female 17, grade 12, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

Gay-Straight Alliances

Although participants differed on the extent to which GSAs influenced overall school climate, they agreed on the importance of these clubs in their personal lives. For example, a number of participants reported achieving a greater level of self-acceptance after joining a GSA. One student stated:

It is very important because the GSA made me see that it was ok to be the way I am. It was ok to love who I wanted to love and I always knew that there would be people standing by to help me face the many trials that come with being a GBLT youth. (Female, 17, grade 12, public school, bisexual, school has a GSA, active member)

A number of students also valued their GSAs as instrumental in helping people within their own social network or other individuals they perceived as being in need of support. One heterosexual student referred to her own LGBTQ friends when reflecting on the importance of GSAs:

[GSAs are important] because I have so many friends who are openly "out." The thought that someone might harm these people, or just hate them on the inside for being something different from what society asks, honestly makes me feel sick. (Female, 17, grade 12, public school, heterosexual, school has a GSA, active member)

To illustrate the importance of GSAs, several participants wrote about the benefits of these groups. For example, participants discussed how GSAs established effective social support networks for students and provided them with acceptance and a safe environment. Moreover, several students were explicit about what they saw as the educational possibilities for GSAs:

The GSA is very important to me because I see so much homophobia everywhere I go....I feel we can educate and inform those in our school who are unaware of what being LGBTQ is and its implications. In turn, we can prevent discrimination and promote equality. (Female, 16, grade 11, public school, heterosexual, school has a GSA, active member)

Finally, some students positioned the GSA within a broader political context and perceived their establishment as the first step in eliminating homonegativity:

It's important for kids to know that there are people out there willing to change the way society thinks about one another. (Male, 17, grade 12, public school, straight, school has a GSA, active member)

Discussion

The present study documented high-school students' perceptions of school climate with respect to homonegative behaviour, the toll these behaviours take on the school and personal lives of students, the likelihood that students will intervene and receive support when confronting such behaviour, and the role that support networks such as GSAs play. The quantitative results revealed that homonegative speech is extremely widespread. These findings are consistent with past research that has found most students report hearing homonegative speech in their schools quite frequently (GLSEN, 2008; Hunt & Jensen, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2006; Taylor & Peter, 2012). Interestingly, when comparing the data collected in the present study with data collected from teachers in Saskatchewan (see Wimmer, Chinnery, & Morrison, 2008), it is apparent that students encounter remarkably more homonegative speech in the hallways and classrooms than teachers. While this finding is not unique (see Morrow & Gill, 2003), it illustrates that homonegative speech is likely intended for, and directed at, students at opportune times or places when teachers are not present.

Consistent with past research (GLSEN, 2008; Iowa Pride Network, 2006), a substantial proportion of sexual minority students and over half of heterosexual allies are affected by homonegative remarks. The quantitative results indicated that the majority of students felt that homonegative speech had deleterious implications for various aspects of their school experience. For instance, the more discrimination experienced by participants who were perceived or known to identify as LGBTQ, the more negatively affected was their academic achievement, involvement in sports/extracurricular activities, social lives, and overall enjoyment of school. To better understand the ways in which homonegative behaviour affected students perceived or known to be LGBTQ, we provided them with the opportunity to comment on their experiences. The qualitative responses provide a decidedly negative depiction of the prevalence and consequences of homonegative speech. When participants were targets of anti-LBGQ behaviour, they reported subsequent reduced attendance, participation, and concentration. When discussing the effect of homonegative language on their academic achievement and their participation in sports and extra-curricular activities, students outlined a similar pattern of enduring homonegativity up to a certain point and then engaging in avoidance behaviour (i.e., skipping school and quitting sports teams) as a final resolution. These issues likely contributed to the negative comments that were generated in relation to students' social involvement and enjoyment of school. LGBTQ students reported isolation if their sexual orientation was known and fear of negative reactions from their peers if it was disclosed. Although it was predominantly sexual minority students who voiced their dismay over the widespread homonegativity in their schools, heterosexual students condemned the treatment of LGBTQ students and expressed how damaging it was to their own school experiences.

Despite the prevalence of homonegative speech in schools, most students indicated that teachers and students rarely or never intervene and over half of participants reported that they themselves, at best, "sometimes" intervene. A number of reasons for not intervening were provided (e.g., intervening is ineffective; fear of backlash; the offenses are not intended to be derogatory; and high frequency of homonegative speech). Alternatively, those who chose to intervene appeared to be reacting defensively or protectively to a behaviour they considered as either an attack on themselves, their friends, or anyone else who may be hurt upon hearing

homonegative remarks. A few other studies have examined why youth choose to intervene in school bullying. Kaster (2005) surveyed 2,103 Icelandic students and conducted focus groups with an additional 56 students about their justifications for intervening or not. Similar to the present study, participants reported intervening when bullying targeted their friends or family members. Further, participants also indicated that they feared being bullied if they intervened, which is consistent with one of the reasons cited by students in the present study. In her survey of 265 American students, Siegal (2009) found that they were more likely to intervene in physical bullying than in relational bullying (i.e., damage to one's social status or peer relationships). This finding may explain why the majority of participants in the present study never, or only rarely, intervene when their peers engage in homonegative speech.

