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Understanding the School Experience of Recent LGBTQ+ Graduates in the Dominican Republic's Education System

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UNDERSTANDING THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE OF RECENT LGBTQ+ GRADUATES IN
THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

by

Rossina Matos

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology
Western Michigan University
April 2020

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UNDERSTANDING THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE OF RECENT LGBTQ+ GRADUATES IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

Rossina Matos, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2020

Studies show that, in general, schools fall short when it comes to serving LGBTQ+ students, sometimes even ignoring the situations regarding bullying, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism that arise. The detrimental effects of repressive, homophobic, biphobic, transphobic, and other marginalizing school environments on LGBTQ+ students are well-documented in the research. However, the limited research available on the school experiences of LGBTQ+ students in Dominican K-12 schools suggests the country could benefit from examining the breadth and depth of the reality of LGBTQ+ students in its schools.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of recent graduates in the K-12 Dominican education system. This study aimed to explore how these students derived meaning from their experiences and how these experiences had shaped who they are today and how they are living their lives. Participants included 12 individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ and graduated from the Dominican education system in the last decade. Data was collected through in-depth narrative interviews and a participant demographic form and was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modification of Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) method of analysis of phenomenological data.

Findings suggest LGBTQ+ individuals in the DR need to adjust to home, school, and societal expectations. At home, participants encountered hardships and lack of support and acceptance. In school, participants were bullied and harassed. Schools lacked inclusive and protective policies for LGBTQ+ individuals and proper sex education. Additionally, schools were generally unprepared to handle the situations that arose with these students regarding their sexual or gender identity. The study findings illustrate a dissonance between the country's espoused cultural and religious norms and the way LGBTQ+ individuals experience family, school and societal response to who they are. This study is the first to examine the school experience of LGBTQ+ individuals in Dominican K-12 schools. The study suggests further research on the long-term impact these school experiences have on LGBTQ+ individuals in the country, and on the lived experiences of families with LGBTQ+ individuals and educational institutions with LGBTQ+ students. The study also suggests research to determine why policymakers, administrative personnel, and teachers are ill prepared to address bullying and discrimination on the basis of sexual and gender identity.

“A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

DEDICATION

To my angels—
I will always wonder who you would have been.

To my children—
I want three things from you:
That you do all things in love.
That you be authentic.
That you be true to yourselves.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study led me to engage in constant self-reflection as a mother, daughter, sister, wife, teacher, school administrator, and as a researcher. Most of all, this study led me to self-reflect as a human being. It made me access privileges I did not even know I had. It helped me to become aware of these privileges. I have grown, personally and professionally. I have learned who I am throughout these years of study. I have found myself. I am human. I strive to be mindful. I am an empathic soul, a justice-seeker... a human rights activist.

It would have been impossible to complete this dissertation without the guidance and wisdom of my advisor, Dr. Patricia Reeves. Your energy, positivity, motivation, and words of encouragement saw me through. Thank you for passion and your faith in me. Dr. Archer, thank you for challenging me and for demanding the best of me. Dr. Bryan, thank you for your time and knowledge.

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Acknowledgments—Continued

To my co-researchers: I have said this before and will say it again to all of you who so willingly and selflessly shared your story: to do so in an effort to possibly help others makes you great. Thank you for being vulnerable with me, thank you for your courage and honesty, thank you for opening up the deepest and most honest parts of yourselves. You made this study possible.

To all LGBTQ+ students: I see you. I honor you. I am in awe of your courage and strength. I hope you see me as a safe place, a helping hand, a shoulder to lean on.

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Acknowledgments—Continued

To my children: in the words of A. Earhart: “you have taught me to be.” Your presence gives my life purpose. If I fight for a more loving and fairer world, it is for and because of you.

Rossina Matos

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As a child, I understood the word privilege as a noun, not an adjective. It took time to understand privilege as something you could *be*. I witnessed so much of our society exercise privileges on a daily basis. Because of this, at a young age, I became aware of how unjust life is towards those who are perceived as different, the unfitting, those who simply do not conform with the norm. Even so, it took time to come to terms with the fact that I, too, am *different* because I, too, am *privileged*.

One of the first underprivileged populations that I became aware of was the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community, given the fact that I grew up with a brother who a decade ago identified as gay. However, I was too young to understand the meaning or significance of sexual or gender identity. Despite this, I was aware of how my brother was repeatedly put down for not fitting into the gender roles he was expected to perform... for not fitting into society's standards. I was also affected by these gender roles, but to a lesser degree. I lacked femininity and rejected everything it entailed in our home country, the Dominican Republic (DR), from wearing dresses and being neat to getting involved in the kitchen and setting the table for dinner. I considered myself tough and strong, however, I was not expected to be so. My brother, in contrast, was expected to be rugged. Instead, he was perceived as delicate and fragile, much to our conservative family's discontent.

As I matured, I grew conscious of the plight of LGBTQ+ individuals in a country where the fine line between church and state has been consistently blurred out throughout history, where traditional gender roles are ingrained in its culture, preventing progress from taking a firm grasp of its societal conceptions, and where its government willingly excludes minorities and has

yet to express interest in the implementation of public policies that protect these individuals (Marzan, Sánchez, Hernández, Jiménez, King, Mercedes, Maldonado, Jiménez, & Ventura, 2014).

Growing up, my brother and I attended a renowned private school in the DR and later we both pursued higher education in the United States (US). I attended a university in Massachusetts that celebrated and fostered diversity. This was the first time I witnessed this particular school environment, where individuals who would have been considered unfitting in the DR could be themselves without worries or fear, where individuals felt protected and supported by their school... where individuals were safe and free to *be*.

My time in the US was eye-opening; it helped me to acknowledge my privilege. While living in Massachusetts, I learned about activism, advocacy, and social justice. But it was not until a couple of years after my arrival in the DR that I took on an activist role, when I was ready to start my own family. It took several failed attempts and a lot of heartbreak to finally have living children of my own. I realized then and there the love I had for my children, whomever they were, and it was then when I became courageous enough to speak up and actively stand up to those who belittle others considered *different*. With the support of two of my brothers, we began an online movement called *Dominicanos X Igualdad* [Dominicans X Equality], joining the fight for justice and equality in the DR, specifically challenging the unjust reality of sexual minorities in the country.

Ever since, I strove to live in fairness and equity, be it for my brother, my children, or my children's children. In my quest to help build a more equitable and just society, I took bell hooks' words on privilege to heart and learned to use my privilege as a tool to educate and empower others:

Privilege is not in and of itself bad; what matters is what we do with privilege. Privilege does not have to be negative, but we have to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it. (hooks & Mesa-Bains, 2018)

In 2020, LGBTQ+ rights are still a taboo topic in the Dominican society. As a Dominican citizen and educator, I have witnessed LGBTQ+ individuals long suffer in silence in Dominican classrooms and hallways. Despite the multiple anecdotes and the few reports available on LGBTQ+ rights in the country, LGBTQ+ K-12 students' experiences in the DR have yet to be documented. This study aimed to give voice to recent (2008-2018) LGBTQ+ graduates from the Dominican educational system and to document their school experiences as LGBTQ+ individuals.

Background

In 2013 the United States of America appointed Wally Brewster as US ambassador to the DR. It took time for the government of the DR to agree to this appointment, and as Satawake, Brewster's spouse recalls in his book, the pressure to deny him as ambassador did not come from the government itself but from the cardinal of the Catholic Church (Satawake, 2019). Cardinal López Rodríguez was not happy about the nomination of an openly gay man as ambassador to the DR, let alone an openly gay man married to another man (Satawake, 2019).

After the White House officially confirmed Brewster as the US ambassador to the DR, the cardinal held a press conference where he referred to Brewster as a "*maricón*" (faggot in Spanish). In addition, Vicar Pablo Cedano stated the nomination of Brewster was disrespectful to the country and warned Brewster on live television that he was to suffer in the country if he decided to go through with his nomination and would be "forced to leave" (Satawake, 2019, p. 52). Following the Catholic Church's representatives' statements, the religious community in the

DR organized the “Black Monday Protest” during the summer of 2013, aimed to scare away the newly appointed ambassador before his confirmation by the US Senate (Satawake, 2019).

Despite these hurdles, Brewster announced his excitement to serve his country with his husband by his side. Once Brewster and Satawake arrived in the DR, Dominican citizens expressed their outrage through protests; churches demonstrated their rejection of Brewster and Satawake by organizing marches against them, arguing “their presence in the country violates article 55 of the Dominican Constitution, that says marriage is only allowed between a man and a woman” (“Religiosos Anti-Gay...,” 2014) and by requesting the government to declare them as *personae non gratae* (Tapia, 2014). Moreover, individuals and organizations used their social media accounts to show disapproval, thus, quickly spreading the message that these two individuals were not welcome in the DR.

Often, the ambassador received invitations addressed to “Ambassador and Guest” (Satawake, 2019, p. 89). The Ambassador also received diplomatic invitations to several events, not inviting Satawake, even though it is common practice to invite diplomats and their spouses to such events. The papal nuncio, representative of the Vatican in the DR, let Brewster know that he would be invited to the event but not his husband. Brewster proceeded by telling him that he would be unable to attend without Satawake. The papal nuncio later issued a press statement saying the US ambassador “had declined to pay respects to the president and first lady” of the DR (Satawake, 2019, p. 83). In this press statement, the papal nuncio also declared that the Diplomatic Corps refused to attend an event if Satawake was invited. This statement was later denied in a press release by the United Kingdom’s ambassador to the DR, indicating he and his wife would not be attending if Satawake was not invited (Satawake, 2019). Diplomats in the DR protested the discrimination and this event was cancelled (Peña, 2014). But the diplomats’

protest did not put an end to the anti-LGBTQ+ campaign. Representatives of the Catholic Church made public statements and used homophobic slurs to refer to the Ambassador and Satawake (Londoño, 2016).

It was not until Brewster and Satawake visited a rural school and were photographed with students that the controversy in the educational sector began. After the photographs were made public, the president of the Dominican Association of Teachers, Eduardo Hidalgo, asked the Ministry of Education of the DR (MINERD) to deny the Ambassador the opportunity to visit more schools in the countryside (Londoño, 2016). Hidalgo stated Brewster “could do his activities, but with adults, because an adult can differentiate what is convenient and what is not” (García Marco, 2016). In response to Brewster’s and Satawake’s school visit, a Catholic school in Santo Domingo placed a sign that read, “The Ambassador of the United States is NOT welcome in this institute” (García Marco, 2016; Tapia, 2016). After this school visit, several sectors expressed their discontent and demanded the US government to remove Brewster as ambassador through a petition in the White House website (Tapia, 2016).

Tension Between Social Norms and Constitutional Protections

Brewster and Satawake’s story illustrates the environment of unacceptance that permeates Dominican society and influences the culture of the country’s schools. The social and cultural norms in the DR regarding gender roles are imposed by custom and practice (Marzan et al., 2014). The country’s religious beliefs shape these norms and influence citizens’ understanding and recognition of LGBTQ+ individuals. In 2010, the Dominican Constitution was amended. Despite the request of the LGBTQ+ community in the country as civil society to specifically reference *sexual orientation and gender identity*, lawmakers declined to include that reference in the newly amended constitution (Marzan et al., 2014), inserting the vaguer term,

“social or personal condition” instead. This final choice of language leaves much to interpretation and avoids specifically recognizing LGBTQ+ persons.

As a result, Dominican school leaders are caught in the tension between the social and cultural norms and the rights implicitly or explicitly granted in the country’s constitution. These school leaders overtly rejected LGBTQ+ individuals by publicly stating their non-acceptance of Brewster and Satawake and by failing to promote an inclusive and respectful environment. Additionally, the public response to the US ambassador and resulting rejection voiced by school leaders was met with silence by the Dominican President (García Marco, 2016; Marzan, 2016). The silence of those who shape public policy was a de facto endorsement of rejection by various religious, government, and educational leaders, despite official constitutional policy. This silence could be cause for LGBTQ+ individuals in the Dominican education system to feel forsaken and deliberately marginalized. If the state is the first to fail to recognize the legitimacy of this population, the expectancy of anyone to react in favor of and come out in defense of the LGBTQ+ community may be limited.

LGBTQ+ Intolerance in the Educational Environment

The public response of the US ambassador and his husband brought about little in the way of meaningful public dialogue. In fact, the overt rejection by religious and educational leaders and more silent and subtle rejection by public officials sent a clear message that the Dominican culture is not yet ready to recognize and legitimize the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. If the lives of LGBTQ+ persons cannot be acknowledged in the affairs of state, the vague terms “social and personal condition” in the Dominican Constitution can provide little assurance to those persons that their legitimacy is to be acknowledged and protected in other aspects of Dominican affairs.

Students in the Dominican education system can reasonably assume that this lack of acknowledgement and protection extends to them.

Though there is scant research into the lived realities of LGBTQ+ students in the Dominican public and private education system, studies conducted in other countries can inform understanding of what LGBTQ+ students may experience in educational settings. Unfortunately, this is the reality of LGBTQ+ students in general: they lack direct support from staff, teachers, or peers and do not benefit from resources in the school environment that address or reflect their LGBTQ+ identity. Because of this lack of support or resources, adolescence is tougher on them than on the rest of the students (Bailey, 2005). LGBTQ+ students have a hard time fitting in and usually do not have people in school with whom they can share their “thoughts and feelings” with (Bailey, 2005, p. 32). While establishing an inclusive culture in schools provides the impetus for developing these kinds of supports for LGBTQ+ students, such a culture is difficult to cultivate in an environment that fails to discuss LGBTQ+ topics (Castro & Sujak, 2014). Despite the surging of new worldwide social movements and activism in their defense, a repressive culture where LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe is natural in schools (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). This repressive culture is further solidified when the broader social context is also repressive and even overtly hostile.

In countries that lack protective policies of LGBTQ+ individuals, bullying of LGBTQ+ students in educational settings can thrive (Polihronakis, Etengoff, & Rodriguez, 2016). Bullying is a prevalent and universal issue in schools all around the world (Griffiths, 1995; Pollock, 2006), but it is particularly prominent in behavior toward marginalized persons (Polihronakis, Etengoff, & Rodriguez, 2016). A survey by the National Mental Health Association in the United States revealed 78% of teenagers who identify as LGBTQ+ or are

perceived as LGBTQ+ experience bullying (Pollock, 2006). According to Polihronakis, Etengoff, and Rodriguez (2016), 84% of LGBTQ+ students in the US reported being harassed due to their sexual identity. These authors also state that 90% of middle and high schoolers reported hearing homophobic remarks. Other researchers also bring attention to the high number of students who are victims in schools and report that LGBTQ+ students are more likely to be bullied, harassed, and assaulted, as well as more likely to be depressed, attempt suicide, or self-harm than their heterosexual peers (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar & Azrael, 2009; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull & Greytak, 2012). Low self-esteem, homophobia, and heterosexism are some of the reasons why LGBTQ+ students are considered a target and are more prone to bullying and harassment (Pollock, 2006).

LGBTQ+ Intolerance in the Home Environment

Because social structures presume heterosexuality and do not recognize sexual diversity (Epstein & Johnson, 1994), LGBTQ+ youth experience an unfavorable climate in school and at home as well (Ressler & Chase, 2009). Most parents and family members usually have a hard time when finding out that their child identifies as LGBTQ+, mainly because most LGBTQ+ individuals do not come from LGBTQ+ families (Castro & Sujak, 2014; Macgillivray, 2000; Pollock, 2006). Moreover, Castro and Sujak state LGBTQ+ youth rarely have a family member who is available to talk to about these topics, and their fear of being rejected could result in these individuals alienating themselves at home. Macgillivray (2000) states LGBTQ+ youth cannot count on their parents “as role models” (p. 308). Because of the fear of retribution and alienation from their families if they disclose their sexual or gender identity, many of these adolescents engage in risky behaviors that may result in school dropout, depression, and suicide attempts

(Macgillivray, 2000). According to Castro and Sujak, LGBTQ+ students are twice as likely to run away from home or drop out of school than their heterosexual cisgender peers.

Since children experience the world primarily through their family and school experiences, by the time they are in high school, they have been indoctrinated to the ways in which society acknowledges and validates sexual identities (Castro & Sujak, 2014). In addition, LGBTQ+ students grow up with “social pressures to conform” to heterosexuality (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 452). If a person’s identity is one treated at home and at school as non-recognizable and/or unacceptable, that person has few options to safely express who they are or to freely “be themselves” (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 452). This poses a fundamental challenge to a child or adolescent’s sense of safety and security, resulting in internalized homophobia, stigmatization, discrimination, and violence (Meyer, 1995). As such, heterosexual cisgender students are more advantaged than their LGBTQ+ peers in school settings (Castro & Sujak, 2014).

Schools Can Make a Difference

Studies have shown, however, that schools that proactively acknowledge the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ students can make a positive difference in their lives. In contrast to the consequences LGBTQ+ students experience when rejected or repressed at home or in their school environment, schools that address homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia positively impact the lives of LGBTQ+ students by helping them develop a positive attitude toward their schooling and, therefore, perform better academically (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). However, homosexuality, sexuality, and sexual or gender identity regrettably are rarely topics included in K-12 academic curricula (Macgillivray, 2000). Even with good intentions toward all students, schools that lack specific curricular and/or co-curricular strategies to acknowledge LGBTQ+

students and respond to their needs can end up systematically excluding LGBTQ+ individuals in the educational environment (Friend, 1993). The lack of inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in schools creates a void in which the presence of students and staff that reject LGBTQ+ students may contribute to verbal and physical abuse as well as harassment of this population in schools (Blackburn & McCready, 2009), and where LGBTQ+ youth may feel students and staff have license to do so.

Unfortunately, teachers often discourage discussions of LGBTQ+ topics and fail to address anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment in classrooms or hallways because they fear “backlash from parents and administrators” (Macgillivray, 2000, p. 316). Such is the case of many schools in the DR, where parents, school teachers and staff, religious, public, and/or private officials and leaders do not encourage, much less, allow Dominican schools to create an environment where LGBTQ+ students are acknowledged, protected, and provided the supports they need to be fully integrated into the school community. With the creation of inclusive policies for all students, policies that specifically offer protection to LGBTQ+ students, schools can begin to protect LGBTQ+ youth within educational environments (Macgillivray, 2000).

Breaking the Silence

Bringing this to the Dominican context, the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (2013) prepared by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in the DR considers the LGBTQ+ community in the country a vulnerable and marginalized population, alongside the poor, Haitians or individuals of Haitian descent, women, girls, and individuals with disabilities. LGBTQ+ individuals in the DR are subject to constant discrimination on the basis of sexual or gender identity due to the lack of public policies that explicitly protect them.

LGBTQ+ individuals in the DR are discriminated against in private and public spaces, including at home, schools, workspaces, and hospitals (Marzan et al., 2014). These authors also express many individuals experience violence in their homes when they identify as LGBTQ+ and are forced out of their homes or restricted economically; this results in some LGBTQ+ individuals attempting suicide. Moreover, Marzan et al. state, the homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Dominican schools lead LGBTQ+ students to low academic performance and sometimes school dropout. Generally, dropping out leads individuals to resort to sex work for money. In the workplace, LGBTQ+ individuals in the DR are denied jobs due to their sexual or gender identity, claiming their hiring could affect the company's employees. In Dominican hospitals, LGBTQ+ individuals are denied healthcare or receive insufficient medical attention (Marzan et al., 2014).

In a country like the DR, where different forms of sexuality other than heterosexuality are condemned due to cultural and religious beliefs, and public policies and laws fail to offer explicit protection to LGBTQ+ individuals, we can infer administrators, teachers, counselors, and school staff are frequently predisposed to repress or ignore the concerns of LGBTQ+ students. Even when they are not predisposed to recognize and address LGBTQ+ issues, they are possibly ill-equipped to proactively support and serve LGBTQ+ students in Dominican schools and classrooms. Because this is still not a sanctioned topic in the Dominican society, we can also infer schools have not prioritized personnel training to address the challenges that LGBTQ+ students face.

Importantly, although the 2015 Constitution of the DR does not offer explicit constitutional protections to LGBTQ+ individuals, by not ensuring safe learning environments for all students, including LGBTQ+ students, schools are violating Human Rights contained in

the country's constitution, which clearly articulates the right to equality that every individual is entitled to in Article 39:

Persons are born free and equal before the law, they receive the same protection and treatment from the institutions, authorities and other persons and enjoy the same rights, freedoms and opportunities, without any discrimination for reasons of gender, color, age, disability, nationality, family ties, language, religion, political or philosophical opinion, and social or personal condition. (The Constitution of the Dominican Republic, 2015)

Article 63 further asserts that every individual is also entitled to a supportive learning environment:

Every person has the right to an integral education, of quality, permanent, in equality of conditions and opportunities, without other limitations than those derived from their aptitudes, vocation and aspirations. (The Constitution of the Dominican Republic, 2015)

Finally, the Dominican Constitution affirms everyone's right to free development of personality in Article 43:

Every person has the right to the free development of their personality, without other limitations than those imposed by the juridical order and the rights of others (The Constitution of the Dominican Republic, 2015)

Regardless of their stand on the topic or whether LGBTQ+ students and their families voice their concerns about school-related issues, school leaders and administrators are legally and ethically obliged to provide a hate-free learning environment for all students, including those members of the LGBTQ+ community (Bailey, 2005; Castro & Sujak, 2014; Porreca, 2010).

The tension between the social and cultural norms of the country may have allowed room for Dominican educational leaders to disregard Human Rights and the Dominican Constitution, evidenced in the public reaction of these leaders by the presence of Brewster and Satawake in a Dominican school. As a school leader myself, I questioned the country's education system, wondering what values and code of behavior Dominican schools instill in Dominican youth. I thought about the students who identify or are perceived as LGBTQ+ in the system; the school

leaders' public rejection of Brewster may have led them to feel unsupported and unwelcomed. The commotion caused by Brewster's arrival and his visit to the school is not surprising in a country with such strong ties between state and Church but do stress the need to study the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in the Dominican education system. It was after witnessing the manifestations and attacks against Brewster that I aimed to give voice to an underserved and underrepresented population in the DR, "the invisible minority of the adolescent population" (Nichols, 1999, p. 509): LGBTQ+ students in Dominican K-12 classrooms.

Problem Statement

The detrimental effects of repressive, homophobic, biphobic, transphobic, and other marginalizing school environments on LGBTQ+ students are well-documented in the research literature in the United States, Canada, and some European countries (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Griffin and Ouellet. 2003; Kosciw and Pizmony-Levy, 2016). Studies show that, in general, schools fall short when it comes to serving LGBTQ+ students, sometimes even ignoring the situations regarding bullying, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism that arise (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009). In general, schools neglect to accept the legitimacy of the LGBTQ+ student's personality, causing them to feel unsupported and unsafe. These students are more likely to be bullied, harassed, and assaulted than their heterosexual, cisgender peers. Moreover, the bullying and harassment that they endure also makes them more likely to evidence poor academic performance due to the emotional distress experienced in school, as well as drop out of school, be depressed, attempt self-harm or suicide, and turn to substance abuse (Castro & Sujak, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2012; Liboro et al., 2015; Mayo, 2013).