Most participants believed that their school administrators, teachers, and counsellors would be supportive if they intervened when confronted with homonegativity. Unlike heterosexual students who indicated that they would receive support from their parents if they intervened, sexual minority students did not expect the same level of support from their parents. The high percentage of students who indicated that they could count on their teachers, counsellors, and principals for support when they intervened may be due to the fact that three-quarters of participants came from schools with GSAs. In their study with Canadian youth, Taylor and Peter (2012) found that students from schools with GSAs were more likely to report that their school community was supportive of sexual minority individuals.

Both quantitative and qualitative results related to how safe and welcoming participants perceived their school to be for LGBTQ students were mixed. Approximately one-third of students considered their schools to be safe and welcoming for sexual minority students; however, a similar number of students perceived their schools to be unsafe and unwelcoming. While these findings are disconcerting, they are an improvement in comparison to the finding from a number of American studies. For instance, GLSEN (2008) reported that 60.8% of LGBT students felt unsafe at school and the Iowa Pride Network (2005) noted that 61.2% of LGBT students felt unsafe due to their sexual orientation. The findings from the present study were similar to those found in Taylor and Peter's (2012) Canadian climate survey. Specifically, approximately 43% of LGBTQ students perceived their school spaces to be unsafe. Participants in the present study stated that GSAs were an integral component in relation to students' perceptions of how hospitable and safe their schools were for sexual minority youth.

It should be mentioned at this juncture that the test-retest reliability of the GLSEN items was not assessed in the present study. Moreover, previous studies that have used GLSEN items do not contain information about their test-retest reliability. Thus, it is possible that, were these items administered to the same students at a later point in time, there might be fluctuations in the frequencies obtained. Given the limited information about the test-retest reliability of the GLSEN items, it is imperative that researchers begin accounting for this form of reliability so as to adequately attest to the psychometric properties of the GLSEN survey.

In addition to the influence of GSAs on school climate, students were particularly positive about the influence of GSAs in their own lives and for other sexual minority students. Most students indicated that their involvement in GSAs led to greater self-acceptance and to establishing an effective social support system. The GSA is a place where students felt they could be themselves and be safe from the homonegativity that pervades their school environment. Further, participants saw the GSA's activities as meeting educational needs and as initial steps in enacting political and social change.

These findings provide further evidence that schools should establish GSAs to support their students and to temper the effect of homonegativity. Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) argue that schools have the ability to diminish the negative effects related to homonegativity if they promote a positive and accepting school environment. A more positive school climate has been found to protect sexual minority students against depression and drug use (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koneig, 2008) and schools with LGBQ support groups report lower rates of victimization and suicide attempts (Goodenow et al., 2006).

The findings of the present study also lend support to the use of multi-methods in investigating perceptions of homonegativity. The contrast between some of the relatively positive findings from the quantitative data and the strikingly negative qualitative responses illustrate their combined utility in uncovering a more complete understanding of individuals' perceptions. For example, had only quantitative data been collected, one could conclude erroneously that homonegativity in schools is fairly innocuous; however, upon consideration of the qualitative responses, the acuteness of the pain experienced by those students who do encounter homonegativity becomes apparent. Studies relying solely on quantitative data collection methods may result in fairly positive conclusions being drawn. It is therefore recommended that researchers' methodological designs be complemented with data collection efforts that are qualitative in nature. Also, future research should continue to consider homonegativity from the perspective of students, as their interpretations and awareness of homonegativity is likely different from those expressed by school staff (Wimmer et al., 2008). Given the findings from the present study and those from Taylor and Peter's (2012) investigation of the climate of Canadian schools for sexual and gender minority students, researchers from other provinces should consider examining how their youth perceive homonegativity and the importance of GSAs. Researchers also should specifically examine the experiences and perceptions of students from separate schools and from rural areas. Unfortunately, only five participants reported attending separate schools so no comparison could be made between the two types of schools. As well, only seven participants came from towns with a populace of less than 10,000 so comparisons between students in rural and urban schools cannot be made.