While, in general, there are more resources available to support LGBTQ+ individuals in cities, LGBTQ+ students continue to experience homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and discrimination in urban school settings in the US (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). These authors state that schools that turn a blind eye to LGBTQ+ students and the situations they face in educational contexts are also common in communities that lack the economic, social, and cultural means to support this population. We can infer that, in a country like the DR, where social, cultural, and religious barriers support the invisibility of the LGBTQ+ community (Marzan et al., 2014), LGBTQ+ students in K-12 schools live in situations similar or worse than those of LGBTQ+ students in the US and Canada.

Anecdotal information shared among educators and school leaders from Dominican schools suggests that, for the most part, attitudes and practices that foster an environment where LGBTQ+ students feel unsupported and unsafe are pervasive and quite prevalent in the Dominican context. Based on anecdotal sources, resources that encourage or help Dominican LGBTQ+ students and their families to push back on this treatment despite implicit Dominican Constitution protections (2015) for fear of retribution, isolation, and other negative consequences are scarce. The Dominican education system would be well-served by examining the breadth and depth of the reality of LGBTQ+ students in the country. However, without a climate that encourages a more systematic study of LGBTQ+ students' experiences in the DR, it is not possible to point to large-scale studies that quantify their experiences. It is not possible to point to large-scale qualitative studies that classify and categorize LGBTQ+ students' experiences as they engage with the current education system in the DR either. In my search of the literature, I found little research that provides even a beginning understanding of the school experiences of LGBTQ+ students in Dominican K-12 schools.

Purpose Statement & Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of recent (2008-2018) LGBTQ+ graduates in the K-12 Dominican education system. Additionally, this study aimed to explore how these students derived meaning from their experiences and how these experiences had shaped who they are today and how they are living their lives. Furthermore, this study is intended to provide an outlet or a means by which this population that has been significantly marginalized and systematically quieted (Castro & Sujak, 2014; Pollock, 2006) is heard and understood in a non-judgmental and non-isolating manner within the context of Dominican society.

The overarching research question that guided this study was: What are the lived experiences of recent LGBTQ+ graduates in the Dominican K-12 education system? To probe the experiences of these individuals more deeply and gather essential information about their time as students in the Dominican K-12 education system, the following sub-questions further guided and framed this study:

1. How do recent LGBTQ+ high school graduates describe their time in Dominican K-12 schools?
2. What factors influence how recent LGBTQ+ high school graduates describe their K-12 school experience in the DR within the broader context of their childhood, adolescence, and post graduate lives?
3. How do recent LGBTQ+ high school graduates' make meaning of their experiences as students in Dominican K-12 schools and how do they carry those meanings into their adult lives?

Significance of Study

The first step to influencing social justice for a given marginalized population can be to find outlets for their voice to be heard. This can be a particular contribution of a research study conducted in the phenomenological tradition because the purpose of phenomenology is to elicit and understand the reality of those who live a particular phenomenon. In the case of this study, the phenomenon of interest is the school experience of LGBTQ+ individuals in a society that has yet to acknowledge any of those identities as legitimate and worthy of the protections afforded to other citizens.

The Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) (n.d.) shared a statement by Madrigal-Borloz and Boly Barry, Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual and gender identity and Special Rapporteur on the right to education respectively, stating that all United Nations (UN) member states commit to ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” under the Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015. Because the DR is one of the 193 member states, it is obliged to work in favor of reaching the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Moreover, the OHCHR mandate states to conduct studies to collect data “on education, disaggregated by sexual orientation and gender identity, to inform policy development.” The findings from this study may help the Dominican government to develop public policy that protects and better serves LGBTQ+ individuals in educational environments.

The findings may be useful to leaders of schools in terms of understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and how these experiences impact and shape their school performance and lives. Furthermore, the study may be useful for schools interested in creating policies that respect and comply with the Human Rights contained in the Dominican

Constitution, specifically articles 39, 63, and 43, which expressly articulate the right of every person to freely develop their personality in a supportive and safe learning environment. In addition to the legal obligations, school leaders who feel ethically obliged to provide a safe learning space for LGBTQ+ students may find this study helpful in terms of learning from and understanding the perspective of these individuals as LGBTQ+ students in the country.

Conceptual Framework and Narrative

The conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 1) illustrates how this study sought to derive the essence of LGBTQ+ individuals' school experience in K-12 schools in Dominican schools. This essence was derived using an open mind, intuition, and self-reflection (Moustakas, 1994) when analyzing the experiences these individuals shared with me during their interviews, taking into account the unique social, political, historical, and cultural context in which these experiences took place. The study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach, where I bracketed my assumptions, biases, and preconceptions throughout the research process, aiming to approach the data exactly as the participants described them (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenological approach was the best fit for this study given the fact that it is the first study of its kind and this methodology ensured an accurate representation of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in the DR.

To facilitate a broader understanding of the meaning of the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals during their time as K-12 students in the DR, their stories were examined through a queer theory lens. This theoretical approach not only allowed a better understanding of the historical context and the evolution of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, but also enabled the critical examination of the many factors that influenced the participants' experiences, providing a framework to understand these experiences within the Dominican context.

The existing knowledge about LGBTQ+ student experience in the US, Canada, Latin America and Caribbean countries, as well as the current standing of LGBTQ+ rights in these countries also gave room for a better understanding of the context in which the participants' experiences took place. Based on their descriptions of their K-12 school experience as LGBTQ+ students in the DR, I thematized and crystallized their stories until I derived their "meaning and essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Giving voice to this suppressed and underrepresented population that has been unsupported in the educational context for years (Castro & Sujak, 2014; Pollock, 2006) could very well be the first step to challenging power relationships, heteronormativity, binaries, and assumptions regarding sexuality and gender as proposed by queer theory (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Queer theory led me to choose the transcendental phenomenological approach. It heightened my sense of responsibility to limit my bias as much as humanly possible and to do my best to tell my participants' stories as they told them. It led me to understand the population I was studying and to sit and learn from my participants. Queer theory was particularly useful for this study because it helped the study participants to embrace the possibility of queering educational environments to challenge society and seek social justice by growing awareness of the current situation LGBTQ+ students face in Dominican K-12 schools. By exploring the lives of a traditionally and persistently marginalized group through a phenomenology, this study will help realize one of the tenets of queer theory; to bring forth a humanized and authentic picture of lives lived as a member of that marginalized group and making those lives matter.

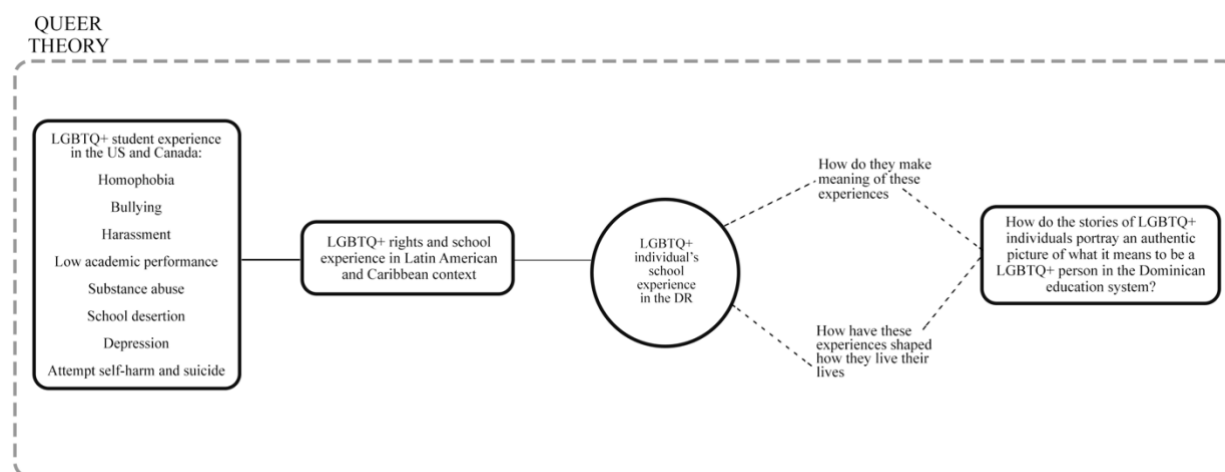


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for understanding the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals in Dominican K-12 schools.

Chapter Summary

This first chapter intended to introduce the reader to this study through an overview, background, and rationale of the study. This study explored how LGBTQ+ individuals describe and make meaning of their experiences in K-12 schools in the country. Additionally, this study aimed to explore how these experiences have impacted these individuals and how they are living their lives today. This study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach to grasp the “meaning and essences” of the school experiences of these individuals (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). The next chapter presents the literature review for this study and considers the existing literature from the US, Canada, and the Latin American and Caribbean region. Moreover, this chapter details the current standing of LGBTQ+ rights in the DR and the little information available on LGBTQ+ student experience in the DR. The third chapter presents the study methodology, its population and sampling strategies, as well as data collection and analysis procedures. The fourth chapter presents the participant narratives that describe their experiences exactly as they narrated them. The fifth chapter presents the findings for this study. Finally, the sixth chapter presents a

discussion of study results, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of recent (2008-2018) LGBTQ+ graduates of the K-12 Dominican educational system. Furthermore, this study aimed to explore how they derived meaning from these experiences and to portray the essences of these experiences. In this chapter, I provide a general overview of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in the US and Canada and review the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights in Latin America and the Caribbean, examining the relevant literature that facilitates the understanding of this topic through its development in various countries. As the current study explores LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences in the last decade as K-12 students in Dominican schools retrospectively, it is also important to incorporate literature that supports the description of the region's social, political, historical, and cultural context in which these experiences took place.

The literature review begins by defining the LGBTQ+-related terms that have been used throughout the study. The next section establishes queer theory as the theoretical framework to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in society and describes its connection to this study. Finally, the literature review will discuss and demonstrate the need for research related to LGBTQ+ student experiences in the DR. Throughout this literature review and the remaining chapters of this dissertation, I use the singular pronoun *they* instead of the he/she singular pronouns. This choice reflects the use of gender inclusive language out of respect for individuals who do not identify with he/she pronouns.

Definition of Terms

The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things are white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the

human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex. (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948, p. 639)

Over 65 years later, Kinsey et al.'s (1948) statement above is still relevant when discussing sexuality, gender, sexual identity, and gender identity. Although labeling identities helps to create a common ground, a safety net, and support system, it is rare that people fully identify with any particular label by embodying every characteristic of it (Killermann, 2017). Because the time, setting, and context in which research takes place directly influences definitions and preferred terms (Sell, 1995), I feel compelled to define the central terms comprehended in this study and include them as an important part of this literature review. While dissertations typically would include definitions in an appendix, I am placing them within the body of my literature review to ensure that the reader can navigate the conversation in this review with consistent understanding of terminology.

According to Qmunity, "queer terminology is fluid and evolving" and constantly changes over time (2013, p. 0), so an exhaustive list of the many terms related to sexual and gender identity is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I acknowledge that this is not and does not intend to be a *complete* or comprehensive definition of terms, as Killermann (2019) states in his e-book *Defining LGBTQ+: A Guide to Gender and Sexuality Terminology*. Moreover, I understand the conventional terms are non-genderqueer inclusive but will be used because their tradition makes them familiar and because using the newer terms requires people to understand and make meaning of gender other than a binary system (Killermann, 2017). Most of the definitions comprehended in this glossary come from Western literature, more specifically, from Killermann's latest e-book (2019) and printed book (2017). The definitions he offers in his work are not only current and updated but accessible to everyone by using a simple and common

language. These definitions intend to make this study easier to understand and clear any doubts that may arise due to the language and terms used to describe the phenomena studied. I will define the following terms: *ally, biological sex, biphobia, bisexual, cisgender, coming out, gay, gay-straight alliances, gender, gender expression, gender identity, gender norms, heteronormativity, heterosexuality, homophobia, homosexuality, intersex, lesbian, LGBTQ+, outing, privilege, queer, questioning, sexism, sexual orientation, straight, transgender., and transphobia.*

This study employs the full range of vocabulary that follows, not to promote inflexible categorization of individuals, but rather, to aid the exploration of the lived experience of individuals who are traditionally marginalized because of one or more aspects of their sexual or gender identity that sit outside of tightly defined societal norms. The terminology used for further exploration of the lives of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ will be employed as a means to acknowledge and respect variation in the human spectrum of difference without judgement or boundaries defining who is accepted as within and who is marginalized as without social recognition and inclusion.

Ally

A term used to describe an individual who is not LGBTQ+ but acknowledges and supports the LGBTQ+ community by promoting equality in different ways (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Biological Sex

Biological sex refers to the sex an individual is assigned at birth based on the hormonal and anatomical attributes or characteristics used to “classify an individual as female or male or

intersex” (Killermann, 2019, p. 15). Biological sex may also be referred to as “sex, physical sex, anatomical sex,” or “sex assigned at birth” (p. 15).

Biphobia

Negative attitudes such as “fear, anger, intolerance, invisibility, resentment, erasure, or discomfort” towards bisexual individuals. Biphobia can be seen within the straight or the LGBTQ+ community (Killermann, 2019, p 15).

Bisexual

An individual attracted to both, men and women, or an individual attracted to “their gender and another gender” (Killermann, 2019, p. 15).

Cisgender

The term cisgender means a person’s assigned sex at birth corresponds to their gender identity (Killermann, 2019).

Coming Out

Coming out is both a noun and a verb. The former is a process through which an individual “accepts and/or comes out” to identify their own sexuality or gender identity and the latter is a process through which an individual shares their “sexuality or gender identity with others” (Killermann, 2019, p. 16).

Gay

A term used to describe an individual who experiences attraction “solely (or primarily) to some members of the same gender” (Killermann, 2019, p. 20). Although frequently used when referring to men attracted to men (Qmunity, 2013), it can also be used when referring to women attracted to women (Killermann, 2019).

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)

Gay-Straight Alliances, often known as GSAs, are student clubs where LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students are members, typically guided by one or a couple of teachers or school staff. GSAs aim to provide in-school support and safe spaces where LGBTQ+ students and allies promote acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. In some schools and countries, GSAs have other names that encompass all identities such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances, because “gay” does not encompass all identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella (Taylor, Peter, McMinn, Paquin, Schachter, Beldom, Ferry, & Gross, 2011).

Gender

Gender is a social construct and something we perform (Janose, 1996). Examples of social constructs are how masculinity and femininity are experienced and expressed depending on culture and context (Qmunity, 2013). Killermann (2017) acknowledges how difficult it must be to think of and understand gender as something other than a *binary* system (composed of two parts, in this case, male and female) if this is what we have been taught ever since we were born. Gender is “personal” and “individual” (Killerman, 2017, p. 137).

Gender Expression

Killermann (2019) defines gender expression as “the external display” or presentation of an individual’s gender, evident through the way they dress, act, perform, stand, talk, pronounce, or even groom (p. 20). Society and culture set the standards for gender expression through traditional gender norms or roles, and individuals are expected to act according to these norms and expectations. Gender expression is not fixed but fluid, is in constant change, and fluctuates throughout the day depending on the individual’s outfit, setting, context, and culture. Moreover, gender expression determines the adversity and privilege faced by an individual because of their

gender. Gender expression can be used to demonstrate or reject gender identity. It is important to point out that individuals will interpret gender expression through their eyes only and assume another individual's gender identity based on their biases, experiences, and their society's gender norms (Killermann, 2017).

Gender Identity

Killermann (2019) defines gender identity as “the internal perception of one's gender, and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or don't align with what they understand their options for gender to be” (p. 20). More specifically, gender identity is an individual's response to a social construct that aims to connect a person's biological sex to a role established by society. Society and culture define how an individual understands gender and will directly influence their gender identity. Individuals may have grown up in societies where gender is a binary system or in societies that have third and other gender options (Killermann, 2017).

Gender Norms

Gender norms are a set of informal rules imposed by society that individuals are expected to follow. These norms change over time, setting, context, and culture (Killermann, 2017).

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is a term used to describe the dominant cultural ideal of family, encompassing characteristics such as sexual identity, race, and class (Bryan, 2017).

Heteronormativity assumes a *normal* family is composed of a white, middle class, married heterosexual couple and biological children (McNeill, 2013). Moreover, the term heteronormativity assumes heterosexual relationships are “normal” and “natural” (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 84).

Heterosexuality

Heterosexual is a term used to describe a person “attracted to the opposite sex” (Barker & Scheele, p. 11). Traditionally, heterosexuality is viewed as the “dominant, stable form of sexuality” (de Lauretis, 1991, p. iii). Moreover, Jagose (1996) states heterosexuality is “privileged and naturalized” (p. 72). Often referred to as straight, Killermann (2019) defines heterosexual as an individual “experiencing attraction solely (or primarily) to some members of a different gender” (p. 22).

Homophobia

The term homophobia is used to describe negative attitudes towards gay and lesbian individuals and to same-sex “practices and relationships” (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 85). Homophobia has different levels and forms such as cultural/institutional homophobia, interpersonal homophobia, and internalized homophobia. The homophobia an individual experiences is directly related to the gender norms or roles of the society in which they live in (Qmunity, 2013). Killermann (2019) defines homophobia as “an umbrella term for a range of negative attitudes (eg., fear, anger, intolerance, resentment, erasure, or discomfort)” towards LGBTQ+ people (p. 22).

Homosexuality

During the 1960s, homosexuality was classified as a deviation from heterosexuality (Jagose, 1996). The term homosexuality is used to describe a form of sexuality where individuals are attracted to others of their gender. The term homosexual is an “outdated clinical term considered derogatory and offensive” (GLAAD, n.d.); the preferred terms are lesbian, gay, or queer (Qmunity, 2013). Killermann (2019) defines homosexual as “a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex/gender,” and adds

this term is “considered stigmatizing... due to its history as a category of mental illness” (p. 22).

Like Qmunity, Killermann encourages the use of “gay or lesbian instead” (p. 22).

Identity

Barthes (1978) posits one’s self-understanding is a result of the conventional codes of representation used to describe ourselves. Jagose (1996) defines identity as an ongoing “process” of identifying oneself “with and against others” (p. 79).

Intersex

Intersex individuals are born with an external appearance and attributes of a sex but have an internal functioning reproductive system of another sex (Killermann, 2017). Killermann (2019) adds intersex was “formerly known as hermaphrodite” but that this term is “outdated and derogatory” (p. 22).

Lesbian

Lesbian is a term to describe a woman attracted to other women. The term gay may also be used instead (Qmunity, 2013). Killermann (2019) adds the attraction could be romantic, erotic, and/or emotional.

LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ is an acronym used to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning individuals. LGBT and GLBT are also accepted terms (GLAAD, n.d.). Killermann (2019) states “some people add a + at the end in an effort to be more inclusive” (p. 24).

Outing

Killermann (2019) defines outing as “involuntary or unwanted disclosure of another person’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status” (p. 25).

Privilege

Privilege is a term used to describe unearned social, political, and economic advantages, granted to an individual due to their membership of hegemonic groups in society. It is not something they choose or reject, but that they are granted solely based on identity, and it paves the way for others to view and interact with them (Killermann, 2017).

Queer

There is no agreement on the exact meaning of the word *queer* (Jagose, 1996); the meaning varies depending on time and context. Initially, queer was employed meaning strangeness, oddness, or difference. Queer became hate-speech in the late 19th century, a term of abuse to refer to same-sex sexual relationships or attractions. In the 1980s, members of the LGBTQ+ community reclaimed the word queer as a neutral or positive way to describe themselves (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Queer then became “a zone of possibilities” (Edelman, 1994, p. 114), an umbrella term for individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender. Queer can be used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective. In queer theory, queer is used as an action or verb, not as an identity (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Killermann (2019) states “the term queer can often be used interchangeably with LGBTQ” (p. 26).

Questioning

A term used to describe a person who is exploring their gender identity, their sexual orientation, or both, or someone who chooses not to label themselves (Qmunity, 2013).

Sexism

Sexism is a term used to describe the belief that sex or sexual identity guarantees privilege over those of non-dominant sex or sexual identity. Western culture exhibits sexism through “male supremacy and heterosexual chauvinism” (Young, 1992, p. 7).

Sexual Orientation

Killermann (2019) defines sexual orientation as the attraction, whether sexual, romantic, emotional, or spiritual, one can feel for others, “generally labeled based on the gender relationship between the person and the people they are attracted to.” In 1995, Gonsiorek and Weinrich suggested the use of the term sexual orientation over sexual preference, because the word preference suggested a conscious and intentional choice. Because the word orientation can also somehow be interpreted as a choice of direction, I use throughout this study the term sexual identity instead.

Straight

Killermann (2019) states straight is “a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to some people who are not their same sex/gender” and adds it a term frequently used instead of heterosexual (p. 29).

Transgender (Trans, Trans*)

Transgender, often abbreviated ‘trans,’ or ‘trans*’ (the asterisk intends to include non-binary and fluid identities such as genderqueer) (Qmunity, 2013), is an umbrella term to refer to individuals whose assigned sex at birth does not correspond to their gender identity. It is often misunderstood as describing a man trapped in a woman’s body or vice-versa. An individual that identifies as transgender may also identify as third-gender, non-binary, or another gender identity. The term transgender encompasses different gender identities, “all grouped by the commonality of being ‘non-cisgender identities’” (Killermann, 2017, p. 144). Qmunity (2013), in its Queer Terminology glossary, posits an individual can only self-identify as transgender. This label does not depend on a specific criteria such as hormone treatment or surgery.

Transphobia

Killermann (2019) defines transphobia as “the fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of trans* people, the trans* community, or gender ambiguity” (p. 30). Like biphobia, transphobia can occur within the LGBTQ+ community as well as within the straight community.

Queer Theory

In qualitative research, the use of theory as a lens or perspective continues to increase. The chosen theory not only shapes the research questions but also informs the data collection and analysis processes (Creswell, 2014). Creswell states theoretical lenses also direct the research toward the issues to explore and to the group of individuals who should be studied. It is through theory that the research “provides a call for action or change” (Creswell, 2014, p. 64).

I chose queer theory as the theoretical framework for this study. Many queer theorists agree it is difficult to define queer theory. Queer theory does not have one universal definition; instead, Jagose posits, queer theory resists definition and resists being institutionalized; “it is a discipline that refuses to be disciplined” (Sullivan, 2003, p. V). This uncertainty and flexibility are vital characteristics of queer theory (Jagose, 1996).

Queer theory challenges streamlined categories and binaries (e.g. male/female, gay/straight) in favor of inclusion and equity (Meyer, 2012). According to Warner (1993), being queer results in exclusion and loss of a formal “membership” of the world (p. xix). He goes on to assert queer theory challenges the privileges of heterosexual culture and heteronormativity in general. According to Gamson (2000), queer theory makes “room for voices and experiences that have been suppressed” (p. 347). This study documented the current state of affairs of the reality of LGBTQ+ students in the DR, giving voice to a suppressed, unsupported, and underrepresented population (Pollock, 2006). The study required deep reflection from both the

study participants and I as a researcher. By engaging in deep reflection and awareness of our lived experiences we can question the unjust and “unfortunate practices we are part of” (Lindseth & Norberg, p. 148, 2004).

More specifically, I chose a queer phenomenology approach, because it desires social change and aims to understand the experiences of those excluded and labeled as “not fitting” (Leitlin, 2012, p. 8). In addition, queer phenomenology aims to make meaning “of the experience and impact of ‘being out of place’ and the disorientation that goes along with it” (Leitlin, 2012, p. 11).

The Origin of Queer Theory

The homophile movement began during the 1950s and 60s in the United States. This movement meant to “decriminalize homosexuality, to educate people about it, and to decrease homophobia” by using assimilationist strategies that argued heterosexual and gay and lesbian individuals were the same and based their fight for equality on this premise (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 25). The homophile movement made possible the rights for lesbian and gay (and later bisexual and trans*) individuals, yet many authors oppose its assimilationist strategies, arguing they reinforced the status quo and saw sexuality and identity as fixed. Moreover, these strategies depicted homosexuality as inferior and focused on privileged (white, middle-class) gay and lesbian individuals. After the homophile movement, the 1969 police raid of the LGBT venue, The Stonewall Inn in New York City led to the Stonewall Riots, demonstrations where LGBT activists demanded public spaces where they could openly express their sexuality without fear of retribution (Barker & Scheele, 2016).

Queer theory began by challenging the assumptions and understandings of identity as a whole and of sexual and gender identity, and the links (or lack thereof) between these terms,

ingrained in the culture by the homophile movement and many other moments in history. Moreover, queer theory critiqued “regimes of normativity” and “power relations” that categorized sexualities as normal/abnormal and functional/dysfunctional (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 30). Although some consider it impossible to point out the start of queer theory because many of its ideas existed before the term was conceived, some authors regard de Lauretis’s conference, *Queer Theory*, at University of California, Santa Cruz, CA as the birth of queer theory (Barker & Scheele, 2016). According to de Lauretis (1990), queer theory refused heterosexuality as the standard form of sexuality from which other forms are based.

Queer theory owes its rapid institutional expansion to academic development from the early 1990s. Although contradictory, queer appears to be the progenitor of traditional lesbian and gay studies but also its evolutionary addendum (Jagose, 1996). Jagose emphasizes queer challenges the stable and until then, unproblematic relationship between sex, gender, and attraction. Moreover, the author states queer indicates the absurdity of “natural” sexuality by questioning basic terms such as man and woman and disregarding natural systems of gender. Queer theory demystifies what were once considered stable sexes, genders, and forms of sexuality, arguing identity is not fixed but rather allows diverse and changeable positions (Jagose, 1996).

Queer theory questions identity and challenges binaries (systems composed of two things) and current popular assumptions and understandings about sexuality and gender identity. It argues said understandings are contextual; thus, queer theory resists categories such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Moreover, queer theory generally uses the word “queer” “as a verb-” arguing queer is an action, not an adjective (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 31). Barker and

Scheele recognize individuals can queer “normative knowledge, identities, and institutions” by demonstrating their oddity or strangeness (p. 31).

Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir, and Camus, all existentialists from the early 20th century, preceded queer theory and significantly impacted it. They questioned the essentialist assumption that human essence is fixed. For Sartre, an individual is in “bad faith” when they assume an identity due to biology or social/gender roles (Barker & Scheele, 2016). For de Beauvoir, limits and freedom vary greatly depending on time and setting (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Alfred Kinsey, a US biologist, made important contributions to queer theory during the mid-20th century. Kinsey was considered a “sex positive researcher,” and his studies challenged the “sex negative culture” of the time (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 37). His research revealed different sexual practices were actually common among the population. Kinsey (1948) created the Kinsey scale that saw sexuality as a continuum or spectrum, rejecting the idea of a binary. As he questioned and challenged the sexual binary, his research failed to question the gender binary (Barker & Scheele, 2016).

Queer Theories

Several queer theories emerged over the 1990s. They all exposed sexual and gender identities are “constructed through the available ways of thinking and being in different times and places” and “performed: something that we do rather than something that we (essentially) are” (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 62). Moreover, two other disciplines also emerged during the 1990s. The first discipline, queer activism, a response to the 1980’s AIDS crisis in the US, opposes agendas that try to normalize LGBTQ+ individuals. Alternatively, this form of activism supports and celebrates uniqueness and diversity. The second discipline, queer studies is a discipline that seeks to integrate all sexualities, moving beyond lesbian and gay studies to “take a

more critical approach to sexuality as a whole” (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p. 15). In general, queer theory, queer activism, and queer studies oppose identity politics; emphasizing that rights should not be fought for based on identity. These disciplines argue fixed identities lead to inflexibility (Barker & Scheele, 2016).

As a theoretical approach, queer theory has its basis in post-structuralism in the 1970s and 1980s, resisting the idea of universal truths (Barker & Scheele, 2016; Jagose, 1996). Post-structuralists like Derrida and Foucault understood knowledge as *partial* and *contextual*. Foucault focused on sexuality, exploring it historically and proposing it is a result of our existing knowledge (and knowledge a result of our context and culture) (Barker & Scheele, 2016). While Foucault focused on sexuality, Judith Butler focused on gender. Butler (1990), a gender theorist, often drawn upon when talking about queer theory, understood gender is performative (something we do, our behavior), instead of understanding our behavior as a result of our gender. These authors, perhaps unknowingly and unwillingly, as they may not have seen themselves doing so, were the early founders of queer theory, challenging the culturally embedded norms and binaries of the moment.

Edelman (1995) posits queer theory is a social movement that instructs the dominant culture to find “different understanding of difference,” and rejects the dream to achieve a “common language,” stating it is what queer theorists hope to disrupt others from (p. 345). Queer theory has allowed me to internalize the normalization of heterosexuality, or as Edelman phrases it, the “heterosexual colonization of social reality” (p. 343), and has encouraged me to agitate and provoke discomfort in such normalization in the DR by exploring the school experiences of recent LGBTQ+ graduates from K-12 schools in the country. Jagose (1996) predicts that if queer theory fulfills its absolute potential, “its future is- after all- the future” (p. 6).

LGBTQ+ Student Experiences in K-12 Schools in the US and Canada

Due to the geographic proximity and the strong economic, political, and social influences Western culture has on the Dominican Republic (DR), it is only logical to explore the existing literature about LGBTQ+ K-12 student experiences in the US and Canada. Moreover, most of the defined terms at the beginning of this chapter come from the available literature on the topic from these two countries. Understanding the context and current situation of American and Canadian LGBTQ+ students in K-12 schools may help better understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in K-12 schools in the DR.

Schools, and society, in general, assume individuals are heterosexual and fail to recognize different forms of sexuality and gender (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). Moreover, schools encourage heteronormativity and rarely include LGBTQ+ topics, representation, events, or history in their curriculums (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). Hence, LGBTQ+ students are at a disadvantage compared to their heterosexual cisgender peers in school (Castro & Sujak, 2014) because they lack in-school resources or support (Bailey, 2005). The literature about the school experiences of LGBTQ+ students in the US and Canada suggest LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience emotional distress, be depressed, and attempt self-harm or suicide than their heterosexual peers (Almeida et al., 2009). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ students are also more likely to be outperformed academically by their heterosexual peers, be more open to risks, and be more open to accessing illegal substances (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2006).

LGBTQ+ Student Experience in Schools in the United States

GLSEN's National School Climate Survey is a biennial survey that documents the experiences of LGBTQ+ students across the US, implemented every two years since 2001. Due to the changing nature of our world, GLSEN continually modifies its surveys to include

questions about current situations that help grasp the reality of LGBTQ+ students nationwide. The 2017 National School Climate Survey, recently published in October 2018, revealed schools throughout the US continue to be a hostile environment for the majority of LGBTQ+ students. GLSEN's survey indicates that although victimization and discrimination have decreased, and in-school support has increased, the positive changes experienced by LGBTQ+ students in US schools are limited and slow (GLSEN, 2018).

Specifically, GLSEN's (2018) National School Climate Survey revealed LGBTQ+ students in the US feel unsafe in school due to their sexual identity, gender expression, or gender identity. It is common for LGBTQ+ students to skip school and avoid bathrooms, locker rooms, and extracurricular activities due to safety concerns. Moreover, LGBTQ+ students regularly hear homophobic remarks in schools across the US and feel tormented due to these remarks. To make matters worse, it is not only peers that use this kind of language, teachers and staff also use homophobic and negative language about gender expression (GLSEN, 2018).

LGBTQ+ students are verbally, physically, sexually, and virtually harassed and also physically assaulted (GLSEN, 2018). These students typically fail to report harassment or assault incidents to school staff due to fear of retribution. Even when some students do report the incidents, school staff fail to address the situations or ask the students involved to simply ignore them. School policies and practices are far from inclusive; LGBTQ+ students continue to be victims of in-school anti-LGBTQ+ discriminatory policies. Transgender and genderqueer students are likely not to be allowed to use their preferred name, pronoun, bathroom, or locker room (GLSEN, 2018).

In general, LGBTQ+ students who attend unwelcoming school environments and are victimized are more likely to not pursue post-secondary education, skip school, be disciplined by

teachers and school staff, have lower academic performance, have lower self-esteem and sense of belonging, consider dropping out, and score higher on depression than students who are not victimized (GLSEN, 2018). GLSEN's latest survey reveals schools need LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula, supportive clubs, alliances, and school staff, proper training for school staff to address the situations that arise regarding LGBTQ+ topics, and inclusive and supportive policies and practices explicitly protective of LGBTQ+ students.

Regarding in-school resources for LGBTQ+ students, many schools across the US have Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). Despite the existence of these clubs, many LGBTQ+ students do not participate in them. Schools fail to provide positive in-school LGBTQ+ representation and often teach "negative content about LGBTQ topics" (GLSEN, 2018, p. 8). Very few schools in the country provide LGBTQ+-inclusive sex education, but the majority of LGBTQ+ students have at least one in-school supportive staff and attend schools with "Safe Space" stickers that help pinpoint supportive educators. Although some school administrators are supportive of LGBTQ+ students, most schools lack comprehensive anti-bullying policies that explicitly mention or protect against discrimination based on sexual and gender identity. Transgender and genderqueer students are even more unsupported when it comes to school policies and practices (GLSEN, 2018).

According to GLSEN (2018), the existence of in-school supports for LGBTQ+ students, such as GSAs, LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula, supportive educators, and inclusive and supportive school policies, decreases the frequency of homophobic or negative remarks due to sexual or gender identity and gender expression, and increases the likeliness of school staff intervening when witnessing these incidents. LGBTQ+ students that have in-school support also suffer lower levels of LGBTQ+-related victimization, have greater support from teachers and staff, more

acceptance from peers, and a greater sense of belonging. Moreover, these students feel safer than those who lack in-school support, ergo, are less likely to skip school due to safety concerns.

LGBTQ+ Student Experience in Schools in Canada

Egale Canada Human Rights Trust's survey, *Every Class in Every School*, conducted by Taylor et al. (2011) is the first Canadian national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia that investigated LGBTQ+ student life in Canadian high schools. The study surveyed LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ participants between 2007 and 2009 and aimed to identify homophobia and transphobia in schools, the impact these incidents have, and the efficacy of the measures schools take to tackle homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. Until then, Canadian school leaders lacked concrete evidence base to address the needs of LGBTQ+ students and the bullying situations that arise due to homophobia and transphobia (Taylor et al., 2011).

Despite the highly evolved human rights curriculum many Canadian schools have that encourage respect and dignity for "every identity group protected in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms," LGBTQ+ people in Canadian schools lack protection (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 18). Identifying as an LGBTQ+ student in a Canadian school means being exposed to negative remarks about sexual identity, gender expression, or gender identity. Students are also exposed to homophobic or transphobic remarks about their perceived sexual identity, gender expression, or gender identity. Moreover, teachers and staff regularly ignore or fail to address homophobic or transphobic remarks in schools; some of these teachers employ these remarks themselves. It is no surprise many LGBTQ+ students often feel alone and do not have even one person to talk to about LGBTQ+ topics in school (Taylor et al., 2011).

In general, LGBTQ+ students in Canada do not consider their school environments to be safe. More specifically, LGBTQ+ students consider locker rooms and bathrooms to be the most

unsafe places in schools. Also, LGBTQ+ students are much more likely to be verbally, physically, and sexually abused or harassed, as well as discriminated against based on their sexual or gender identity. Trans* students experience harassment, assault, discrimination, and feelings of unsafety on a higher level than the rest of the LGBTQ+ students (Taylor et al., 2011).

Taylor et al. (2011) found that although hostile school climates are predominant for LGBTQ+ students in Canada, schools that have introduced policies explicitly protective of LGBTQ+ students, GSAs, and have adopted LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum have improved their school climate significantly for these students. However, the authors state, anti-homophobia school policies alone do not ensure LGBTQ+ students will feel safer in schools. Students that attend schools with GSAs are more likely to feel more supported by their school community, more likely to openly discuss their sexual or gender identity with peers, and to perceive their school environment as less homophobic. To lessen the adverse situations that LGBTQ+ students face and become a more welcoming environment, Taylor et al. recommend schools provide professional development opportunities to implement LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum and provide teachers with resources to properly incorporate LGBTQ+ education in their subject areas.

The Latin American and Caribbean Context

A key aspect of queer theory is that it posits sex and gender identities are contextual, meaning that they have been practiced differently over time and across environments and cultures (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Exploring the existing research on LGBTQ+ rights in Latin America and the Caribbean provides a social, historical, cultural, and political framework of the context in which this study took place. More specifically, by examining policies protective of LGBTQ+ individuals in Latin America (or the lack thereof) and the impact these policies have in the

region's educational environments may lead to a richer understanding of the situations LGBTQ+ students face in K-12 schools in the Dominican Republic.

LGBTQ+ Rights in Latin America and the Caribbean

In general, the progressiveness of Latin America when it comes to LGBTQ+ rights has people questioning its origin (Wilkinson, 2014) because it is unlike any other region in the world except the North Atlantic (Corrales, 2017). The growing number of scholars studying LGBTQ+ rights in Latin America and the Caribbean acknowledge they “are one of the fundamental human rights issues” (Corrales, 2015a, p. 53) and “one of the most important globalization battles of our time” (Corrales, 2015a, p. 58). Countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, and cities such as Mexico City, Cancun, Bogotá, and Santiago allow same-sex civil unions or marriage, have inclusive anti-discrimination and hate-crime laws, and have progressive and independent courts pro-LGBTQ+ rights, positioning them next and sometimes ahead of distinctly advanced and democratic countries in the world. Regardless of the growing societal acceptance, other countries in the Caribbean and Central America do not have a similar fate (Corrales, 2015a).

Liberal principles defend the biases of all individuals, not just LGBTQ+ people (Corrales, 2017). Anglo-Caribbean countries, despite their liberal and democratic politics, have a long way to pave towards LGBTQ+ rights. Countries such as Belize and Guyana legally remain “among the most homophobic places among stable, liberal democracies” (p. 59). In contrast, Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries are generally more open-minded about issues related to sexual or gender identity than Anglo-Caribbean countries.

Corrales (2015b) tries to explain the disparity of the legal status of LGBTQ+ rights across the region by several theoretical propositions. He states the importance of economic development, acknowledging that the higher the education and income levels, the higher the

acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. Moreover, Corrales argues LGBTQ+ social movements significantly but not sufficiently advance LGBTQ+ rights. Also, religious groups are an influential and determining factor, and the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights stir state-churches confrontation (Corrales, 2015a).

Corrales' (2015a) theoretical propositions to explain the variation of the legal status of LGBTQ+ rights in Latin America and the Caribbean have significant exceptions. Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago are rich countries that have remained behind. Moreover, "globalized and transnational" nations (e.g., DR, Jamaica, Nicaragua) have yet to catch up with countries that have moved LGBTQ+ rights forward (p. 55).

Corrales (2015a) acknowledges the need for more research regarding LGBTQ+ topics in Latin America. For instance, he states that, in contrast to North Atlantic countries, Latin American countries have adopted pro-LGBTQ+ laws before society reaching an accepting stance on the topic. Also, Corrales argues conservatism in the region is another important area for further research. The author finds striking that some conservative groups have come out in defense of LGBTQ+ rights and some progressive groups have pronounced against them. According to Corrales, Argentina, Chile, and Colombia are the most accepting countries in the region. Moreover, the author posits younger generations are more welcoming than older ones (Corrales, 2015a).

The advancement of LGBTQ+ rights in many countries in Latin America encompasses sanctioned same-sex marriage, prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual or gender identity, and sanctioned legal name and sex change for trans* people (Wilkinson, 2008). Argentina became the first country in Latin American to legalize same-sex marriage and adoption in 2010 and the second country in the Americas, following Canada. Mexico City

legalized same-sex marriage in 2010; Brazil and Uruguay followed in 2013 (Corrales, 2017). Because Uruguay also has hate-crime laws, it is, at least in legal terms, the most “LGBT-friendly” Latin American country (p. 55). In October 2018, Uruguay passed a law that grants rights to trans* individuals. The law establishes the state will pay for hormone treatments and surgery to match their sexual identity, requires public offices to have a minimum number of trans* individuals, and grants a pension to compensate trans* individuals oppressed during the country’s 1973-1985 tyranny (Associated Press, 2018). The World Bank (2016) ranks Uruguay as one of the most advanced countries worldwide.

Despite the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights in Latin America, some countries in the region seem to have plateaued or even moved backward (Corrales, 2017). For instance, Honduras, El Salvador, and the DR have constitutional bans of same-sex marriage by only acknowledging marriage between a man and a woman (Wilkinson, 2008). The DR’s constitutional ban of same-sex marriage dates to 2010; the 2010 Constitution of the DR also bans abortion, limiting women’s rights. Moreover, despite the Latin American region’s development of LGBTQ+ rights compared to the rest of the world, LGBTQ+ representation in politics continues to be low. Corrales (2017) states coming out publicly when seeking office is (or is perceived as) unsafe. In addition, gay leaders have been assassinated in Honduras, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil (Corrales, 2012). Even so, a well-known Dominican LGBTQ+ activist, after losing his job for publicly acknowledging he was gay, ran for a seat on the Santo Domingo Municipal Council (Lavers, 2015; The challengers, 2016). Although he lost, his candidacy promoted LGBTQ+ rights in a country where LGBTQ+ individuals lack legal protection (The challengers, 2016).

Even with the growing acceptance and expansion of LGBTQ+ rights, LGBTQ+ individuals in Latin America continue to be discriminated against and are generally unprotected

in labor, health, housing (World Bank, 2016), and education matters (Corrales, 2012). In some Latin American countries, institutions have yet to catch up with the pace in which laws have changed (Corrales, 2015a). Violence against LGBTQ+ individuals is so common that the region is possibly recognized as the most violent for LGBTQ+ people worldwide (Wilkinson, 2008). The region continues to be a popular arena for public homophobic incidents. Police harassment, sexual violence, and the belief that homosexuality can be cured continue to be widespread in the region (Corrales, 2017). On top of that, schools and public forces lack the necessary training to best address LGBTQ+ situations (Corrales, 2012). In educational settings, homophobia, discrimination, bullying, and harassment continue to be a problem for LGBTQ+ youth (Carrara, Nascimiento, Duque & Tramontano, 2016).

LGBTQ+ Student Experience in Latin America and the Caribbean

In Argentina, LGBTQ+ students continue to be victims of bullying, violence, and discrimination in schools (Corrales, 2015a). In Colombia, LGBTQ+ students continue to be extremely unprotected and vulnerable in schools (Pulecio, 2015). Moreover, Pulecio states, being an LGBTQ+ student in Colombia means being subject to insults and offenses, like in any other country of hegemonic heterosexuality, and acknowledging the educational environment will not meet an individual's needs as a student. The author posits sexual diversity discourse continues to be suppressed and engaging in such discourse will draw unwanted attention.

Although Brazil's contemporary school policies defend the idea that gender, sexual, and racial diversity should be welcomed and embraced instead of *tolerated* (Brasil, 2007), discrimination and homophobia are typical in Brazilian educational environments. This may be due to the recent rise of resistance to sex education from conservatives. Teachers indicated religion plays an important role and impedes the correct development of activities about sexuality in schools.

Moreover, teachers stated they lack family and community support, especially from Protestant groups, to engage in discussions about gender or sexuality in classrooms. Studies in Brazil have revealed predominant homophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexual or gender identity. These studies indicated Brazilian schools lack the necessary training to deal with LGBTQ+ topics, revealing the need to invest in such training that will help teachers and staff address said topics. The Brazilian federal government has developed initiatives and policies that protect LGBTQ+ individuals in the country, such as an online course meant to address the intersection of discrimination on the basis of sexual or gender identity, sex, and race in public schools (Carrara et al., 2016).

In Mexico, the LGBTQ+ population continues to be discriminated against in schools (Baruch-Dominguez, Infante-Xibille, & Saloma-Zuñiga, 2016). Baruch-Dominguez et al. acknowledge not only LGBTQ+ individuals are subject to homophobic bullying, but also individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles. The authors posit this may be partially due to the existence of unyielding gender stereotypes in the Latin American region, Mexico included. Moreover, they state, Mexican society continues to view LGBTQ+ individuals as “sick or confused” (p. 25). Despite educational laws to eradicate in-school bullying, the government has implemented limited strategies to combat bullying and harassment (Baruch-Dominguez et al., 2016).

The Dominican Context

Little research has been documented about LGBTQ+ individuals in the DR. A 2014 Gallop-Hoy poll found that 73% of Dominican citizens believe LGBTQ+ people experience discrimination. Not only are LGBTQ+ citizens being discriminated against, but they lack fundamental human rights, proper access to justice, and face violence, homophobia, transphobia,

and hate crimes (Human Rights First, 2015). Not surprisingly, the offenders of LGBTQ+ citizens are unpunished. Often, the offenders are part of the police force whose job is to protect the Dominican citizens. These members of the police force arbitrarily arrest members of the LGBTQ+ community, are responsible for violence, rape, and extortion, and present obstacles to justice. Because impunity is typical when it comes to offenses towards LGBTQ+ citizens, many of these crimes go unreported (Human Rights First, 2015).

Power of the Catholic Church in the Dominican Republic

To understand the power of the Catholic Church in the DR, first, it is necessary to understand the country's religious context. The DR's 2015 Constitution provides religious freedom (US State Department, 2015). According to the Dominican Republic 2015 International Religious Freedom Report, the total population of the DR was estimated at 10.5 million by the US government in July 2015. The DR is a predominantly Catholic country, with 57% of the population identified as Catholic, 23% of the population identified as Protestant, and 18% is without religious affiliation (US State Department, 2015).

During the Trujillo era (1930-1961), the Catholic Church and state were "mutually supporting institutions," where the Church regularly praised the dictator (Wiarda, 1965, p. 238). One of Trujillo's most important steps in securing the Church's support was the 1954 Concordat between the DR and the Vatican. The Concordat designated Catholicism as the official religion of the country. In addition, it granted special privileges to the Catholic Church but not to other religious groups in the country, like the legal recognition of Church law, the ability to use public funds to support some Church expenses, and customs duties exclusion. Moreover, the treaty fully accepted Catholic marriage (between a man and a woman), respected the Church's holidays and guaranteed freedom to create and organize schools of all levels in the country (Wiarda, 1965).

Regarding education, the Concordat between the state and the Vatican (which remains fully in force) demands Dominican law to require religious instruction as part of public schools' curricula, and public education, in general, to be guided by Catholic principles and morals (Wiarda, 1965). Private schools are excluded from this requirement. If a public school parent does not wish their child to participate in religious studies, the Concordat allows this request (US Department of State, 2015).