Finally, future research should focus on creating interventions to reduce the effect of homonegativity in schools. One in five students were affected by rampant homonegative speech and homonegativity had serious scholastic consequences for these students. The GLSEN (2008) report states that students who are frequently harassed achieve, on average, half a grade point less than those who are not victims of homonegative bullying. The participants in the present study indicated that they are unable to concentrate and even skip school to avoid homonegative speech and, as a result, their academic achievement suffers. In addition to the creation of evidence-based interventions to combat homonegativity, current bullying interventions should incorporate homonegativity prevention strategies and school personnel should assure students of their full support should they intervene when witnessing verbal and non-verbal homonegative behaviour. Finally, given the perceived importance and utility of GSAs, all schools should establish these groups to provide a safe and supportive environment particularly for sexual minority students and heterosexual allies and, more generally, the remainder of the school population.

Endnotes

¹The frequency with which LGBQ participants heard anti-LGBQ remarks (e.g., “fag”, “faggot”, “dyke”, “homo”, “queer”, and/or “gay”, used as an insult) correlated significantly with variables in the study that should, theoretically, be linked. Specifically, the greater the frequency of hearing anti-LGBQ speech, the less school was enjoyed by LGBQ students, $r(27) = .41, p = .03$ and the less safe LGBQ students felt in their highschools, $r(27) = .40, p = .04$. Thus, the question about frequency of anti-LGBQ speech appears to possess a modicum of construct validity.

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Table 1. Participant Demographics for Overall Sample ($N = 60$)

	% (n)
<i>Sexual Identity</i>	
Lesbian	3.3 (2)
Gay	11.7 (7)
Bisexual (female)	23.4 (14)
Bisexual (male)	3.8 (2)
Questioning	5.0 (3)
Heterosexual/Straight	50.0 (30)
<i>High-School</i>	
Public	83.0 (50)
Separate	10.0 (5)
Unknown	10.0 (5)
<i>High-School Grade</i>	
9	7.5 (4)
10	18.9 (10)
11	28.3 (15)
12	45.3 (24)
<i>Size of Town in Which Participant Resides</i>	
<5000	1.7 (1)
5001-9999	10.0 (6)
1000-10000	12.0 (20)
>10001	40.0 (66.7)
<i>Active GSA</i>	
Yes	73.3 (44)
No	26.6 (16)
<i>If GSA, Active Member (n = 44)</i>	
Yes	79.5 (35)
No	20.4 (9)
<i>Active GSA (LGBQ; n = 28)</i>	
Yes	78.6 (22)
No	21.4 (6)

Table 1. (Cont'd)

	% (n)
<i>If GSA, Active Member (LGBQ; n = 22)</i>	
Yes	90.9 (20)
No	10.1 (2)
<i>Active GSA (Heterosexual; n = 31)</i>	
Yes	70.0 (21)
No	30.0 (9)
<i>If GSA, Active Member (Heterosexual; n = 21)</i>	
Yes	63.6 (14)
No	36.4 (8)
<i>If LGBQ, Sexual Identity Disclosure (n = 28)</i>	
Completely Out to Friends	96.4 (27)
Not Out to Friends	3.5 (1)
Completely Out to Teachers	64.7 (18)
Not Out to Teachers	35.7 (10)

Note. For the question that asked about the extent of disclosure amongst friends and, in a separate question, amongst teachers and staff, the response option “partially out” was not reported.

Table 2. Frequency of Hearing Anti-LGBQ Speech and Location in Which Anti-LGBQ Speech Occurs ($N=60$; $n=28$ LGBQ students; $n=32$ heterosexual students)

Q. I have heard words such as “fag”, “faggot”, “dyke”, “homo”, “queer”, and/or “gay” (used as an insult) at my school:

	FREQUENTLY	OFTEN	SOME OF THE TIME	RARELY	NEVER	MISSING/NA
LGBQ	57.1% (n=30)	28.6% (n=8)	14.3% (n=4)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)/0%
NON-LGBQ	46.7% (n=14)	20.0% (n=6)	23.3% (n=7)	6.7% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	3.3% (n=1)/0%