The relationship between the Trujillos and the Church was so strong that during Trujillo's daughter's marriage, Pope Pius XII conferred a special blessing on their family. Moreover, Trujillo was called the *Benefactor of the Church*, and the Church compared the love of Christ for his apostles to Trujillo's love for the Church. During his last two years of ruling, however, the Church turned against Trujillo. Despite cooperating with Trujillo for over 25 years, the relationship between Church and state was severed due to Trujillo's jailing of citizens, priests, and seminarians who opposed his regime. Moreover, the fact that the ultra-conservative archbishop had been replaced symbolized the change in opinion toward Trujillo (Wiarda, 1965).

In 1960, the Church redacted a pastoral letter that indicated the cutting of Church-state ties. The letter specifically indicated human rights "had priority over the rights of any state," and that at the time, these rights were non-existent in the DR (Wiarda, 1965, p. 242). Following Trujillo's execution, the Church was criticized for its silence during the regime's massacre. It was then that the Church publicly spoke favoring reform, democracy, and social justice (Wiarda, 1965). Between December 1962 and President Bosch's electoral victory in 1963, the Church openly spoke against communism and publicly attacked Bosch. After Bosch took office, his new Constitution of 1963 was revolutionist and liberal, perhaps too liberal for the Church. Bosch's First Law "sanctioned divorce, common law marriage, and state inspection of religious schools,"

(p. 249) and “failed to mention the 1954 Concordat” (p. 250). Individuals of the Church felt so threatened that they began to charge Bosch of communist, cooperating, although unofficially, with Bosch’s overthrow in September of 1963.

From then on, the Church continues to support democracy (Wiarda, 1965), but publicly opposes matters that endanger its interests, such as LGBTQ+ activism. According to Lara (2018), the DR’s contemporary conceptions of human rights draw upon the biblical binaries that the Catholic Church considers acceptable, such as Adam and Eve, Joseph and Mary, among others. These binaries reject the idea of same-sex or polygamous couples. The extensive power of the Church in the DR, more specifically, its power over political leaders and lawmakers, seeks to replicate the Catholic biblical gender binary ideology (Lara, 2018). The Catholic Church’s strong, evident ties with the state, or in Lara’s words, the “collusion between fundamentalist Catholic colonial ideologies and nation-state policies” significantly influence the country’s politics (p. 110). This level of power, along with the constant negative discourse about LGBTQ+ individuals, has resulted in lack of interest among Dominican politicians to protect and support the LGBTQ+ community in the country (Human Rights First, 2015).

In 2010, the European Union’s (EU) Working Party on Human Rights released a document named *Toolkit to Promote and Protect the Enjoyment of All Human Rights by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People*. The document promoted the protection of the members of the LGBTQ+ community and enabled EU members to react towards mistreatment of LGBTQ+ individuals worldwide. In reaction towards this document, the Church, through its principal representative in the country, the cardinal, grew its negative discourse against the LGBTQ+ community and pressured the police force to prosecute LGBTQ+ individuals in public spaces (Lara, 2018).

In 2012, the Church's cardinal and then-First Lady (now Vice President since May 2012) Margarita Cedeño spoke at an inauguration of a Center for the Integral Formation of Youth and Family, stating families were exposed to serious threats, that, according to the cardinal, surfaced due to liberal politicians that supported same-sex marriage. After this event, the then-First Lady declared families are composed of heterosexual couples responsible for the development of society. After Brewster's arrival in 2013, Church authorities rallied against the presence of openly gay individuals in a power position and publicly rallied against the foreigners who they believed were against Dominican interests (Lara, 2018).

Activism in the Dominican Republic

Government officials, police officers, state defense forces, teachers, doctors, and religious leaders constantly act violently against LGBTQ+ individuals in the DR. Their actions are so common that they have become normalized and most go unpunished. LGBTQ+ activism in the DR is a response to these actions that seeks to maintain the "social moral order" (Lara, 2018, p. 113). Dominican LGBTQ+ activists aim to achieve freedom for everyone, assuming all individuals can "embody an unlimited range of sexual desires and behaviors" and should be allowed to express themselves freely (p. 113).

For decades, activists have aimed to promote understanding and advance the rights and protection of LGBTQ+ individuals in the DR. The contemporary Dominican LGBT movement began in the 1980s, but it was not until the early 2000s that several social events took place and marked a before and after in the quest for civil and human rights protection for LGBTQ+ individuals. In the year 2000, a Dominican activist came out on national television, constituting the first televised recognition of sexual diversity in the country (Lara, 2018). In the year 2001, there was commotion at the Dominican national book fair where an HIV advocacy organization

distributed pamphlets featuring male sex organs in a booth. Evangelicals protested the distribution of these pamphlets, and the police raided the booth and confiscated all of the organization's materials. A woman happened to be harassed and arrested during the raid and was fired from her job after a newspaper revealed her sexual identity. The labor movement instantly became her ally (Lara, 2018).

In June 2001, LGBTQ+ activists publicly convened in Santo Domingo. In response to the book fair violence and exclusion, they drew attention to the dehumanization LGBTQ+ individuals experience in the DR by holding signs that read "We are human" (Lara, 2008). The police forced the group to break up within the hour. In 2002, with the support of friends and allies, the same group gathered publicly. The tradition to meet in public spaces to draw attention continued until the year 2008 when the group paraded with musicians that joined them within the colonial city, an area known for its tourism (Lara, 2018).

LGBTQ+ activists responded to the constitutional reform process of 2009 that prompted xenophobia, racism, and the imposition of Catholic values with the national pride parade in Santo Domingo, a parade that takes place every year since (Lara, 2018). These parades aim to remove the invisibility cloak from the LGBTQ+ population and smooth the way for LGBTQ+ civil and human rights. Moreover, Lara posits, these parades provide a political and international framework and inserts Dominican LGBTQ+ activists into the global narrative and fight for universal human rights, drawing from local, cultural, and folkloric Dominican expression. Although public pride manifestations have taken place in Santo Domingo since 1991, the 2010 pride parade may have been the first to hold a permit that caught the attention of the media and, despite its efforts, the police were not able to shut it down (Quinn, 2018).

The 2013 Dominican LGBTQ+ pride parade was well-supported. Quinn (2018) goes so far as to state police officers did not try to stop the parade and were neither “tense” nor “questioning” but worked to maintain peace and order (p. 141). Furthermore, 2013 was the year that the Dominican attorney general’s office first acknowledged the need to stand up to and address the ill-treatment and abuses the police force commits against the members of the LGBTQ+ community. This public acknowledgment signified a significant step towards civil and human rights for LGBTQ+ individuals and activists (Quinn, 2018).

Dominican LGBTQ+ activists carefully and astutely adopt discourses from the global North, such as the LGBT or LGBTQ+ acronym, known worldwide in social, political, and juridical environments. Adopting universal discourse has led to international support and funding from Spanish and French groups and foundations. Moreover, employing universal terms and concepts has signified a robust, powerful step towards justice for Dominican LGBTQ+ activists in that the LGBTQ+ community has become visible and has gained awareness from international human rights structures, organizations, and networks. This discourse also paved the way for US support with the arrival of Brewster, the US gay activist and former ambassador to the DR. The fact that Brewster was not well-received “enabled the neoliberal political development” of the Dominican LGBTQ+ movement (Lara, 2018, p. 106). Although the progress has been slow, the media coverage of Brewster’s arrival provoked debate, opened communication channels, and heightened the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community. Many activists have advocated for the LGBTQ+ community and joined social media campaigns promoting equality and the protection of the community (Human Rights First, 2015).

Legal Frame in the Dominican Republic

There are few legal protections for the LGBTQ+ community in the DR. For instance, the 2010 Dominican Constitution enshrines the right to equality in its article 39 but does not list sexual and gender identity as possible categories. The 2010 Constitution protects individuals from discrimination but does not explicitly offer protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual or gender identity. Despite surging activism, a report by the Dominican LGBTTI Coalition sustains these terms were not included in the Constitution (Marzan et al., 2014), deliberately maintaining the LGBTQ+ community invisible (Human Rights First, 2015).

Although homosexuality is not illegal, the Church's power in the DR allows its universal concepts to be interpreted as the moral ground of the country, where Church leaders feel free to oppress LGBTQ+ individuals and publicly state they represent a danger to the well-being and public safety of its inhabitants. The verbal pronouncements of its leaders resulted in the nonexistence of LGBTQ+ individuals in matters of law, failing to mention LGBTQ+ individuals as protection worthy. As a result, LGBTQ+ individuals in the country are mistreated, neglected, and harassed verbally and physically in the name of "state- and church-sanctioned justifications" (Lara, 2018, p. 113).

Lara (2018) posits the 2010 Constitution's repressive nature is evident in its lack of consistent use of gender-inclusive language, its amendments that negate women's rights, its lack of explicit protections of LGBTQ+ subjects, and its requirement to replicate Catholic gender binary ideology. Lara goes on to declare the 2010 Constitution reveals the Catholic Church's exercise of power through nation-state roles and responsibilities, emphasizing its purpose of securing itself as the moral and ethical authority in the country. The 2010 Dominican Constitution was modified again in 2015 but only to permit the presidential reelection.

Currently, the 2015 Constitution only recognizes marriage between a man and a woman, meaning same-sex marriage continues to be illegal. Same-sex adoption is also illegal, forcing members of the LGBTQ+ community interested in adoption to adopt as single parents. In addition, gender or name change in identity documents is illegal, and conversion therapy has yet to be banned.

In contrast to the vague and implicit protection in the 2015 Constitution, the General Youth Law (2000) expressly offers protection of LGBTQ+ individuals in its second article that states the law aims to promote the holistic development of the country's youth without discrimination, explicitly mentioning discrimination based on "sexual orientation." Furthermore, article 27 goes on to assert Dominican youth's right to equality, explicitly protecting from discrimination on the basis of "sex or sexual orientation."

To the best of my knowledge, the only law in the country that prohibits discrimination based on both sexual and gender identity is the 2011 HIV/AIDS law in its second article. In 2015, a proposed modification for the Criminal Code expressed in its article 182 that unequal or degrading treatment against a person on the basis of "sexual preference or orientation" constituted discrimination, but this code never made it into law. After careful investigation, I only found one legal protection for LGBTQ+ individuals in educational environments, explicitly offering protection against discrimination based on "sexual preference," the Norms of the Dominican Education System for the Harmonious Coexistence in Public and Private Educational Institutions (2013).

LGBTQ+ Challenges in Education in the Dominican Republic

If LGBTQ+ students in Latin American countries that have advanced LGBTQ+ rights continue to struggle and face hostile school climates, it comes as no surprise that LGBTQ+

students in countries like the DR, that has remained behind in these matters, feel unsafe and unsupported in educational climates. Little has been documented about LGBTQ+ challenges in education in the DR. The 2014 report by the Dominican LGBTTI Coalition reports in-school homophobia towards members of the LGBTQ+ community is evidenced in poor academic performance and sometimes desertion. The report goes on to assert that many trans* individuals turn to sex work because they are unable to finish school due to the constant transphobia experienced in school, and how this negative treatment towards this population negatively impacts the students' self-esteem (Marzan et al., 2014). The paucity of existing research on the topic reveals the need for further research in order to better understand and assess LGBTQ+ student experiences in the DR.

This study is intended to open the door for academics, educators, and policymakers in the DR to begin a dialogue about the status of LGBTQ+ youth in the country's education system. Any instructive dialogue must begin by expanding understanding, so this study seeks to generate more authentic understanding of how LGBTQ+ youth experience their lives as students in the DR's K-12 educational environment. By engaging with a sample of recent (2008-2018) LGBTQ+ graduates from various Dominican schools, this study will give voice to a segment of the DR student population that has yet to be recognized or considered as key informants on how the Dominican educational system is serving and educating its students.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this second chapter was to provide a review of the relevant literature for this study. The chapter begins with the definition of the central terms to this study and then establishes queer theory as the theoretical lens for this study. I then continue with an overview of the LGBTQ+ student experience in the US and Canada, and in the Latin American and

Caribbean region. I conclude the literature review with an examination of the current standing of LGBTQ+ rights in the DR and a discussion of the little information available on LGBTQ+ student experience in the country. The next chapter address the study methodology, population and sampling approach, as well as data collection and analysis procedures.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

“The most crucial learnings have come from lonely separation from the natural world, from immersions and self-dialogues and from transcendental places of imagination and reflection” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41).

There is very little information available on LGBTQ+ student experience in the Dominican Republic (DR). The information available suggests LGBTQ+ individuals are discriminated against in educational settings throughout the country (Marzan et al., 2014). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of recent (2008-2018) LGBTQ+ graduates of the K-12 Dominican education system. Furthermore, this study aimed to explore how they derived meaning from these experiences and to portray the essences of these experiences. The overarching research question that guided this study was: What are the lived experiences of recent LGBTQ+ graduates from the Dominican K-12 education system? To probe deeper around said experiences and allow the emergence of data as part of the phenomenological study (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998), and to derive a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon being studied, the following sub-questions were asked to participants:

1. How do recent LGBTQ+ high school graduates describe their time in Dominican K-12 schools?
2. What factors influence how recent LGBTQ+ high school graduates describe their K-12 school experience in the DR within the broader context of their childhood, adolescence, and post graduate lives?

3. How do recent LGBTQ+ high school graduates' make meaning of their experiences as students in Dominican K-12 schools and how do they carry those meanings into their adult lives?

This chapter presents the methodology for this study. The first section of the chapter presents the research design, approach, and rationale for the study. I then describe the reflections of my identity and the field test conducted prior to conducting this research. As a qualitative study, I present the selected population, sampling strategies, and access and recruitment procedures. I then explain the data collection protocols and procedures as well as the data analysis approach chosen for the study. Finally, I describe how I ensured trustworthiness and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

Research Design, Approach & Rationale

According to Gamson (2000), qualitative research is “less objectifying of subjects,” “more concerned with cultural and political meaning creation” and “make(s) room for voices and experiences that have been suppressed” (Gamson, 2000, p. 347). Gamson adds qualitative methods focus on “meaning creation and the experiences of everyday life” and “fit especially well with movement goals of visibility, cultural challenge, and self-determination” (p. 348). This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach, more specifically, a transcendental phenomenological approach. Phenomenology as a research method aims to describe and reflect upon a person’s lived experience (Richards & Morse, 2013). According to Eagleton (1983), the purpose of phenomenology is to help the individual reject the impact of the external world on the experience and be faithful to the essence of that experience. As a phenomenological researcher, my job was not to assume and automatically state that something “is,” but rather, to understand the motivation that makes a conscious individual state that something “is” (Giorgi, 1997).

Moreover, Giorgi states, the focus of phenomenology is “the meaning of the object precisely as given” (p. 237).

According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology is especially useful when the purpose of the study is to provide pertinent information about the context of the phenomenon being studied. It was suitable for this study because it allowed me to portray the student experience of recent LGBTQ+ graduates from Dominican K-12 schools exactly as the participants’ described them, coming back “to the things themselves!,” Edward Husserl’s maxim (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). In Moustakas’ words, “that which appears provides the impetus for experience and for generating new knowledge” (p. 26). Previous studies highlight the importance of listening “to all voices equally in order to appreciate diverse voices” (Ferguson, 2013, p. 6). Transcendental phenomenology enabled me as a research to generate knowledge of LGBTQ+ student experience in the DR directly from the descriptions of those who experienced the phenomenon themselves, respecting, appreciating, and giving equal value to each one of their voices.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Moustakas (1994) states phenomenology is a method that requires self-reflection and provides a systematic framework for deriving “meaning and essences” (p. 27). In phenomenology, the researcher rejects external impact and does not make suppositions, identifies the focus and creates questions and the problem on which to base the study, and derives the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Meaning is not “presupposed or assumed” but derived (Moustakas, 1994, p. 46).

I chose the transcendental phenomenological method to guide this study. To Moustakas, transcendental phenomenology is a scientific study of things as they are, of phenomena exactly

as they appear and as we are conscious of them. Moustakas (1994) states Husserl's (1931) transcendental phenomenology is a systematic and disciplined methodology that allows the researcher to derive knowledge. It constitutes a transcendental phenomenology, because it highlights subjectivity and searches for the meaning of experiences. It is *transcendental* because it complies with discoveries made through reflection from the subject about an object (Moustakas, 1994); it is *logical* because it asserts an individual can only be certain about what they are conscious of (Moustakas, 1994). In Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology, the researcher faces the challenge of describing things as they are, as the participant narrates them, becoming aware of their experience and understanding their experience in "its meaning and essences" through "intuition and self-reflection" (p. 27). The researcher, then, needs to fuse the participant's experience with probable meanings, unifying the real and ideal world.

According to Brentano (1973) and Husserl (1975), the world is to an individual only what they are aware/conscious of- what they interpret as reality. Moustakas' (1994) describes how he immersed himself in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology by acknowledging his own "knowledge and experience, in a free, open, and imaginative sense, ultimately would determine the core ideas and values that would linger and endure" (p. 26). In other words, only through self-reflection, an open mind, and recognizing personal experiences and biases will meaning and essences be discovered.

Phenomenological research process. According to Moustakas (1994), there are four core processes in phenomenology that make the derivation of knowledge possible: (a) Epoche, (b) transcendental-phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis of meaning and essences.

(a) Epoche: Moustakas (1994) uses the Greek term *Epoche*, which means to refrain from, and describes it as the first step to seeing things as they are, “free of judgments and preconceptions” (p. 90). The goal of Epoche is for the researcher to see things “freshly, as if for the first time” (34). The Epoche process leads the researcher to “receptiveness,” allowing the researcher to receive “whatever is being presented, without coloring the other’s communication with (my) own habits of thinking, feeling, and seeing” (p. 89).

(b) Transcendental-phenomenological reduction: Through phenomenological reduction, Moustakas (1994) emphasizes the researcher should describe using only textual language the participant’s experience. During this process, the researcher needs to “look and describe” repeatedly while referencing the “textural qualities” of the described experience and context (p. 90). The focus becomes these textural qualities (*what*), while the challenge becomes understanding the nature of the experience (the *how*). Husserl (1931) argues during the phenomenological reduction process the aim is to explicate the essence of the phenomenon being described, requiring “reflection, reduction” and “concentrated work” in doing so (Moustakas, 1994, p. 92). Moustakas states this reduction process is “not only a way of seeing but a way of listening with a conscious and deliberate intention of opening ourselves to phenomena as phenomena” (p. 92). According to Moustakas, the final goal of the reduction process is developing the textural description of the experience, a narrative that describes *what* the individual experienced as the individual described it.

The steps of the phenomenological reduction process are:

- Bracketing: “the focus of the research is placed in brackets” and everything else is separated, aiming to keep the research process firmly around this focus (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

- Horizontalizing: Statements are treated as if they have equal value and then those unconnected to the focus and those repetitive and redundant are removed, only keeping the *horizons*, “textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon” (p. 97).

- “Clustering the horizons into themes,
- Organizing the horizons and themes into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon” being studied (p. 97).

(c) Imaginative variation: The third core process Moustakas (1994) describes is imaginative variation, a process that requires a “reflective phase” that gives “body, detail, and descriptive fullness to the search for essences” (p. 99). The researcher approaches the phenomenon using different frames from different perspectives, to finally ask *how* of *what* was. According to Moustakas, “the aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience,” a narrative that describes *how* “did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is?” (p. 98). Through imaginative variation, the researcher develops structural themes, understanding there is not one universal truth, but rather the existence of infinite possibilities.

(d) Synthesis of meanings and essences: this final process consists of integrating both the textural and structural descriptions developed through the above-mentioned processes into a coherent statement that narrates the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1931) defines essence as the common condition or quality that makes a thing what it is.

Field Test

I conducted a field test to ensure the data collection methods and instruments employed were ideal for the study. The field test participants were two self-identified gay cisgender individuals who graduated from high school in the DR in 2007 and 2009. The first participant was an openly gay individual and I recruited him by telling him what the study was about and

asking him if he wanted to participate. The other participant was recruited through sharing the flyer on social media. He contacted me and let me know he wanted to participate.

Conducting this field test informed the way I shaped my purpose and research questions and the general design of my study. Furthermore, it allowed me to refine several aspects of my study. First, I modified the study's interview protocol; I was so focused on gathering enough and rich information from them that I felt obliged to ask all ten questions on the first interview protocol, sometimes even interrupting the participant mid-answer to ask another question on the list. It was then when I realized that I did not need a long list of questions to gather substantial data, and decided to go with a narrative interview instead, asking fewer questions and giving my study participants plenty of time and space to answer them with minimal interruptions. Narrative interviews enable the researcher to gain exhaustive and in-depth knowledge of the experience being studied, as well as to describe and explain the social phenomena surrounding this experience (Parczewska, 2017). As Parczewska states, I intend to "enter the world" of my participants and "perceive that world from their perspective" (p. 88).

Second, the field test also led me to decide that I will not be conducting interviews that are not face-to-face. I conducted the second interview via Skype and I felt I did not build enough rapport in comparison to the face-to-face interview that I conducted. I felt I did not gain the participant's trust via Skype, and the interview (despite the lengthy interview protocol) was much shorter than anticipated. I probed but was unable to gather significant data from this participant.

Third, the field test served to open the scope of the school experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals to K-12 schools in general and not specifically high school years. I originally wanted to focus on high school, but the participants shared significant school experiences from middle

and elementary school. Limiting the study to the participants' high school experiences only would not let me grasp the essence of their experiences as LGBTQ+ students in the DR.

Reflections on My Identity

In general, I am a very forgetful person. I have very few memories from my preschool or elementary school years, and it is difficult for me to remember events from my college years that my friends sharply remember. The few memories that do come to mind, though, involve my older brother. Ever since I can recall, I remember my brother as *different*.

I remember receiving Barbie dolls as gifts for my fifth birthday, even though I strongly disliked them, because he suggested to family members that I liked them just so that he could play with them. I vividly remember a day our mom came home from work and found him wearing one of my dresses; I remember how upset this made her. I remember how our dad insisted that he do things that are considered *masculine* in the Dominican society, like ride bikes, horses, motorcycles, play sports, or anything that would get him dirty. I remember our parents arguing because our mom allowed us to listen to a song that said the word “faggot” in Spanish. I remember how our dad not-so-silently envied his friends and their masculine sons, and how vocal he was about how they happily and actively participated in activities considered masculine. I remember a day my brother went camping with our uncle, and how once they returned, our uncle told our mom that he had to force my brother to pee behind a tree like the rest of the boys because he insisted on holding it in and using the restroom once they returned home. I remember my brother singing Shakira, Laura Pausini, and Talia at the top of his lungs, and how our father got upset because he would sing songs from female artists that usually talked about loving a man. I remember the talent shows at home where he would sing these songs or make up new ones and shake his non-existent long hair as part of his performance.

At school, I remember my brother sitting with female friends every day at lunch. I remember his only male friend was bullied because he was perceived as gay, and how my brother sometimes bullied him too, maybe because he desperately wanted to hide the many things they had in common. I remember my brother being bullied for being too short because “boys were supposed to be taller than girls.” I remember him being horrible at every sport he tried, and how our parents insisted he find a sport he loved and practiced it. The one sport he was good at was gymnastics, but he did not practice it for long. I do not remember why he stopped practicing it, but I suspect it may have been because it was considered a *feminine* sport. My brother made evident, very early on, that he did not fit into traditional gender roles. He was considered “different” from the rest of the boys his age he interacted with.