Q. I have heard words such as “fag”, “faggot”, “dyke”, “homo”, “queer”, and/or “gay” (used as an insult) spoken in:

	FREQUENTLY	OFTEN	SOME OF THE TIME	RARELY	NEVER	MISSING/NA
CLASSROOM						
<i>LGBQ</i>	25.0% (n=7)	32.1% (n=9)	32.1% (n=9)	10.7% (n=3)	0%	0%/0%
<i>NON-LGBQ</i>	20.0% (n=6)	26.7% (n=8)	33.3% (n=10)	13.3% (n=4)	3.3% (n=1)	0%/0%
HALLWAY						
<i>LGBQ</i>	67.9% (n=19)	25.0% (n=7)	7.11% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0%/0%
<i>NON-LGBQ</i>	60.0% (n=18)	26.7% (n=8)	10.0% (n=3)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0%/0%
CAFETERIA/LUNCHROOM						
<i>LGBQ</i>	28.6% (n=8)	21.4% (n=6)	17.9% (n=5)	7.1% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	3.6% (n=1)/21.4% (n=6)
<i>NON-LGBQ</i>	23.3% (n=7)	36.7% (n=11)	13.3% (n=4)	6.7% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	3.3% (n=1)/16.7% (n=5)
GYM/SPORTS FIELDS						
<i>LGBQ</i>	17.9% (n=5)	7.1% (n=2)	21.4% (n=6)	0% (n=0)	3.6% (n=1)	0%/50%(n=14)
<i>NON-LGBQ</i>	16.7% (n=5)	6.7% (n=2)	33.3% (n=10)	10.0% (n=3)	6.7% (n=2)	3.3%(n=1)/23.3% (n=7)
LOCKER ROOMS						
<i>LGBQ</i>	17.9% (n=5)	3.6% (n=1)	17.9% (n=5)	7.1% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	0%/53.6%(n=15)
<i>NON-LGBQ</i>	16.7%(n=5)	6.7%(n=2)	33.3% (n=10)	10.0%(n=3)	6.7%(n=2)	3.3%(n=1);23.3%(n=7)

Table 3. Staff, Student, and Study Participants' Perceptions about Frequency of Intervention When Hearing Homonegative Remarks and Perceived Sources of Support Were a Student to Intervene ($N=60$; $n=LGBQ$ students; $n=32$ heterosexual students)

Q. How often do staff members intervene when they hear homophobic language?

	ALWAYS	MOST OF THE TIME	SOME OF THE TIME	RARELY	NEVER	MISSING
LGBQ PERSPECTIVE	0% (n=0)	10.7% (n=3)	35.7% (n=10)	42.9% (n=12)	10.7% (n=3)	0% (n=0)
NON-LGBQ PERSPECTIVE	3.3% (n=1)	13.3% (n=4)	30% (n=9)	43.3% (n=13)	6.7% (n=2)	3.3%(n=1)/0%

Q. How often do students intervene when they hear homophobic language?

	ALWAYS	MOST OF THE TIME	SOME OF THE TIME	RARELY	NEVER	MISSING
LGBQ PERSPECTIVE	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	28.6% (n=8)	57.1% (n=31)	14.3% (n=4)	0% (n=0)
NON-LGBQ PERSPECTIVE	0% (n=0)	6.7% (n=2)	13.3% (n=4)	50% (n=15)	26.7% (n=8)	0% (n=0)

Q. At my school, if I have heard words such as “fag”, “faggot”, “dyke”, “homo”, “queer”, and/or “gay” (used as an insult), I have intervened:

	ALWAYS	MOST OF THE TIME	SOME OF THE TIME	RARELY	NEVER	MISSING
LGBQ PERSPECTIVE	3.6% (n=1)	32.1% (n=9)	35.7% (n=10)	21.4% (n=6)	7.1% (n=2)	0% (n=0)
NON-LGBQ PERSPECTIVE	6.7% (n=2)	33.3% (n=10)	26.7% (n=8)	16.7% (n=5)	13.3% (n=4)	0% (n=0)

Q. Were I to intervene when hearing words such as “fag”, “faggot”, “dyke”, “homo”, “queer”, and/or “gay” (used as an insult), I believe I would receive support from:

	CLASSMATES	TEACHERS	SCHOOL COUNSELLOR	PRINCIPAL	FAMILY
LGBQ (n=28)					
Yes	53.6% (n=15)	92.9% (n=26)	96.4% (n=27)	78.6% (n=22)	60.7% (n=17)
No	46.4% (n=13)	7.1% (n=2)	3.6% (n=1)	21.4% (n=6)	39.3% (n=11)
NON-LGBQ (n=32)					
Yes	43.3% (n=13)	86.7% (n=26)	86.7% (n=26)	90.0% (n=27)	86.7% (n=26)
No	56.7% (n=17)	13.3% (n=4)	13.3% (n=4)	10.0% (n=3)	13.3% (n=4)

Table 4. Perpetrators of Homonegative Victimization

PERPETRATORS	TARGETS	
	Girls %(n)	Boys %(n)
Younger Boys	14.0% (n=6)	37.5% (n=6)
Younger Girls	14.0% (n=6)	18.8% (n=3)
Boys in Same Year	27.9% (n=12)	62.5% (n=10)
Girls in Same Year	30.2% (n=13)	37.5% (n=6)
Older Boys	20.9% (n=9)	31.3% (n=5)
Older Girls	23.3% (n=10)	25.0% (n=4)
People from Other Schools	20.9% (n=9)	37.5% (n=6)
Adults	18.6% (n=8)	0% (n=0)