Once in college, I remember being asked by random people if my brother was gay and getting into fights with strangers for calling him out in public. I remember thinking I needed to protect him because he was weak, or at least weaker than I was. More than once, I directly asked him if he was gay, and told him it was OK if he was, but he denied it.

The fact that we were born only 16 months apart may be one of the reasons why my brother was always present in the few memories I do have. Growing up, I remember thinking he was “too” present most of the time. Every time I turned around, there he was to do something that would upset me, to criticize something that I was doing, or to tell on me. For some reason, our mother would always take his side when we disagreed. We did not always get along as we do now. To be honest, we did not get along at all for many, many years.

Our relationship significantly improved once he came out. Perhaps he was unable to get along with me because he envied the freedom I had to be feminine *because* I was a girl, an opportunity he was denied in the Dominican society *because* he was a boy. Moreover, the fact

that I took the opportunity to be feminine for granted and was known as a tomboy throughout my childhood and adolescence may have worsened the situation; I strove at everything our parents (and society) expected him to strive at.

Growing up with a brother who identifies as gay led me to become a more empathic teacher and school administrator. I constantly find myself protecting students who are bullied because they are perceived as LGBTQ+ in a community that openly looked down upon these individuals. I developed inclusive policies for all students at our school, explicitly mentioning the words “sexual and gender identity.” I teach empathy and compassion and respect in my Critical Thinking class with eleventh and twelfth graders. I foster and promote an environment that welcomes every human being and respects Human Rights. Before enrolling in this program, I knew that if accepted, I wanted to make visible the struggles my students faced as LGBTQ+ students in the DR. My application essay was titled *A King in Pink* and discussed my experiences as a preschool teacher with a young boy that preferred dancing instead of sports and pink and flowers over blue and cars, challenging gender norms and stereotypes.

My job as a phenomenological researcher is to present the experiences of my participants as they took place and discover the meaning and essences of their experiences as LGBTQ+ students in Dominican K-12 schools. I recognize that my writing and my research reflect my experiences growing up with my brother and my experience protecting LGBTQ+ students, and that I cannot separate these from who I am as a person or as a researcher. My experiences may have impacted my interpretations and findings from the study. However, I did my best to limit my bias by connecting the voices of individuals with the setting in which the situations described take place (Creswell, 2013).

According to Creswell (2009), reflexivity means the consciousness the writer has of the biases and life experiences that they will bring to their study. As a researcher, I am aware of my biases when it comes to protecting LGBTQ+ individuals in schools. I have experienced this topic up close with LGBTQ+ family members, especially with my brother. My experiences with him as a child, teenager, and adult led me to become much more passionate about this topic and have shaped me into the person I am today. I acknowledge these experiences will shape me as a researcher, too. I acknowledge that, as a researcher, I employed all means at my disposal to identify and mitigate against any substitution of my own perspective for the actual perspectives offered to me by those who participated in my study. I also employed all appropriate safeguards in the conduct of data collection and analysis to ensure unconstrained expression by participants and reliable interpretation of that expression in the study findings. I go into details of this safeguard in the Trustworthiness section of this chapter.

Reflexivity is a process that must be lived by the researcher. To live this process throughout the conceptualization, design, and conduct of this study I used several strategies in a recursive and consistent manner. For instance, I journaled almost every day. I met frequently with peers to debrief my thinking, reflect on the process of my inquiry, and explored what aspects of my own experience I brought to this study. This process of journaling and engaging with peer researchers throughout the study kept me in a reflexive mode and allowed me to watch my own transition of thought and insight as I moved from conceptualization, to exploration of the literature, to study design, to data collection, and finally to data analysis and interpretation.

In the process of conducting this research, I engaged with a book called *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat Zinn (2013). When talking about mindfulness, Kabat Zinn invites the reader to hear “what is here to be heard... without judging or thinking about what you are hearing” (p.

72). He promotes “non-judgmental awareness” (p. 80), and “a beginner’s mind” (p. 79), encouraging the reader “to let each time be as if you were encountering (your body) for the first time” and “letting go of all your expectations and preconceptions” (p. 79). As I read Kabat Zinn, I could not help but to think of Moustakas (1994). To engage in a transcendental phenomenological research, it is necessary to approach the data in a mindful and reflexive manner, becoming aware of biases and preconceptions and setting them aside, because only then will the researcher be able to encounter the phenomenon “as if for the first time” (p. 34).

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Before conducting this study, I obtained approval to conduct the research from Western Michigan University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). There was no additional requirement other than the consent form signed by individuals who participated in this study. The HSIRB approval provided me with the authorization to conduct human subjects’ research and ensured that my participants were treated ethically during the course of this research.

Site, Population, Subjects, and Sampling

Site

After approval of HSIRB and my doctoral advisor/committee, this study took place in the Dominican Republic (DR). I had access to a private conference room and office where I conducted in-person interviews with the participants, except one interview that I conducted at the participant’s home per his request.

Population and Sample

The sample of this study was 12 individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or trans* and attended and graduated private and public schools in the DR between 2008-2018. The inclusionary criteria were:

- 1) Individuals who identify as LGBTQ+
- 2) Over 18 years old

The exclusionary criteria for subjects were:

- 1) Individuals who do not identify as LGBTQ+
- 2) Individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ but are underage
- 3) Individuals who attended schools in other countries even if they graduated from a K-12 school in the DR.

I used a combination or mixed sampling and various strategies to achieve my desired sampling. Purposeful sampling approach was used to ensure participation of information-rich individuals (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015; Patton, 2002). Palinkas et al. (2015) emphasize criterion sampling should be used to select participants who met specific criterion. After receiving approval through the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB), I recruited 12 individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ who attended and graduated private and public schools in the Dominican Republic between 2008-2018. In addition to criterion sampling through my recruitment flyer, I invited respondents to the flyer to assist me in using snowball sampling to expand the pool of potential participants. Palinkas et al. posit snowball sampling allows the identification of other individuals who meet the same criterion through individuals who are key informants. I requested the potential participants who responded to the criterion sampling strategy to recommend individuals

they knew who also met the study criterion and who might be interested in participating in this study, and asked them, at the potential participants' discretion, to give me their contact information. Through these contacts, I started a snowball recruitment chain.

Access and Recruitment

This study recruited participants 18 or older that identify as LGBTQ+ and have attended and graduated private or public K-12 schools in the DR between 2008-2018. The process to access and recruit participants began by sharing the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) on my social media accounts and asking friends and professionals to share it on their social media accounts as well. This flyer contained information about the study and my contact information. Second, I contacted organizations that work to promote equality for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ in the country and asked them to share the recruitment flyer as well. Potential participants contacted me via Instagram, Whatsapp, or email. Once contacted by potential participants, I sent out the recruitment email (see Appendix B), and, if they expressed interest in learning more about participating, I provided them with a consent document and went over the study with them, answering any questions they had before they decided whether they wanted to participate or not. The recruitment flyer, email, and forms were available in English and Spanish. Once the participant expressed interest in learning more about participating, I provided them the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C) that detailed the study purpose and indicated how the study would take place. The Informed Consent Form also stated participation was voluntary and if desired, the participant could withdraw from the study at any time. Once there was agreement and the Informed Consent Form was signed, we set a date and time for the interview via email.

I placed the first 10 participants to sign and return the Informed Consent Form in the participant pool. I then thanked any other potential participant who returned the Informed

Consent Form after the first 10 had been received and communicated that they may be contacted in the future if the opportunity to participate in the study arises or if additional participants are needed. After interviewing the first 10 participants, my dissertation chair and I agreed it would be best to interview at least two more participants to reach saturation, so I went back to HSIRB for approval. Additionally, I created a Demographic Profile Form (see Appendix E) that was also approved by HSIRB and sent it out to all participants via email.

Data Collection Methods, Procedures, and Instrumentation

Data Collection Protocols and Procedures

Lindseth & Norberg (2004) state a basic way to become aware of and understand our experiences is to narrate them through reflection. Because of this, I collected data through semi-structured, narrative, face-to-face interviews with all participants in the study (see Appendix F for interview protocol) and through a participant demographic profile form using an online survey tool. According to Lindseth and Norberg, narrative interviews produce texts that express their own meaning. To ensure the participants' voices were heard, I encouraged the participants to narrate their experiences freely in an environment where confidentiality was guaranteed and both, the participant and I as the interviewer shared "an understanding of the interview situation" (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 148). While it might require more than one interview with some populations on some sensitive topics, I found that my sample of participants was very open and ready to share their experiences and to go very much in-depth in their descriptions and explorations of meaning.

I audiotaped each interview with prior permission of each participant (Bailey, 1996) and transcribed each interview verbatim (Creswell, 2013). The duration of the interview with each participant was approximately between 60 and 90 minutes. The number of questions asked

varied from participant to participant. I paused to ask questions and clarifications of things and situations that were confusing to me and encouraged the participant to engage in reflection of their narrative through probing (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). I took field notes throughout the interviews to capture the context of each interview and note anything that occurred during the interview (e.g. signs of nervousness or hesitation or stress on the part of a participant). These notes are included in Appendix G. Per Creswell's suggestion, I kept a journal at all times during the study, memoing and recording my impressions, feelings, and thoughts during the data collection process (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and also during the data analysis process. The participant demographic profile form helped to further describe the setting and context in which the participants' experiences took place. I contacted my participants via Whatsapp and email several times during the data analysis process to ask them to answer questions that arose after the transcription of their interviews or while creating their participant narratives. While these contacts were not full additional interviews, they did allow me to probe on points of interest that I might have missed during the actual interview; thus, bringing out more of the potential data richness and capturing more of the meaning participants make of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Earlier in this chapter I provided detailed guidelines for the phenomenological research method proposed by Moustakas (1994) and described the author's transcendental phenomenological approach. Moustakas' modification of Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) method of analysis of phenomenological data as follows was the data analysis method chosen for this study:

1. Listing and Preliminary Grouping. List all expressions from the experience.

2. Reduction and Elimination: Only keep expressions that are necessary and relevant to the experience (horizons). Remove expressions that do not add value or that are repetitive or vague.

Horizons remaining are “invariant constituents” of the participant’s experience.

3. Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents: Cluster into labels that become the central themes of the experience.

4. Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application: Validate horizons and their themes. They must be explicit and compatible to be relevant to the participant’s experience.

5. Create an individual textural description for each participant using the validated horizons and themes. Include examples from the interview.

6. Create an individual structural description for each participant based on textural description and imaginative variation.

7. Create a textural-structural description for each participant that reveals the essence of the experience, using horizons and themes.

8. Create a composite description of the essence of the experience that represents all of the participants’ descriptions.

Discussion of data analysis procedures

First, I engaged in a pre-data analysis bracketing process again, in order to set aside my assumptions, expectations, and preconceptions and in order to come to the phenomenon “as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). During this bracketing process, I listed the assumptions I was aware of and later discussed them with my dissertation chair, as suggested by Hycner (1985). I then attentively followed the data analysis steps mentioned above. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. I sent the individual transcripts to each participant

engaging in member checking. After receiving the member checked transcripts from each participant, I translated all statements from each interview into the English language to facilitate my data analysis process. I then began Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam (1959, 1966) method of analysis.

I “prioritized and honored the participant’s voice” (Saldana, 2013, p. 91), using exact words from the participants’ interviews. This allowed me to see through the first data analysis step, listing and preliminary grouping. I grouped and regrouped the participants’ statements into categories and sub-categories that emerged from the data. I then engaged in the process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), only keeping the relevant expressions (horizons) and precise and non-repetitive statements. I clustered and labeled my horizons again, allowing the creation of comprehensive themes and sub-themes that encompass the experiences of all participants. After engaging in the final identification process of horizons and themes, I validated each one of them, and then created individual textural and structural descriptions for each participant. Using these descriptions, I created detailed and in-depth participant narratives that I present in Chapter Four that capture the essence of each participant experience. I relied on the participant demographic profiles to gain a better understanding of the context in which the participants’ experience took place and to immerse myself in the experience with them. Finally, I created a composite textural and structural description that accurately portrays what the participants’ perceived as their experience and how the participants’ perceived their experiences the way they did, a “description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

I used an analytic field log as a significant tool during my data collection and analysis process. I began journaling my impressions in it since my field test for this study took place. In

it, I documented throughout the duration of this study my thoughts, opinions, assumptions, expectations, and biases. I discussed my entries with my fellow Ph.D. classmates and my dissertation chair. This field log helped me to further bracket my preconceptions and prejudgments and engage in reflexivity in every phase of this research.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe trustworthiness as the ability of an inquirer to convince their “audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of” (p. 290). To ensure the findings of the present study are worth taking into consideration, the data collection took place using all five senses, as per Creswell’s (2014) suggestions. To avoid misunderstandings, I asked questions and asked the participants to clarify their statements during the interview process (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) and also during the analysis process.

Credibility. According to Mertens (2015), credibility “parallels internal validity” (p. 268). To ensure credibility, I asked my participants enough questions to get to know their experiences as LGBTQ+ students in Dominican schools in the last decade. I sent all of the participants their transcribed interview as a form of member-checking, as suggested by Mertens (2015) and asked them if there was something they wanted to add or clarify. All 12 replied that they had nothing to add or clarify. Moreover, I used data triangulation by collecting data from a demographic profile form and through in-depth interviews. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) suggested triangulation by using multiple sources of data to corroborate the findings. Probing resulted in identifying issues that were noteworthy and allowed me to connect with my participants, creating an environment of trust by reassuring the participants confidentiality (Mertens, 2015). This provided me with the necessary information to develop an in-depth

description and understanding of the settings and participants of the study. During the data analysis process, I contacted my participants several times to clarify doubts that emerged while writing the participant narratives or the discussion of the findings. Each of my doubts were answered by the participants I contacted. I followed another of Mertens' (2015) suggestion which was engaging in peer debriefing. Mertens states the researcher "should establish criteria" for whom to include in both member checking and peer debriefing and when to do so (p. 269). In my case, I was in constant communication with three of my peers since the beginning of this research, given that were at the same stages of the research together. We discussed each step of the research process thoroughly, exchanging notes, giving suggestions, and asking each other questions. Their input was especially helpful during the translation process, given the fact that Dominicans tend to speak figuratively, and some statements lost meaning when translated into the English language.

To ensure validity, I followed Hycner's (1985) suggestions and first asked the participants to "validity check" themselves (p. 297) through the initial step of member checking the transcripts of their interviews. This resulted in no changes to the transcripts; however, when I wrote the participant narratives, I discovered areas where I wanted to probe deeper. To do so, I contacted participants for post-interview probing questions and clarifications. In this fashion, I followed Hycner's suggestion of checking if the findings are valid and true to the experiences of the participants. I also followed Hycner's recommendations for ensuring validity by sharing my findings with the participants. Specifically, I went back to my participants and asked them to help me convert my generic labels for thematic elements that emerged from the data into more meaningful statements. Finally, I applied Hycner's recommendation to check my findings against the existing literature in Chapter Six of the dissertation and applied the author's

recommendation to present the findings to the research committee through the process of the dissertation defense.

Transferability. Transferability “parallels external validity” (Mertens, 2015, p. 268). Because I interviewed participants from different schools throughout the Santo Domingo area, I presented full descriptions of the settings, backgrounds of the participants, significant situations that impacted the participants, and context in which the participants’ stories took place to address transferability. Mertens (2015) suggests thick descriptions will allow the reader to determine if the findings are transferable. The participant narratives in the following chapter are evidence of these thick descriptions. Morrow (2005) emphasizes that because qualitative data requires small sample sizes and lacks statistical analyses, it is important not to present the findings as generalizable to other communities or settings. Moreover, Hycner (1985) states, the purpose of the phenomenological researcher is to shed light on a specific phenomenon, not to generalize the findings.

Confirmability. According to Mertens (2015), confirmability “parallels objectivity” (p. 268). Mertens adds confirmability means the researcher limited their judgment’s and preconception’s influence in the study. To establish confirmability, I engaged in constant memoing as a means to set aside any assumptions that may have conflicted with the data collection or analysis processes through bracketing them in every step of the research. I again engaged in bracketing or epoche prior to my data analysis process although I understand Moustakas’ (1994) states there is no possible way to come unbiased to a research. Reflective memos from the interview process and participant narratives are available in Appendix G. This helped me to ignore my judgment and preconceptions and focus instead on the essence of the experience.

Dependability. Mertens (2015) states dependability “parallels reliability” (p. 268). Ford (1975) suggests that applying the same instruments to the same participants will produce similar results. To establish dependability, I followed Morrow’s (2005) recommendation of keeping an audit trail. I meticulously tracked every step of the research in the audit trail, allowing me to think critically about my choices and steps taken in the research. Morrow suggests the same procedures used to ensure dependability are valid when trying to ensure confirmability, especially the audit trail and the limiting of subjectivity or researcher judgment in the study.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

This study recruited recent (2008-2018) LGBTQ+ high school graduates from the Dominican K-12 system. As I anticipated, I recruited more self-identified gay individuals than self-identified lesbian individuals and only recruited one transgender person who identified as trans* man. Eleven out of 12 participants came from the private sector and all of the participants went to school in the Santo Domingo area, meaning no participant from rural areas were recruited nor from other cities or towns in the DR. It is important to note that I graduated from a private high school. Many potential participants reached out to me after seeing the flyer posted on my social media account because they knew me or knew someone close to me who shared the flyer, which is why most of the participants attended private schools. These factors could limit the scope of the study because the participants were not divided equitably.

One of the issues of qualitative research Hycner (1985) presents is the fact that some studies entail a retrospective viewpoint. Such is the case for this study. According to Hycner, some could argue that a retrospective viewpoint suffers changes through time and hence, changes the experience. Hycner states that a retrospective viewpoint could allow room to develop “a

much fuller verbal description” because of the time the participant could have reflected on the experience to “integrate it consciously and verbally” (p. 296). In addition, due to the nature of the topic, it is also possible that the participants may not have shared their complete experience or may have left out information they felt could have compromised their identity. As expressed previously in this chapter, I consciously made an effort to address and lessen these concerns.

Delimitations

Phenomenological research requires a limited number of participants because the nature of the study supposes the emergence of a considerable amount of data (Hycner, 1999). I interviewed 12 participants until I reached saturation. To participate in this study, participants must have been 18 or older and must have attended and graduated from a high school in the DR. It is worth noting that information that could compromise the participants’ anonymity or the anonymity of the institutions they attended was deleted to protect them. This information could have been important to better understand the participants’ experiences and the context in which they took place.

Chapter Summary

The intent of this third chapter was to establish the research design and methods for this study. I begin the chapter by explaining why I chose qualitative research, specifically, a transcendental phenomenological approach and the guidelines for conducting this kind of research. Additionally, I provided a brief overview of the field test conducted, reflections on my identity, and shared study population, access and recruitment, and sampling strategies, as well as data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, I present the ways in which I ensured trustworthiness and the limitations and delimitations for this study. Chapter Four presents the demographic profiles and participant narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE AND PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of recent (2008-2018) LGBTQ+ graduates of the K-12 Dominican educational system. To do so, the following chapter provides a demographic profile of study participants and in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences. Both aim to provide a better understanding of what each participant experienced and the factors that influence how these participants describe and make meaning of their experiences. The demographic profile and the participant narratives will provide further insight to understand the essence of these experiences.

Demographic Profile of Participants

The sample of this study were 12 self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals who attended and graduated K-12 schools in the Santo Domingo province between 2008 and 2018. Most of them attended private, monolingual, religious schools. Moreover, most of them identify as either gay or lesbian and preferred the pronouns that correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth. Information that could compromise the participants' anonymity or the anonymity of the schools they attended is not disclosed in this profile or throughout the participant narratives that follow. The demographic profile provides fuller context description of each participant experience, although the details removed to preserve anonymity may have been important to further understand the context in which the experiences took place. The names used for each participant in the study are pseudonyms. Table 1 presents the demographic information for participants in the study.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Sex	Sexual or Gender Identity	Preferred Pronouns	HS Graduation	Education Sector	Type of Education	Religious Denomination	Highest Degree
Grace	Female	Lesbian	She/her/hers	2012	Private	Monolingual	Non-religious	Bachelor's
Boris	Male	Gay	He/him/his	2012	Public	Monolingual	Catholic	Bachelor's
Martha	Female	Lesbian	She/her/hers	2014	Private	Bilingual	Non-religious	Bachelor's
Alana	Female	Lesbian	She/her/hers	2015	Private	Monolingual	Christian	Bachelor's
Amelia	Female	Lesbian	She/her/hers	2012	Private	Bilingual	Non-religious	Bachelor's
Julia	Female	Lesbian	She/her/hers	2015	Private	Monolingual	Christian	Bachelor's
Aaron	Male	Trans* man	He/him/his	2008	Private	Monolingual	Catholic	Bachelor's
James	Male	Gay	He/him/his	2012	Private	Monolingual	Catholic	Bachelor's
Leo	Male	Gay	He/him/his	2017	Private	Bilingual	Catholic	HS diploma
Nathan	Male	Gay	He/him/his	2009	Private	Monolingual	Catholic	Bachelor's
Manuel	Male	Gay	He/him/his	2018	Private	Monolingual	Christian	HS diploma
Fabio	Male	Gay	He/him/his	2013	Private	Monolingual	Non-religious	HS diploma

Note. HS= High School

*Information based on schools the participants' graduated from, not their elementary or middle schools.

*All participants graduated from schools in urban areas and considered themselves to be out of the closet.

Participant Narratives

The narratives that follow are individual representations of the understandings gleaned from my interviews with each participant. The participants thoroughly described their lived experiences as LGBTQ+ students in the Dominican Republic in the last decade (2008-2018) through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews helped me to understand how these participants make meaning of their school experience as LGBTQ+ students. After the interview, the participants completed a demographic questionnaire that further helped to understand the context in which these experiences took place. I summarized the information gathered through this questionnaire in the previous sub-section, titled Participant Profiles.

Many participants share common situations and feelings, but their experiences also vary greatly depending on the context in which they developed. Transcendental phenomenology challenges the researcher to describe the experience as it took place and then derive meaning from those descriptions, to later crystallize the meaning elements until they reveal the essence of participants' experiences. The following narratives allow room for in-depth understanding of each participant's experience and for a critical examination of the K-12 school experience of LGBTQ+ students in DR.

These narratives are faithful to the descriptions of the participants and respect the particularities and distinctiveness of their experiences; they provide an authentic description of their stories. During the interviews, I wrote margin notes and impressions of my thoughts, feelings, and reactions. I also captured my reflections during the data collection and transcription processes in reflective memos (Appendix G). These helped me to ensure that my characterization of each participant's story conforms to the data and captures the meanings and insights that I began to see during the transcription process and later confirmed through multiple readings of

those transcripts followed by the coding of meaning units. According to Moustakas (1994), reflection allows for a “logical, systematic, and coherent resource” during the data analysis process, necessary to materialize the essence of the experiences described (p. 47). Moustakas states only through self-reflection can I get to know myself as a researcher within the bounds of the experience I am studying.

Grace

Grace is an openly out self-identified lesbian cisgender woman in her twenties. She graduated from a middle-class, non-religious private high school in 2012 in Santo Domingo, DR, but attended several schools in the country during her K-12 education. She described her school experience as a “period of self-discovery, bullying, and vulnerability.”

It was during the fourth grade that Grace realized she was “different.” She was attending a religious school in the countryside in the northern region of the country. Although she noticed she was different, she could not grasp then what it was that made her different from the rest of the girls in her class:

I played sports, and yes, I was discriminated against, and I felt different, but it is tough. In fourth grade you are a child. What do you do? You play. But I did know I was never like my female friends.

Grace explained that during her elementary school years, she befriended mostly boys. She stated she did not fit in with girls and, although she got along better with boys, it was also tough to fit in with them because a girl in a group of boys “ruins the dynamic.” Today, she stated she still has mostly male friends and that most of them identify as gay. Grace noted that the bullying she endured may not have been due to the fact that she identified as lesbian because when the bullying began, she did not even know what the word lesbian meant. Instead, she believed the bullying was due to her incapacity to fit into the traditional gender roles and what

society expected of her as a girl. “I think it has a lot to do with gender roles. When you do not assume them like they are established in society, it is very paradigmatic, and no one helps you.” She stated that sometimes, when someone does try to help, their help consists of trying to change you. She remembered how her female cousins who were older than her taught her how to put makeup on and bought her dresses, and even found her a boyfriend from her “*barrio*” (neighborhood), but that she never felt “comfortable” with any of this. Between laughs, she stated it was “obvious” that she was going to be bullied because she hated to comb her hair, and confessed she still does and does not do it often.

As she grew older, the bullying continued and got worse. Throughout our time together, she insisted she was bullied because she did not conform with traditional gender roles and not because of her sexual identity:

I believe that anyone, including heterosexuals, and anyone with a different sexual identity that did not fulfill, in that period in the DR, with what was expected of them... was going to have a bad time, and was going to feel like they did not belong.

At age 14, someone in school started a rumor that Grace identified as lesbian, although she had not self-identified as lesbian yet because she was still not “conscious” of her sexual identity. She stated this was a tough time for her because she felt this rumor followed her everywhere. This rumor was present throughout the school year and she went home every day without being able to talk to anyone. During that time her father did not live at home and she described her mother as “very religious,” so she felt she could not talk to her about this. Her brother lived with them and, although she described him as very “relaxed,” she did not talk to him about this either. She stated that what she had learned until then was that the only acceptable sexual identity was being heterosexual, and she had not yet self-identified as lesbian. Grace considered this to be a very tough year. She thought about suicide but never attempted it.

Grace narrated she felt out of place and excluded, therefore had no social life from eighth to tenth grade. She always dressed “like this” (she was wearing a buttoned-down shirt, jeans, and sneakers). Her gender expression was more inclined to “what society considers masculine” growing up. She played basketball and did not understand why most girls in her grade worried so much about what they were going to wear on a Friday night; she wore the same sneakers and old t-shirt over and over again. She tried dating boys, but realized she disliked them right away. At age 14, she realized she was attracted to girls when she and her friends were watching a music video and they were interested in the male artists while she was interested in the female artist, but she did not identify as lesbian just yet.

When I asked her about the bullying, she said it was constant and “generalized, group bullying.” She recalls two other classmates being bullied, too:

There was this other (male) kid, who evidently was homosexual because of his gender expression, and another one, who was the most bullied, he was top of the class, but there was something about him, not even I could understand what was going on with his identity, not even from my perspective knowing I was *different*. They were bullying both of them and me, the three of us were bullied. This other kid was trans*. Today, he is a woman. This person was the most bullied. I realized that the more different you were, to what was standardized in school, at least regarding to gender, the worst you would be bullied. Everyone in the group who did not fit into the heteronormative model was bullied.

Grace stated that she never experienced physical violence, but her two other classmates did. When asked if she was scared to go to school, she said yes. She explained she was not hit regularly because she was a girl, but that when playing basketball, it was evident that other girls took advantage of this space to hit and push her. Again, she stated she thought this was not because of her sexual identity. She added she played well and that this was also a reason why she was hit and pushed during the game. She recalled being scared when she saw her two other classmates being hit, because she did not know what was going to happen to her. Grace stated school staff knew these two classmates were physically abused, because it happened in class or

between classes, but that they did nothing. This was one of the reasons she was scared. “If they knew and did nothing, who is going to defend me? My conservative mom? She knew nothing... she would have died.”

Grace did not recall school authorities ever intervening when she was bullied, nor that bullying was penalized in school. According to Grace, the only behaviors that were penalized were those that impacted the school’s image, such as damaging school furniture or equipment. She was never taken to the psychology department or to see the school principal, contrary to what happened to some of her LGBTQ+ friends in other schools. She recalled the bullying in school was obvious, but school staff preferred to stay out of it. At one point, the bullying was so unbearable that she was afraid to go to school. School felt unsafe and she lacked a place or person to go to at school or at home. She remembered some school staff were “atheist” and some a little more open-minded than the rest. She would sit next to one of her teachers in his class just to talk. She felt school staff did not care about what was happening to students and her “biggest problem at school” was she “had nowhere to go.”

One day, after coming home from school, she cried the whole afternoon and asked to be changed to another school. She remembered this day as “the day I broke down.” Despite not giving her mother an exact reason to why she wanted to leave that school, her mother complied. I asked her if she thought her mother knew why she wanted to switch schools, and she replied: “I imagine she did. Listen, parents prefer, at least in my mom’s case, not my dad’s, because my dad asked, but they rather not ask the question because they do not want to hear the answer.” Her mother even gave her a reason to change schools, she said “let’s try this other school, the one where your female cousins are at, because it has a technical degree in business.” Grace later recalled convincing herself the change was because of this technical degree.

The new school was a non-religious polytechnic, much larger than the previous school. There were 120 people in her class. She found a small group of teenagers who were all “open-minded” and became friends with them quickly. She began dating a girl from her school at age 16. She did not have to come out to her friends, they just assumed they were dating because of how Grace and her girlfriend acted when they were together. Grace stated that she will never forget a time when her girlfriend sat on her lap during recess:

I had never thought about it, you know, if someone sits on your lap it meant that you were dating, and this experience, but with a woman, in recess... having all that attention, but because my circle (of friends) was so open (minded), they did not care. They began to joke about it, like they would with any heterosexual couple, and it was the first time I felt normal, with my sexual identity. I was 16. This was, for me, a positive and beautiful experience, because I was very scared, but they were joking like with any other person, and I went from being bullied in eighth grade to feeling normal for the first time in eleventh grade.

Grace had always been an excellent student until she came out to her parents. Her dad asked her about her relationship with a female friend of hers who regularly visited their house; that was when Grace told him she identified as lesbian. She began crying as soon as he asked. He comforted her and, according to Grace, he took it well and expressed his support. Her mother, in contrary, who is very religious, sent her to a religious therapist hoping he would convert her into a heterosexual person. Grace remembered how frustrated her mother seemed at her newly disclosed identity, to the point where she physically abused her, and Grace’s brother had to intervene for her to let go of Grace. Grace began rebelling and ended up drinking alcohol regularly and using recreational drugs occasionally. She expressed that because she was not accepted at home, she would do everything to avoid going home. She was out every day with friends that influenced her to drink and use drugs. She would come into school drunk and stopped doing homework and paying attention in class. Her grades dropped drastically but,

because grades are cumulative in high school, she graduated with a good average, good enough to earn a 50% scholarship in a private university in the country.

When she began college, her dad fell terminally ill and later passed away. She felt helpless. But thanks to the support network she created, her group of friends, most of them from the last school she attended, she pulled through. She recalled she found a circle of friends who did not see homosexuality “as something abnormal.” Grace expressed she considers herself a resilient person and acknowledged she survived the bullying and not having had a safe space to be either at school or at home because of the support from her small group of open-minded friends. She considers them her “chosen family,” and confessed sometimes she asks her other LGBTQ+ friends how they all put up with everything they went through after growing up in a “system that excludes you.” She stated it is tougher for children like herself to grow up in a hostile school environment where school staff simply do not get involved.

I asked Grace what she would have wanted her school to have done differently. She answered she would have wanted “counseling” and for them to become actively involved instead of “turning a blind eye.” Having someone to talk to would have been beneficial for her. She would have liked clear rules of coexistence in school that explicitly protected students from name-calling and other behaviors that made LGBTQ+ students like her feel unsafe.

Today, Grace described herself as clear about her future, confident in herself, and supported by her friends. She indicated she still has things to sort out, but that she considers herself happy:

I am doing what I am called to and what I want to do... yes, I am happy. I would say I make decisions with fear but with a fear that pushes me instead of stopping me. And I take risks. I have found a partner that gives me peace. I did not want to have debts and I have them. But, can I pay them? Yes, I can. I am a little overweight, but I do not have a health condition that stops me from flourishing fully. I have a place to sleep, later today I am meeting with a group of friends to drink a beer, I can go home and watch Netflix or read, and I wake up every day with

the satisfaction of knowing I positively impacted the life of at least one person, and I feel comfortable with who I am. So yes, I can say I am happy, with all of life's ailments, but totally happy.

She stated she does not want to be rich and wants to do things that make her feel fulfilled. Since she began working, she has always volunteered in NGOs that work with vulnerable populations like youth with crime history, violence, addiction, and teenage mothers. She has not worked with or for the LGBTQ+ in the country because she feels "they do not know what they are fighting for. They fight, fight, fight, and at the end I tell them: what is it you are fighting for? Is it for healthcare? What right is it you want to see first?"

Grace acknowledged she has certain privileges, despite identifying as LGBTQ+. For instance, she was never kicked out of home, she attended private school, her family could afford a psychologist (even if it was a religious one), and she attended a private university. She stated once she became aware of her privilege, she became an activist.

Boris

Boris is a twenty-something-year-old self-identified gay cisgender man. He graduated from a Catholic, public, polytechnic institute in west Santo Domingo in 2012 with a technical degree in hospitality. He lives with both of his parents and an older brother. He said his family is not religious, but "you know, all Dominicans think they are Catholic and never go to church, so no, they are not religious."

Boris stated he "knew" he was "different" since he was around five years old. He recalled "feeling something" for a child of his same sex at age five or six. "I always knew I liked boys, I knew it was wrong, or, not wrong, but that it was not OK with them (my parents), so I was always discreet, I never told my mom I liked a boy." Ever since he can remember, he has felt his parents have tried to "masculinize" him: "Boris, do not walk that way, do not talk that way, do

not wear that like that.” He did not understand what he was doing wrong, but he understood right away there was something “wrong” that he should “should hide.” He expressed he figured out quickly that in order for them to stop correcting him, he needed to “act” or, better yet, “stop acting” a certain way.

Overall, Boris described his school experience as “fun, distressing, and a time of change.” When I asked him about an experience at school he would never forget, he immediately talked about bullying. Although he stated he always had a good relationship with all of his classmates, he expressed certain people called him “*maricón*” (faggot). He expressed this made him feel “terrible” and that he tried to change his behavior to avoid this name-calling:

If I had an argument and they would ask me if I was gay, or “*pájaro*” (Spanish word for bird, another derogatory way of referring to homosexuals in the DR), like Dominicans say, I tried the next day to come to school a little more masculine. I would say to myself: let me walk this way, let me try to not raise my voice, let me try to spend more time with boys and not with girls. I tried to fix this and that.

He then expressed that it was not that he wanted to hide who he was, but he tried to avoid getting bullied. He told me that he saw many others in his school experience much more bullying than he did, because they were even more “*amanerado*” (Dominican expression for feminine mannerism) than him, so he actively tried to avoid getting bullied. If someone asked him (if he was gay), he would answer: “what do you care?” and then he “would try for it not to happen again” by “inhibiting” himself and controlling his feminine mannerisms. When asked him if the bullying ever escalated to physical violence, he said he did not recall it ever getting to that point:

It was not like I was telling the world (that I was gay), but, I don’t know, you were in school once, you know that this is normal, they notice. I don’t remember physical violence, but normal problems like that, verbal discussions with people, but I do not remember physical violence for that reason.

Boris attended the polytechnic institute during his four years of high school. He recalled experiencing less bullying than during his elementary and middle school years when he attended

another religious school in Santo Domingo. He remembered being called *maricón* and not having many friends or people to talk to back then. He told me there was “progress” from elementary school to high school, or not “progress, but, I had already modified my behavior, trying to hide, change my expressions.” According to Boris, changing his behavior was a “mechanism” to avoid bullying. He recalled being frustrated and going home to ask himself and analyze why they were calling him *maricón*. He tried being more masculine by speaking and walking differently.

At a point during elementary school, he told his parents he wanted to switch schools: “they called me *maricón* and I had this reputation and had to leave that school. I just told her (my mother) I did not want to be there.” When asked if he thought his parents knew why he was requesting the change, he answered:

Of course they knew, even if, I don’t know if that’s a phase, but they simply did not accept it or did not want to see it. Just like it happens to us, at first it is hard to accept it, one tries to hide it, one thinks it is wrong. They would ask me since I was young if I liked boys or if I wanted to go to a psychologist. Our parents were also young once. If they noticed feminine mannerisms in me, they tried to change that. Every time I would talk, my dad would tell me I spoke weird and asked me if I wanted to visit a psychologist. I remember my mom telling me as a child that if I liked men she was going to die. You don’t say those things to a child.

In elementary school, Boris recalled being victim of a lot of bullying. Most of his friends were girls and he had little to no male friends in first grade. He later restated that he did not have a single male friend in elementary school. He recalled always feeling more identified with girls than boys despite trying to be close to boys. But he said the “rejection was almost instant,” they would tell him to leave and he felt he did “not fit in.” His dad would constantly ask him why most of his friends were girls. He expressed he never told his parents what was happening in school because that would have worsened the situation and have created further surpluses at home.

Boris' parents were separated when he was born until he was about five to six years old. He recalled that the "attacks" on him started when they got back together. He stated his dad was the first to start telling him how not to act and blamed his mother because she had him "under her skirt." He told me about a time when, as a child, he was playing with his mother's lipstick. He shared he thinks "that's when their (my parents') frustration began," asking him to change his mannerisms and way of being, telling him to stand up straight, and not to "wear your hair like a woman." He remembered having to wear "loose-fitted clothes" because otherwise they would tell him he wanted to "dress like a girl." Boris expressed that he was very effeminate in childhood, and that his parents would send him to summer camp at the police or marine force, perhaps to change this behavior.

As a child, Boris said he felt he was never going to be accepted. He confessed he still feels that way today. He said his parents are at a point where they know he identifies as gay, but they simply do not talk about it. He stated he would like to bring his boyfriend over, but that he understands this is a process and prefers not to annoy them. He knows he depends on his parents economically. He stated he works with his dad and wants to move to the United States (US) for his master's degree. "All these things require their economic help, so I don't want to create buzz. Maybe when I know that I will definitely be moving out with my partner I will (talk about this)." He stated he feels lucky to have his partner's support. His partner is 10 years older than him and Boris expressed he went through what he is going through right now with his family. He talked about how his partner's family accepts him and how Boris can go to their family activities, but that his partner cannot come to his. "We don't even talk about this topic. He (my partner) knows that in the future he will (be able to come to my family activities), but not right now."

Academically, Boris was always a very good student, except when in middle school. He expressed he does “not want to remember the bullying” he endured then. After he switched schools, he did better in high school. Boris did not recall his parents realizing he was not doing well in school. They worked full time and they both arrived at home at around 9:00 P.M. every night. Neither of them would pick up his grades; an aunt of his did. He said his grades were mostly Cs.

When I asked Boris about his emotional wellbeing in school, he said that when a child wants to switch schools it is because the situation is unbearable.

There was a time when I felt depressed, I wanted to die. I remember searching for suicide videos and things like that. That was the most catastrophic period, when I wanted to change schools. I do not think that what most affected me has been (the lack of support in) school, but my family. When you feel your family is rejecting you, pressuring you, I think that is the most painful of all.

Boris shared that although he contemplated suicide at a point, switching schools helped a lot. He felt less emotional pressure, he did not have the (gay) reputation he did before, and he was able to be more open in high school.

According to Boris, other technical degrees at his polytechnic were considered more “masculine” than the one he chose, hospitality. He expressed that his father did not understand why he had to choose that degree out of all the others offered, like computer science, electronics, or electricity. In fact, when he graduated high school, he wanted to major in hospitality, but his father said he was not willing to pay that much money for *that* career. He then changed his mind and chose a science major instead, like his father; his father paid right away. Boris said he made up his mind about changing majors on his own.

At the polytechnic institute, the school psychologist assumed Boris was gay and often approached him during recess or when she saw him in hallways. She offered to “help” if he ever

needed to talk or “felt attracted to men.” She pulled him out one day and offered to talk to his father. Boris found out she even talked to his teachers, because one of his teachers told him the psychologist had told the school faculty to “observe” him in order to “help him.” Boris did not ever recall telling the psychologist he identified as gay despite the many times she offered to help. She told him he “could change” and that his feelings could “go away.” Moreover, his homeroom teacher told him the school psychologist was telling the rest of the teachers she thought he was gay and that she thought she could help him. When asked if he felt safe at school, he replied:

In a school run by Salesian nuns, where the school psychologist told my teachers to ask me if I was gay and if she could approach me, do you think I am going to feel safe in an environment like that? No. Of course not.

Boris recalls having two or three friends who identified as gay in high school, but they were not in his technical area. “It was incredible, I was the only one in the technical area for women, the other were in accounting, electronics, that does not mean anything, but you know.” He said he had two or three male friends (who did not identify as LGBTQ+) that were in the hospitality technical degree with him. He said some of his female friends expressed interest in him and that this made him “uncomfortable.” He remembers trying to date a girl and described it as “the most uncomfortable moment” of his life. He expressed he felt “wrong and hypocritical.”

He graduated from high school as a young teenager and earned his bachelor’s at a very early age. This is uncommon for students in the DR. He told me he skipped two grades because some of his family members were educators and they enrolled him in school early. Right out of college, at around age 20 or 21, he said he felt desperate to meet somebody and fall in love. He recalled telling himself that he was not going to wait until his parents passed away to get on with his life. He met his now-partner through an app. Up until then, he expressed he had restricted

himself and did not know much about the LGBTQ+ community or have any LGBTQ+ friends. As a matter of fact, he confessed he “criticized people for being too *amanerado*,” and that he “could not stand trans* people” because that’s the example he grew up with. Every time his dad saw someone he perceived as LGBTQ+, he would use pejorative terms. Boris said he had changed his attitude little by little and that his partner had helped him a lot in this sense.

We discussed how not having the support of his parents still makes him feel “terrible.” He said he feels they have hope that this is just a phase and that their comments are hurtful and make him feel “uncomfortable.” He said he is working hard not to ruin the relationship he has with his father, but that it is tough on him. He shared how his dad tries to get on his “good side,” after making derogatory comments about the LGBTQ+ community, but then goes back to saying that “he does not want or love ‘*maricones*’” and that he is never going to accept “*that*.”

When we talked about who he is today, he told me he does not inhibit himself from being who he is, but that much of who he is he learned growing up. He confessed he was much more effeminate in childhood, but he had to change his ways in order to “survive” at home and in school. He told me he grew up repressing who he was and that doing so definitely impacted who he is today. He said this does not mean he is ashamed of who he is. He is currently dating the same person he met online, and described himself as “open,” although he does not go around saying he identifies as gay, but if asked, he answers he does.

Boris and I later discussed how his high school experience impacted who he is today. He told me having graduated from a public school after having been in private school all his life was a challenge for him. He said he learned “to deal with all types of personalities” and became a “tough” person. He recalled how the attacks received “modified his personality” and “impacted”

his development and talked about becoming “defensive” in high school. He stated that at the beginning of his relationship, he would go out in “fear of being discovered.”

Despite everything he lived, Boris confessed he feels privileged. His parents were able to give him a good education. His whole life he had been in private school except when he decided to change to the polytechnic because he could no longer withstand the bullying at his other school. Some of his friends did not even have money to buy lunch. He stated this helped him to become a more mature person.

Boris described himself as “young, mature, visionary, very perseverant, fighting to be happy and conquer his dreams.” Although he indicated he still has things to sort out, he is confident in himself and clear about his future. We discussed his dreams and his plans. On the top of his list is moving to the US and certifying his career there. He stated that although the DR has made certain advances, he feels he will never be able to marry his partner in his home country. He yearns for the right to get married to his current partner, healthcare, and many other benefits not yet available in DR. He wants to have a good job, a family, a house, and “basically try to live a normal life,” and to do so, he feels he needs “to run from this society.” I asked Boris if he felt he needed the support of his family to be happy and he replied he knew in time “they would come around.”

Martha

Martha is a 22-year-old self-identified lesbian cisgender woman. She is the youngest of three children. Currently, she lives with her mom, dad, and her sister. Her brother lives in the US but travels back and forth. She finished high school in the year 2014 in a private, upper-middle class, non-religious school in Santo Domingo. When I asked her about her experience as an

LGBTQ+ student in the DR, her answer was: “I didn’t encounter any problems.” She told me she always knew she was “different.”

I always knew. I mean, I was attracted to a female teacher when I was seven years old. To me that did not come up (later in life) like ‘oh! I’m attracted to women.’ I always liked women. I never liked men.

When I asked her about this teacher, there was nothing particular she remembered about her that caught her attention. She was not Martha’s teacher, but she shared she had these flashbacks of her teaching another class. Martha told me this teacher was “weird” and “kind of a wuss” and “was not good looking.” She “does not understand” why she was attracted to her but always remembers she was.

Despite having heard many times that homosexuality is wrong and a sin, Martha told me she had never given too much thought to what other people think. She never felt the need to pretend she was somebody else if she was happy with who she was. I asked her if she ever told anyone in school she identified as lesbian, but she told me there was no need to. She also said that she had never told anyone before, except her mom. “They just knew. It always flowed. For instance, if there was a get together, I would attend with my girlfriend.” She described “everyone” in the school as “super open,” and described her school as “a school for everything and everyone, any religion,” a place where “you could not judge anyone.” She continued saying that it was made clear that you could not discriminate against anyone because of their religion, and if there was a religious activity that was going to take place in the classroom, you were not forced to assist or be part of the activity if you did not want to. The teacher would say: “we’re going to talk about this (religion), and if you are not interested in it, it’s OK for you to leave the room.”

Martha did not recall anyone at school talking about what religion said about homosexuality. Instead, Martha said she felt supported at school and that all of her teachers “would talk about that” and “would defend homosexuality.” She went on to say that one teacher in particular “defended it vigorously.” Martha told me she did not recall the school ever talking about homosexuality as a bad thing with parents and then told me that her school did not involve parents as much, stating they only went once a year to pick up their grades.

Despite not being bullied herself because of her sexual identity, Martha expressed other kids had a bad time in school because of this. She told me how much a girl’s story had impacted her. The girl came out to her mother and her mother sent her to live in the countryside on her own. She remembered the girl once climbed up the roof and said she was going to jump, and that her mother told her to go ahead. The girl’s mother was one of the school’s principals. Martha never had a problem with this principal but was shocked at how she supported Martha and she would not support her own daughter. Martha then talked about a boy in her class who was bullied. She recalled she “did not defend him because he brought it upon himself because he was very, very weird.” Martha later told me this boy’s “problem” was that “he was not open (about his sexual identity). He was kind of scared. He was mocked a lot because he would tattle on all of us.”

Martha and I talked about her academic development in school. She told me she “tried to be good but it did not work out that way.” She acknowledged she did not work hard enough, though. She did not have a favorite subject, she disliked all of them, and considered that “normal.” However, she never failed a subject. She expressed she would have liked being an A student, but she was very talkative and was instead a B student. We then discussed her social development in school. She recalled only getting along with four girls in her class. She got along

well with the boys. In Martha's words, "the girls in my class weren't worth it. They were envious and criticized everybody."

When I asked Martha if her school experience had impacted who she is today, she replied:

I don't think a school experience can shape you. You shape yourself with what you live at home, who you really are, who you want to become, and your projections. I mean, not because I was treated well in school I am happy, and not because I was mistreated in school I am sad.

I then asked Martha how she thought people became happy. She replied people are happy when they "do what they want and love themselves." She recalled an experience that shaped her was the pressure her mom had on her by comparing her to her female cousins. "Since young, I never let her compare me. I never gave in. And then I learned, whomever came to compare me to others, I stopped them right on point." She told me her cousins were "good students" and her mom insisted she be a good student too.

Martha had her first girlfriend when she was 15. She did not go to the same school as her, but Martha would bring her to get-togethers with school friends. She told me no one ever asked her why she was dating a girl or called her names:

Not ever. It depends. People who are bullied, it depends on who they are and how they act. If you allow it, if you allow the name calling, for example, "*pájaro*" or "stupid," you allowed it. You're the one who decides whether you are going to be bullied or not.

I asked Martha if she was afraid to express herself when she realized her sexual identity. She shared she was scared at the beginning. She told me she remembered thinking a lot about not wanting to go to hell but then realizing on her own there were all kinds of people in the world. She said she realized that being different did not mean she was a bad person.

Martha and I then talked about suicide. She told me she never thought about it as a possibility because she wanted to "accomplish many things in life. I know I have a future and I want to fulfill that future." I asked what it is she wants to accomplish, and she replied she wanted

to “be successful, have a family, have multiple dogs, and enjoy life.” Martha then said: “you can’t just squander your life and everything you have, you have to have something good, you can’t just look at what is wrong.”

Martha and I then talked about her family. She expressed she enjoyed spending time with her mom but not with her family. She described her dad and sister as “close-minded and archaic” and said that they do not validate other people’s opinions and always assume they are right. Martha told me her dad was “rarely home.” We discussed her coming out process to her mom, since she told me her mom was the only person she had told she identified as lesbian. Her mom became depressed for “a while,” but Martha insisted “she is fine now. That was a long time ago.” She said she does not remember exactly how long it took her mother to accept her, but that it felt like 10 years. She described that period as “horrible,” and expressed she was “angry” and “felt alone.” Although Martha had said earlier she did not pretend to be someone she is not, she told me she had a boyfriend as a cover up when things were not well at home with her mother. She said that every time they talked, her mother would criticize her or compare her to others, but that today, she “literally is a completely different person; she became my mom again.”

Martha’s mother was the one who told the rest of her direct family Martha identified as lesbian. Martha’s sister was upset because she did not tell her first and her brother said “he always knew.” I asked how her dad took it and she replied: “normal.”

Martha indicated she considers herself happy. When we discussed the future, she told me she planned to move to Europe for school with her then girlfriend in a few months. When I asked her if she planned to move back to the DR after she finished school, she said no. She hoped to find something she loved and felt comfortable with in order to stay.

Alana

Alana is a self-identified lesbian cisgender woman in her twenties who lives with her father, stepmother, and two brothers. She graduated from a private, lower-middle class school in Santo Domingo in the year 2015. Alana expressed she did not know what she wanted, who or what she liked, or what she was inclined to when she was in elementary or middle school. She confessed thinking all her life until about eighth or ninth grade that she was a “normal person.” She said “*this* (homosexuality) is still not considered normal. I don’t think it ever will be.” She grew up liking boys and she even had a boyfriend. She told me her feelings for him were real, that he had broken her heart, and overall, that their relationship was “normal.” But then the doubts in ninth grade began. She said she started questioning her sexuality at around age 14 or 15. She met a girl and began having feelings for her but preferred to ignore them: “I was like, what is wrong with me? I started feeling weird, because this was something completely different. But I did not talk to anyone about it because I was afraid of being judged.” She expressed she considered herself a “super open-minded” person but was not as open-minded then as to talk to someone about what was going on. She also said that when it came to others, she was open-minded, but that when it was about her, she was a bit more “reserved.” She told me she did not know then if this was a phase and chose to ignore it for a while. But at school, she had several friends who identified as lesbians who were out and to them this was completely normal. “I was shocked at how normal this was for them and I was like, OK, how weird.”

It was not until a religion class at school that Alana identified as lesbian. The teacher was saying things about the LGBTQ+ community that upset her and she considered hurtful, and this was when she knew. “It is not the same thing if someone is judging somebody else, a friend or a family member, but it would not feel as hurtful if you did not identify with what they were

saying.” She expressed she sat with a very close friend and talked about it, and her close friend said she already knew because of how Alana talked and acted. She told me she never felt judged by her school friends and how this had been very positive for her. She expressed they did not make a big deal about her coming out and did not treat her differently because of this, and that she felt much better with their support.

Alana expressed her school friends were always supportive of her. If they had a get together, they expected Alana to bring whomever she was dating. She joked boys in her class even asked for her advice on dating girls. When we talked about her teachers, she stated the religion teacher considered homosexuality to be a sin and talked about it often in Alana’s class. She brought to class the chapters of the Bible that talked about this and told the class that LGBTQ+ individuals would go to hell and not have “eternal life.” Alana often argued, while in class with that teacher, that she should not be so absolutist because many of her students did not believe in the same thing she believed. Alana insisted the teacher should not judge others because they had different beliefs and that she should open her mind. She recalled how upset these comments made her and how often she argued with her teacher. Every time Alana felt the teacher was upsetting someone, Alana would step in for them. She told me her classmates called her “the people’s defender.” Alana later told me she felt this teacher tried to “make you addicted to her religion” and Alana simply never agreed to that. She expressed she sat with the school principal several times and told her how this was disrespectful to everyone who did not believe in what the teacher believed but the principal did nothing. Alana told me she felt she had no say in her education and that by opposing the religion teacher she was risking her enrollment, but she felt she had to do it anyway.

Alana continued to talk about her religion teacher for a while. She said that it was not that she only talked about homosexuality as a sin, but in general, the teacher said that everyone who opposed “what the school believed” was wrong and “would not go to heaven.” Alana said many of her friends disagreed with this teacher but did not have the courage to confront her. She told me that her teacher’s behavior was disrespectful of human rights. She added that she was raised by her father to believe that all human beings are equal and that no one is better than anyone. Alana expressed her father had taught her to speak her mind as long as she did so respectfully.

It was not until twelfth grade that Alana began dating a girl for the first time. “It was as if she turned on a spark on me. I was anxious to talk to her, get to know her, I felt I needed to have that person in my life, even if it was as a friend.” She expressed it was while dating this girl that she realized what “love really was and what it feels like to actually have your heartbroken.” She added it was a “completely different experience” and that she felt “comfortable” talking to people about her and going out with her. She expressed she did not know if this was because this was the first time she dated a same-sex partner. After several other same-sex relationships, she can now say she “was doing it wrong all along (when I dated men)” and that she may have done it because she knew it was “what society expected” of her, more specifically, her friends and classmates.

Alana told me that technically she did not have such a bad time in school, but that these religion classes really bothered her. She expressed the religion teacher would say homosexuality is a sin, that it was very wrong, that LGBTQ+ individuals usually have attention deficit disorder (ADD) or are missing a maternal or paternal figure. Alana told me this made her feel terrible. Her mother passed away when she was a young child, but her parents were divorced. Her father had already remarried when her mom passed away and she was living with her father and

stepmother at the time. Besides, Alana told me her aunts did an incredible job at being present in her life.

Alana remembered asking her biology teacher if people were born gay or if this was a learned conduct. She recalled her teacher being “reserved” and that she gently declined to answer. She did not talk about religion in her class. Alana insisted her teacher answer the question, but she did not. After the class finished, Alana and her teacher met in private. The biology teacher told her this had more to do with psychology than biology, but that because she was asking for her opinion, she would give her just that, her opinion. The teacher told Alana that she thought people learned this behavior, but that that did not mean Alana had to believe this. She told Alana many people believed different things and that she did not want Alana to change who she was because of the answer she was giving her. Alana said that that was the only other time she had a conversation about this topic with another school staff other than her religion teacher.

Alana told me she was never bullied in school. She expressed the other kids knew she did not mind what they did or thought and that this was an advantage for her. She recalled how once a female classmate was picking a fight with her and she reminded the girl that they were not close friends and that she should not be bugging her.

I am not a person that’s easily humiliated. I may feel bad, but I won’t let you notice. I will never tell you that I’m upset if I know your purpose is to upset me. Because that will allow room for it to happen again.

Alana said she has been this way ever since she can remember. If she was not OK with something, she would let people know. If she did not understand anything, she would ask until she received a logical answer.

Academically, Alana did not do very well. She joked she did not know how she finished high school. She confessed she considers herself “extremely smart” but that she was “lazy and elusive.” Moreover, Alana told me she did not enjoy any subject in school. She expected teachers to make their classes fun or at least enjoyable. She stated she spent hours in school thinking about recess, lunch, or what she was going to do when she got home. She said she was not using her phone or computer in class, talking to a classmate, or overanalyzing who she was.

During the interview, I told Alana I perceived her as a strong and tough person and asked her if she could point what situation made her this way, and if it she thought it had something to do with the death of her mother.

When my mom died, I was young. I did not understand what was going on. I was like, she died, what’s next? And because I did not understand, I do not believe that made me strong. What I do believe could have made me strong is understanding how life works. I have been very observant since young. I have seen how my dad lived his life and know I do not want to do it that way. How my brother lived his life, how my stepmother lived her life. How the decisions they make lead them to who they are. My dad has always had emotional problems and sought help for the first time now. He is much more stable and better, and this gives me peace. But I remember thinking when he drank that if I drank I too would be drunk and have an emotional hangover. I did not want that. I saw my brother ruin his life using drugs and I did not want to end up like him either. Get it? So yes, learning from others’ decisions and mistakes is what I’ve been doing. I believe that is why others consider me to be strong or tough. My mom passed away, I grew up with a stepmother, my brother is a drug addict, my dad is a depressive alcoholic. I don’t think that’s a big deal, it’s just my life, I have not seen any other, this is the life I have. I do not know if I am strong. I have just lived the life that was handed to me and have learned to live with that.”

Alana told me her dad has said to her on several occasions that she is tough like her mother was. He told her the world could be crumbling down and her mother knew how to get out alive. She said she feels that way too and added that she will not destroy her life because others are destroying theirs, and that it is her responsibility to strive in hers.

We discussed her coming out to her friends. She first came out to her close circle of friends. She said they completely supported her. She also told her best friends’ parents and they took it well. She said she felt relieved because she considered them family; they were like an

aunt and uncle to her. She recalled one of her best friends crying when she finally told her. Alana's friend said she was crying because she never thought Alana would trust her enough to tell her. According to Alana, all of her friends "suspected it" and knowing it did not change their relationship at all. Alana told me it was great to not feel judged or to think that her friends thought of her as "weird," especially when she was with her girlfriend around them. She then told me she came out to the rest of her classmates and they took it well too. "Every time I told someone I felt relieved." When she saw not one of her friends rejected her, Alana said she was ready to tell her family. The only person she has not told in her family is her grandmother because she is very religious, but Alana said she will eventually find out.

Alana and I then talked about her coming out process to her family. She said that after that first relationship ended, she sat down with her dad and told him she identified as lesbian. She recalled him asking "if she was happy" and she replied she was, and he said he was OK with that. She then told her stepmother who was also OK with it.

I have grown. I mean, during this period of my life, I have evolved. I have grown and learned to let go. I spoke to my father, with my stepmother, my family, with everyone, and told things as they are. My dad was supportive and told me the world was not going to end, that I was still his daughter and he loved me still, and told me if my mom was alive, she would be celebrating with me.

I then asked Alana about her brothers. She suspects her parents told her younger brother, but she has not discussed it with him yet; he is 10. He did randomly tell her he just wanted her to be happy, which made her think he already knows. Alana said her older brother took it well and shared he "suspected it."

Alana and I later talked about fear. She said she "was afraid many times at the beginning." She feared her family would find out before she told them. She said she had never lied to them and did not want to be caught in a lie. Losing her family's trust was something she

does not want to think about. We then talked about suicide. Alana said she never contemplated suicide because her life was “worth too much.” She said she thinks suicide is a selfish act and would never do that to her family members, but she understands there are people that feel they have no other choice.

Alana told me she would have loved if the whole topic of homosexuality and everything LGBTQ+-related was not referred to as “sin” and was not considered taboo in school. She told me she does not consider kids should be afraid to be themselves in an educational environment, because that is where they spent most of their time. She expressed schools should be a “safe place, where you don’t feel judged or like a freak, or wrong, or that you’re living in sin” because of the way you live and see life. Alana continued saying a teacher should be someone that teaches about and for life, not just their math or science lesson. She said she knows many kids do not publicly acknowledge who they are because they are judged at home and it would be great to have a space to feel free to be who you are at school.

Alana described herself as a happy individual. She indicated she is clear about her future and confident in herself. At the end of our conversation, we discussed her higher education experience. She expressed she disliked it, adding

I don’t like anything about this country. Not because of the country but because of its people and their mentality. I love the beaches, it’s a beautiful country, but we are way behind in so many things. Our educational system is not good, neither are our politics, we have a high depression rate, and, overall, we’re behind.

Amelia

Amelia is a twenty-something-year-old self-identified lesbian cisgender woman. When I asked her what she identified as, she replied: “the L word, ugh, I hate that word, ‘lesbian.’ I call myself gay, but they took ownership of the word.” She laughed and signaled she was joking. She graduated from a private, upper-middle class, bilingual school in Santo Domingo.

Amelia identified as gay at around age 14. She expressed that all the information she received outside school regarding being gay was negative. But in school, it was just the opposite. She recalled how the first time she heard someone say being gay was not wrong was in school when she was in sixth grade. Amelia expressed her school experience was always positive, even if she was not out of the closet during her school years. She said school was the only place where she could be herself.

My school is very different than the rest. When in fifth grade we talked about reproduction and STDs, our teachers mentioned that men had to wear condoms because of AIDS. They also said that men also have sex with men and women have sex with women. It was not a deep conversation, but they mentioned it. This was never a taboo topic at our school.

Amelia expressed that, although she knew what being gay was and it was covered in the topic about reproduction in class, she did not know she would later on identify as gay:

I knew what it was, but I never thought I was (gay). I think that happens when you feel that attraction, because I thought and heard people talking to me about a boyfriend all my life. And then, I never feel attracted to boys but to girls. Some people feel that attraction younger than I did.

The reason Amelia identified as gay was because she felt attracted to another girl in her school. She described this moment as a “boom.” This was when she “connected the dots.” She realized why she would prefer to be with certain people and that men were “whatever.” Although she admits she was always a “tomboy” in school and that some people commented she was “*marimacho*” (Dominican word for tomboy), she never connected that being “*marimacho*” could mean she was gay. She did not recall ever feeling anything prior to that moment.

Amelia came out to her friends at 18, the summer after her high school graduation. While at school, she did not feel ready to “confront it” and felt “very insecure,” although she made clear this had more to do with her family than with her school. She then moved to a northwestern state in the US to pursue higher education. She told me this was when she “opened up

completely” (about her sexual identity), because despite the positive school environment she experienced, she did not feel “comfortable” enough to talk about it. She said sometimes in school there were religious discussions, although they were supposedly not allowed on campus. She did hear comments like “*pájaro*” but they were not directed towards her. I asked if she was ever bullied in school, she said no. “No one noticed (I was gay) until I told them.” She added she thinks it is “different between men and women because if a man is effeminate, they automatically think he’s gay; but if a woman is a tomboy, they just think she likes sports.”

Amelia shared that when she was in sixth grade, her class was reading *A Wrinkle in Time*. She distinctly remembers the book had the word gay in it, but that in the context it was used, it meant happy. All the kids in her class were laughing. She remembers the teacher said: “Why are you laughing? Being gay is normal.” Amelia stated that was the first time she heard an adult say identifying as gay was normal.

Amelia stated she was always a good student in school. She confessed she sometimes felt overwhelmed when she acknowledged her sexual identity, but this never impacted her academic development. She told me she sometimes forgot to do her homework, but that she always paid attention in class. Her last two years of high school were the ones most impacted by her sexual identity, because she felt pressured when she realized she did not feel attracted to men. She did try dating men but knew it was not for her.

I remember my constant fear was that my friends would think I was attracted to them. I hated that thought. As soon as I realized I was gay, if they were changing (clothes) I looked away. I did not want them to think when I finally came out to them that I was looking at them (naked).

When asked about her social development, Amelia told me she studied 12 years in the same school. She had a good relationship with all of her classmates and spent more time with

girls than with boys when in high school. She recalled that in elementary school she would spend her time with boys playing sports in recess. Amelia mentioned she played soccer and tennis.

Amelia recalled another girl in her school who also identified as LGBTQ+. She told me about a time when a new school psychologist was hired and how she told this girl that “she was just going through a phase.” She remembers it was a big fuss in school and that it got “messy.” However, she explained “that had to do with the psychologist and nothing to do with the school.” Although her school had a general zero bullying policy, it did not explicitly mention bullying on the basis of sexual or gender identity was not allowed. Amelia also shared there is no policy about outing LGBTQ+ students but she stated it is not something that she believed has happened before.

Amelia told me she never felt afraid to go to school and considered school a “safe place.” Despite this, she would have liked to have had more support:

Even if I felt safe, I felt I had little to no information about this topic. I get the country we live in. But my school, it can be hippie, open, progressive, but it doesn’t want to be labeled. It’s not like they were going to have pamphlets that read “are you gay?” Get it? They do this in the US. They also have gay-straight alliances, clubs, not here. No, never.

Amelia currently works as a teacher at the school she graduated from. She told me she feels “extremely comfortable.” She loves their methodology and told me she still remembers her sixth and seventh grade classes, which to her, means “it’s a good school.” She never had to memorize a text or write a five-page paper without understanding what she was writing about. She expressed everything she did in school had a purpose and everything she learned she still remembers, and shared she wants to have that same impact on other children. She added her school’s view of life is “more open and less squared.” She told me her school is all for free and critical thinking. Amelia added that “almost all schools in this country fail to develop children’s

minds. They say sit there, copy this, do this. You are not developing anyone's mind; you're creating a person that does what you tell them to do."

Amelia and I discussed how she thinks psychology in the DR is "outdated." She told me "there are psychologists that still think that gay boys are gay because they were too attached to their mothers. No." We talked about how dominant the Catholic religion is in our country and she added that "religious people think everyone needs to live their lives like they do. For me, that's wrong."

Amelia expressed she thinks her positive school experience is "100% related to not being in a religious school." She said she dealt with her family's negative comments about LGBTQ+ individuals but that did not happen every day. However, she knows people who every day heard negative things about "homosexuality, adultery... more in protestant schools. Catholics try to hide it a bit more, but it's the same." She stated that in tenth grade she once had a religious teacher who would say a prayer before classes started. Her classmates and her did not see it as wrong, but the school was supposed to be "non-religious at all, you could not criticize it, but you could not include it either." She remembered the teacher got in trouble for this. She also remembered how this teacher said in a class that they did not have to accept LGBTQ+ people but that they needed to "tolerate" them. "We (my classmates and I) stood up to her, you tolerate a toothache. We asked if she would not let her child socialize with a gay person." Amelia said this experience was "positive" for her.

We discussed her coming out to her family. She was 21 and already living in the US. She was visiting and had another week left before returning to the US. She told me everything negative she heard from her family about identifying as LGBTQ+ was when she was a child. She stated she assumed they told her that because they feared that she could, in fact, identify as

LGBTQ+ in the future. Amelia expressed her family members “already knew” when she told her and that they told her “they imagined it. There was crying involved, but it was more like ‘oh, it’s OK’ (that I’m gay).” She told me her family feared how she was going to be treated and that they said it was not the life they wanted for her because of how society looks at LGBTQ+ people, not because of how they saw it. She added between laughs: “they fixed it then but before they did say it (that being LGBTQ+ was wrong).” Amelia described herself as happy and indicated that although she feels she still has things to sort out, she is confident in herself, and feels the support of her friends and family.

Julia

Julia is a twenty-something-year old self-identified lesbian cisgender woman who graduated from a religious, lower-middle class private school in Santo Domingo. She described her school experience as “traumatic” and recalled it had its “advantages and disadvantages.” She told me it was tough at the beginning because it was a Christian school. She said that “2008 was the year when it all started” and told me she was bullied from sixth to ninth grade. “At the beginning it was confusing. I did not know what was right and what was wrong, and as I grew, I realized I was different. I was not like normal people.”

Julia expressed she did not feel support from anyone, and that she “basically grew up alone.” She lacked support at home and at school. “Everyone knew in school. It (homosexuality) was something new, back in the year 2008. It was new and I was the center of attention of the school, but in a bad sense.” At home, though, Julia shared her family did not notice anything out of the ordinary in her. She stated she “still wore the clothes my mother bought for me.”

Julia was around nine years old when she identified as lesbian. She said she did not know if it was real or child’s play at first. But as she grew older, she realized it was real. She stated one

of her female cousins told her what “lesbianism” was and Julia thought she fit that category. Julia called herself the “lesbianism focal point” in school. She said she was blamed for everything that happened around other girls and their sexual identity. It got to a point, she shared, that they installed security cameras in the girls’ bathroom and had someone guarding it. Julia stated she knew other LGBTQ+ individuals in school, but they never shared their identity because they feared the same thing she was going through could happen to them. She said she was the first LGBTQ+ student out of the closet in her school.

Julia was outed in school by a friend whom she had shared her secret with. This friend told school authorities. Julia told me “everyone knew from the start” because she “never denied it.” If she was asked, she would answer the truth. The school psychologist called Julia’s parents and outed Julia. She referred Julia to a psychologist because she “was confused.” Her parents took Julia to five different psychologists. Julia told me the first three had told her dad that Julia was confused because she was young and that as she grew, she would “mature and leave those thoughts aside.” The last two psychologist told her dad that this was not about confusion, but about who she really was. She pointed out the first three were Christian and that the last two were not religious. According to Julia, her family did not agree with these last two psychologists but finally desisted. Julia shared how she would have liked to have continued going to therapy, she said she needed “someone who would have stopped and listened. Not just listen to what benefited them but try and understand the other person (me).”

Julia lives with her mother and father. She has an older sister who is married and does not live in their household. Currently, her parents “don’t get involved.” They tell her she is an adult (over 18 years old) and that she should live her life outside of their home: “don’t do anything we do not like in the house and do whatever you want outside of it.” She expressed she feels

supported by her cousins and her grandmother, and said her grandmother often tells her mother to “let me (Julia) go.” She told me her maternal aunt once asked her “not to do it (be out) so publicly,” but that today her aunt does not think Julia is doing anything wrong. Julia also shared her sister did not support her while she was in school. Today, Julia’s sister is more “open but still not supportive,” but at least she respects Julia “a lot.” She recalled her sister told her parents on her many times and how she was kicked out of home because of this.

Julia said not one of her friends was supportive of her but that there were a couple of them who “did not get involved.” She said that some of her friends then are still her friends today. She told me it was “very normal” for her friends not to get involved in “a process like that” because they did not want to end up “adversely affected.”

Julia shared how around her high school graduation many influencers in the DR publicly came out of the closet and, suddenly, she became accepted in school.

I was the coolest person in school, they all wanted to hang out with me, all of those who bullied me suddenly wanted to be my friends. It was weird, and funny, because people do it to fit in, “she’s popular because she’s gay, I’m going to be her friend to have a gay friend too.”

Julia recalled how she was pushed from the stairs at least twice a week while in school. She told me there were also many lies: her female classmates would tell the teachers Julia was looking at them in Physical Education (PE) class: “They would say I was looking at their butts and many other things that were not true. They were not true because I was always alone.” She was threatened many times by her classmates. Julia told me she reported this to school authorities on several occasions, but that they did not believe her. The school psychologist said she was making it up to “cover up what was really going on.” She expressed her teachers “turned a blind eye” and treated her as “the weird one” in school. Although she was physically abused

and bullied, she said she did not fear going to school because she “knew it was not going to get worse than that.” She said she never fought back, because she considers herself a “pacifist.”

I waited patiently. I knew all of it was going to pass, it was going to be over at some point, be it when I graduated or when I was kicked out, but it was going to end somehow. But I stood firm. Some people come out and when they are pointed out they say they were kidding or that it was a phase. I didn’t.

The school psychologist threatened to have Julia kicked out of the school if she did not “change.” Julia shared the threats from the psychologist were constant. “But I couldn’t do anything. It wasn’t something I could change. But I had to adapt. The insults, the beatings, that was normal for me.”

According to Julia, one of the things that shocked her the most was that the psychologist told her that if she did not change her behavior (and become straight) she would be “kicked out of the school or sent to prison.” The psychologist argued that other kids in school looked up to Julia and relied on her to have someone to talk to about LGBTQ+ topics and that she was “negatively influencing them” up to a point where their parents could argue she was “sexually abusing them.”

Julia stated homosexuality was a topic that was never openly discussed in school. When situations with her came up, she stated teachers ignored them. She expressed she would have liked for them to intervene and at least talk about it. “We are the same. We feel just like everyone else feels, and I did not feel I was treated equally then.”

Julia said she was a good student before all these “complications” started. She failed her classes many times. While in school, she did not want to justify herself because she knew they would not believe her, but it got to a point where she could not even concentrate. If there was a group project, she would not go to the group meeting because she knew her classmates were going to treat her poorly. She confessed she felt terrible and that this impacted her greatly. She

told me the only thing that kept her going in school was knowing her maternal cousins were there. “They never turned their back on me. They would have lunch with me. That’s the only reason I was calm. People would tell them I was weird, but they stayed (with me).”

I asked Julia how she kept standing through it all, and she answered: “music. Music saved me.” She shared she plays several instruments.

Music was the only thing that soothed me. I would get home and lock myself in my room. I wouldn’t even say hi to my parents. It was an argument where I had no voice. They wouldn’t listen. It was as if I talked and there was a mosquito talking. So, I headed straight to my room. And if I insisted on being heard, I would have to leave my house.

She shared she was kicked out of her home at least three times. One time she went to her last psychologist’s office, who let her sleep there. The other times she went to her grandmother’s house: “My grandmother would tell me: ‘don’t listen to your mom. I’m going to try and talk to her.’”

Julia and I talked about suicide. She confessed she thought about it several times and had attempted it. Today, she thinks it is a “stupid choice. Think about it. I’m going through this, and then I die, and they will cry for me a couple of days, and that’s it. They’re not going to cry for me forever, and I’m not going to gain anything from that.”

Julia said her school experience would have been different if the school psychologist and principal would have been “less closed-minded” and would have left religion out of it. She said she did not need to talk about this with them but that their problem was that they were “too closed-minded” and this caused a lot of her “suffering.” She stated the principal was friends with her parents, and because of this, the principal would send the school psychologist to talk to her in order to not intervene herself because of the friendship they had. She told me she felt disrespected, that she was not worth anything, and that she could not talk to anybody in school.

She added her school experience made her stronger. She became a good listener, she understands people better, everything “I would have wanted others to do with me while I was in school.”

Julia shared she is doing well in college. She said she feels “free and safer” because she is not exposed to constant threats and does not get “evil looks” from anyone. Today, Julia described her dad as more “chill” around the topic. Her mom tells her “do whatever you need to do.” Julia shared she thinks this is because she’s working hard and earning money, and this gives her more freedom at home. She said as long as she’s working, “everything’s fine (at home).” I asked Julia about the future. Julia indicated she feels she still has things to sort out. She told me she still does not know what she is going to be “when she grows up because life changes too much and one never knows.” The one thing she is clear about is that she is going to “continue influencing a lot of people” and that she is “going to be happy.” She said many people have told her that despite everything she lived in school, she did so with a smile on her face.

Aaron

Aaron is a thirty-something self-identified trans* man who uses he/him/his pronouns. Aaron was identified as female at birth in a Central American country to a Central American mother and a Dominican father. He is the youngest of three children. His brothers were born in Santo Domingo, DR. Aaron and his mother returned to the DR soon after Aaron was born. All three of them were raised in the DR. His parents divorced when he was young, and his mother remarried.

He graduated in 2008, a couple of years later than he was supposed to. He attended several private, religious schools throughout his school years. He shared he was expelled from a previous school (also private and religious) because of his “sexual preference.” Although Aaron used the term “sexual preference,” I will be using sexual identity instead throughout his

narrative. Aaron shared he then went through other schools where he was also discriminated against because of his sexual and gender identity. As an adult, he later found a way to work and finish high school simultaneously; he studied on Sundays and did two high school grades in a year.

Aaron shared he realized he was “different” when he was four years old. As children, he and his brothers were bathed together. He began questioning at age four why he did not have a penis, like his brothers, because he always thought he was a boy. In fourth grade, he began wanting to dress like boys in his school, too. This was an issue in school, where girls were only allowed to wear skirts. He remembered standing up to school authorities asking why girls were obliged to wear skirts. According to Aaron, this was “the moment when it all started.” He told his teacher in front of his classroom he was not a girl when she tried to brush his long hair and he replied: “do not comb my hair. I am not a girl.” His teacher replied Aaron was a girl who wore a skirt and he replied he was forced to wear a skirt. Aaron’s teacher contacted his mother and told her what was going on and he soon started visiting psychologists and psychiatrists. He shared:

I have spent more time visiting psychologists and psychiatrists than any other place in my life. My mom insisted on keeping me occupied so I wouldn’t think about that. I was enrolled in every possible class in the afternoon. I went from school straight to karate class, then to English class, then homework, then bed. I had no free time. At age 15, she enrolled me in modeling class. She thought that would ‘fix’ me, but I ended up liking girls even more because I saw them naked.

Aaron shared that by age 15, he had already said at home he was attracted to girls. He tried dating a boy but ended up telling him he “grossed him out” and that they would just be friends. He shared that when he told his mother he had a formal girlfriend, she kicked him out of their home. He recalled his mother saying that poor people lived “under a bridge,” so he literally found a bridge and went there. His best friend picked him up and told him he could move in with him until Aaron figured out what to do. During the summer, being underage, he moved to the

eastern coast of the DR for work. He spent three months living and working there. He said his mother did not call him or try to find him once while he was away. At age 21 he moved back in with his mother, but she kicked him out again and he moved into his grandmother's house. His grandmother had passed away, but he spoke to his uncles and asked if he could live there if he took care of the house and they agreed. He described his mother as "*machista*" (male chauvinism). He later added his brothers were as *machistas* as their mother. He shared his brothers cannot understand who he is and that he simply "lets them be, they do not get involved in my life, and I do not get involved in theirs." He also expressed his brothers continue to use she/her/hers pronouns when referring to him.

Aaron told me his father also uses she/her/hers pronouns with him, but that he does not mind. He said his father always supported him. "You can have AIDS and you will still be my son. You can fall in love with a stick and I will welcome that stick. So, because I am supposedly his only daughter, his girl, I let him (use she/her/hers pronouns). Call me whatever you want."

Aaron shared he felt he was tossed aside or dismissed in school and at home. If there was a school act, he would not be selected to participate, arguing she (pronoun Aaron used then) was "weird" and "was not allowed to dance with other girls." But he said he never wanted to socialize with girls, he wanted to play with boys until he reached puberty. Puberty was when he first felt attracted to a girl. He started a romantic relationship with this girl until the girl committed suicide. He stated she committed suicide because "of the lack of acceptancy in the country" and the contempt they were treated with. Although she made her decision on her own, Aaron shared it fell on him. At school, they would tell Aaron it was his fault she committed suicide, and in ninth grade, school authorities told his mom she could not enroll him again.

Since preschool, Aaron had a best friend who “always knew everything.” Aaron told me this was his only school friend. Today, that friend identifies as bisexual but during their childhood and adolescence identified as heterosexual. Aaron said this friend was always in love with him. After college, his friend moved abroad. Aaron stated his friend “had more opportunities” than him and now “has a family and everything.”

We then discussed his experience in elementary school. Aaron shared he felt suppressed:

I was the nerd that was always far away. Everybody had a group, everybody shared things, and I ate alone or with my best friend. If my best friend did not come to school, I was alone. It was always him and me everywhere.

Aaron shared his best friend always knew because he had shared this with him since the start. “I told him my name was not Eva and that I did not want to be called Eva. He asked me what I wanted to be called, and I said Aaron. And he started calling me Aaron since.”

We then talked about middle school. He described it as “a little bit more tedious.” Aaron shared that being in a religious school was difficult. He stated that as soon as school authorities realized he was attracted to a girl they decided he had to go to Bible class every day because he supposedly “had a demon inside that needed to be pulled out.” He recalled how one of the nuns that worked at the school poured holy water on him. He shared he would reply he knew God and believed in God, that he was not an atheist, and asked that they do not pour water on him because he did not have a demon inside. Aaron expressed they then enrolled him in the youth pastoral program, something he is “profoundly thankful for” because he got to see “the inside of a church and understand what churches really do.”

I saw priests with children, everything that is now known (about the church) I saw it at that church. They would tell me not to talk about anything I saw. And I left because what happened in there was not my responsibility. They never laid a finger on me.

We continued talking about middle school. Aaron said it was tough to be around his classmates. He shared he had a male teacher that would insinuate attraction to him and even talked to Aaron about his penis. He recorded the teacher “talking about the color of his penis and what he did to girls in school” and he went to the school principal and played the recording. He stated he was expelled from the school at the end of the school year and failed the grade. “I lost a year. My classmates from my other school were ahead. All of them finished school before me. All because I denounced what was wrong.”

Aaron stated he did well in math and science and even represented the school in math, chemistry, physics, and chess competitions. He shared he was good at soccer but that in school he was forced to play volleyball, a sport “known to be feminine.” He disliked volleyball, so he would sit and support the girls. Aaron stated that he was not a good student in Language Arts because he was lazy, although, he vented through writing. He wrote poems.

While my world was chaos, I wrote about love. I tell my mom every time we get into an argument. I tell her I did not know love in her house. I knew love on the streets, where she put me. The day I have children, they are going to know what parenthood really is.

Aaron shared his mother replied that his “lifestyle” was not compatible with her religion. “But my mother has never gone to church, and that’s her excuse. That God created man and woman.” Aaron told me he still does not get along with his mother. When he turned 18, he asked her for all of his legal documents. He said she tore up his birth certificate and has refused to give him his Central American passport. Because he has the Dominican citizenship, he applied for the Dominican passport. “That’s what she doesn’t want. She doesn’t want me to have the benefits I should have for being her son.”

We discussed the bullying he experienced in school. He said he would always get the last seat in class, or that his classmates would steal his seat, they would steal his pencils, write on his

notebooks words like “weird” or “nerd,” they would lock him in the restroom, and push him around. I asked how he pulled through. Aaron began to cry. He replied: “I cried. I cried a lot. I still do today.” He shared they would hit him frequently but that he did nothing about it. He said he was not raised to be violent but that he reflected a violent behavior as an adult. Aaron then expressed he is currently in a relationship with a woman. He told me she is the one who sees this sometimes-violent behavior, because when he is too upset, he raises his voice. His voice tore and tears flowed down his cheeks as he tried to discuss who he is and what he has experienced.

Aaron shared he feels the “need to make friends now” because he did not have the opportunity to make friends in school.

I never experienced what a prom was. I never got to go to graduation. I finished school, took my diploma, and left. Nothing else. I mean, I see my brothers, because they were normal, they got to live all that, they get together with their classmates, I don’t know what that is. I missed out on that. I still miss it. I can’t say ‘oh, let me get together with this person from my class.’ Every one of my classmates label me as the weird one. They’re like: ‘yes, he was at our school, he was very weird, that’s why they kicked him out.’

He shared he keeps in touch with very few of his classmates. Some of them follow him on social media because he’s now an LGBTQ+ advocate and has a public Instagram profile. Aaron and I discussed how he does not ever recall someone talking about LGBTQ+ topics in school, not even in hallways. He shared he thinks his experience would have been different if he at least would have had sex education in school. He stated that this was a never a topic in school. He said his teachers would say: “women and men are made for this and that” and he would ask “how are children made? How can one avoid STDs?” He stated he thinks schools should instruct youth on gender, homosexuality, and gender identity. “I found out what a trans* person was at age 21. When I saw a trans* man, I asked him for pictures and proof. When he showed me I was shocked.” He said at the time he searched for news on trans* individuals and he only found news from Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Argentina, but none from the DR.

Aaron also shared that had he had support from his school, he would have finished school on time, his life would have been easier, and he would have school friends. He said schools should also educate parents and families, not just students.

I have seen schools call parents and intervene in parents raise their kids. Nobody is born knowing, so they teach them. My own dad tells me my life would have been different if my school experience would have been different. He thinks it would have been easier. But no, it is not easy. For a gay person, or member of the LGBTQ+ community, it is not easy in this country.

He would have liked to have a school psychologist to follow up on him in school. Someone who would have told him that “it is not wrong to be yourself and that every person in the world is different.” He shared:

I knew I was different, but I never knew that because I was different I was going to be mistreated the way I was. I remember I only drew things related to blood and death. I wanted to kill the whole school because I was dismissed by everyone. I was called weird. I was called a monster. My dad was my only support.

Overall, he described the Dominican school system as “low quality, inexperienced, and poorly educated.” He said he thought it was that way in all levels of education in the country. He added that, to him, the college level is the worst because they are “dealing with adults” and “care very little about them.” Aaron stated that while in college he never received any support either, but that he focused on his studies.

Aaron shared he was not only discriminated against in schools but that he is discriminated on a daily basis in hospitals and at the workplace. He expressed they refuse to call him by his name because his legal documents say a different name. He discussed how name and gender change on documents is not legal in the DR. He then shared that because his voice has changed lately and the shape of his body has changed a lot, they call him “sir” until they see his documents. Aaron told me he is transitioning and has been in treatment for almost two years. We talked about his dreams and about who he is today.

I am the happiest I have ever been. My voice no longer sounds feminine, my body does not look so feminine, yes, I still have big hips, but that will change, God willing... I stopped treatment because I don't want to stay alone. I want to have my children. I'm thinking about opening a "Gofundme" account to see if I can do in vitro fertilization (IVF). I can't conceive naturally, I'm infertile, but that has always been a dream. Some people dream of going to college, I dream of having a family.

Aaron shared all the disappointment experienced when he was younger made him stronger and made him want to succeed.

I wasn't going to die. I wasn't going to die. I learned the value of money early on, I learned what taking care of a house meant, I was an adult when I was supposed to be a child. I did take on smoking early. I have been smoking since I was 13 years old. If someone tells me I can't, I find a way to do it. Because if someone else can, I can. If someone has the right to education, I have that same right. But the truth is, I didn't. I still don't. I don't have the right to an ID with the name and gender that I choose. I don't have a place to go. I can't just sit and make friends with anybody because if that person is not LGBTQ+ friendly, they'll exclude me. I was never chosen for group projects. I did everything by myself. This negatively impacted my academic development.

Aaron confessed he has been thinking about suicide since he was 12 years old. He has tattooed himself to cover the scars of his suicide attempts. He shared he still cuts himself "to liberate stress" but that as soon as he sees blood, he regrets it. Aaron said he does not go to therapy because to "Dominican psychologists think I am ill. They think I have mental health problems. I am not going to go." Aaron shared he has lived in fear ever since he can remember and that he fears for his life every time he leaves his house. He shared that trans* women in the DR are being killed and that he wakes up every day to read the news, expecting to read a trans* man has been killed. "I really hope I'm not the first."

Today, Aaron works at a call center. He said this is where the LGBTQ+ community is destined to work at. He said he is lucky to have learned a second language and benefit from it. He stated he never feels discriminated against at work but that they cannot use the name Aaron on his work ID. They did, however, print a label for him to paste over his work ID and use the name Aaron on it. He shared he had an issue with the restroom he uses, but said that Human

Resources (HR) spoke to him kindly and told him that while they work on a non-gendered restroom, to please use the restroom that corresponds to his birth sex and, if someone has a problem with that, to tell them to take it up to HR.

Aaron indicated that although he feels sad and with pending things to sort out, he is confident in himself. He expressed he volunteers at NGOs that actively work to advance LGBTQ+ rights in the country. He considers himself an activist and wants to help all trans* youth and individuals in the country. Aaron then stated he has this immense need to help others:

The weirder they are, the more they catch my attention, and the more I want to help. I found out late what freedom of speech meant, what human rights were. How my rights were being violated at school, at the doctor, everywhere. Now that I know what gender identity is, I want to help others know what all of this is too.

James

James is a twenty-something-year old self-identified gay cisgender man. He graduated in 2012 from a private, “somewhat religious” school in Santo Domingo. For the purpose of this study, his school was categorized as a religious school, as he narrated they celebrated mass “sporadically.” Throughout the interview, James used the term sexual preference, but I will be using sexual identity instead. Academically, James shared he did well. He was a “dedicated student” but he confessed he was not the “smartest person in the world. But I was dedicated, I did my homework, studied for tests, and always held a good average.” James told me he spent all his life in the same school. He described his school as “small,” with no more than 12 or 13 students per class. He told me this helped him to feel more “comfortable.” He said he never had issues with any teacher and that the school principal and his parents were good friends.

Both of James’ parents are psychologists. James expressed his parents are very conservative.

They never really let me be who I was meant to be. They did not prohibit me to play with girl toys, but they would tell me it was wrong and that I shouldn't do it. It was not prohibited. It was this fine line between yes and no.

He shared he has three half-sisters from his father's side but that he does not really have a relationship with them. James has a younger brother that lives at home with his mother and father. He shared he had already come out at home and that he did so after he finished high school, once in college.

I felt much more independent, more adult, more prepared. You have 'the balls' to say it. The first person I told was my cousin; he's like a brother to me. I later told my aunts, my friends, and I finally told my mother and father.

James added he told his parents together and that he thinks they took it "well and not so well."

My mother was a bit sad; she was depressed for some time. My dad, I thought my dad was going to act differently. But he did well. He expressed his support; he saw it more normal. It took my mom a while to adapt.

We spoke about his childhood. He said he felt "changes" and that he did not feel he was like the other boys. James stated he never encountered an event that led him to think things he "should not be thinking about."

James shared he realized he was different at age five. He felt attracted to things that were very different to what boys his age did. He did play with "masculine toys" but was also attracted to "feminine toys." James told me he was bullied because he spent a lot of time in school with female friends and stated that boys that often hang out with girls in school are labeled as gay.

James recalled his teacher saying he was very "charismatic" and because he was a "smart child" he said he "knew" what she meant. He told me he understood his teacher meant he was behaving differently than the other boys in his grade. He shared he knew that boys liked girls, and he did not feel attracted to girls, "at least not in that way." He also shared he never played

“mom and dad” because he did not feel comfortable doing so. “I felt very nervous because this attraction was not present.”

James shared he did not remember much from elementary school but that vividly remembers he was called a “girl” then. He was always a little overweight, and he shared they also called him “*gordita*” (Spanish word for chubby female person). He also recalled some of his teachers intervened. “Because it was such a small school, I felt the support from some of them, I won’t say all. The female teachers supported me. Sometimes it escalated and the principal found out, but they wouldn’t talk much about the topic.” James shared he has always been very self-conscious about his weight. He expressed he wore hoodies to school every day to hide his body because he has always been on the larger side of the scale.

James later stated he had a couple of male friends but that he always had more female friends. “My best friends were mostly girls.” He said his family insisted that he like sports.

I even played baseball, but no... (he laughed), that was not for me. When I was up to bat, I would hit the ball and run with the bat in my hand. You know, I was never good. Except for volleyball, a sport mainly labeled as feminine. But I was never a lover of sports.

James shared he never felt attracted to a girl, although he tried to force himself and it did not work out. “I was always sure of who I was and what I liked. It did not work out. I saw her as a friend.”

He mentioned he began “feeling changes” in eighth grade. He felt “curious. A lot of curiosity.” He recalled he fell in love with his friends’ brother, because he looked like a singer James liked. He expressed he thought these feelings were not OK but that they did not displease him either. “It was like something different was emerging.” He shared he never told that boy anything because he felt embarrassed.

He described his experience as “difficult,” especially in middle school and high school. He said that in high school he began discovering who he was. He was bullied but pointed out this bullying was “not violent.” James shared he was always a very mature person and he knew how to handle himself in tough situations.

James said his best friend then is still his best friend now. She always stood up for him at school. He said it was a “privilege” to grow up with the same group of friends in school, but that he had three classmates that bullied him, especially in high school. According to James, this bullying never took place during class but in common areas in school, where teachers would not notice. James expressed he is still friends with them today although they do not have the same friendship they did then. When he came out to his friends, he said he felt their support and that he thought they were not surprised at all. James felt he kept his secret for a long time. He described his family as “not totally closed-minded but conservative.” He came out at around 17 or 18 years old.

But my friends, at least my close friends, female and male, always suspected because it was an obvious behavior, but they never talked to me about it. It was like a ghost. It took me a long time for me to say it... to accept who I was.

He shared he never said at home when he was called a girl, *gordita*, or the other names they used to call him, because he tried to handle it himself.

James and I talked about the bullying he endured in school. He said it was painful. He shared that back then he had to think well before he talked because he did not want to be misinterpreted. He never talked or fought back. According to James, this was his “defense mechanism.” He expressed he suffered severe bullying in eleventh grade. He said he had a female best friend and, that because he spent so much time with her, older boys would say he was a “girlfriend” and would mock him using “feminine voices.” They also called him *pájaro*

and suggested he buy bras to cover his breasts because he was overweight. They used derogatory language constantly. Looking back, James shared how much it hurt. He expressed he felt “uncomfortable” and sometimes felt he was not strong enough to confront so many people at a time. James stated he would think:

Wow! I’m going to have to go through this again in school. I would go to school in a bad mood, get home thinking about things I did not have to think about, and I would get upset. I had to calculate exactly where I was going to sit in school, where we could eat lunch without being seen, tried to behave in front of people, not talk too much. I suffered. I was stressed out.

I asked James if his teachers knew what was going on. He said he thought they did, but that most of them ignored the situation.

They turned a blind eye. I feel that’s how it was. There were many teachers that cared about me, but they did not totally defend me... there were different situations. It was more like ‘stop it, let’s carry on with our class.’ It was not like ‘hey, come here, let’s talk.’

James said he got along with all his teachers and that the only class he did not like much was PE because he was forced to practice sports with boys, and he did not feel comfortable doing so. James shared he would have wanted his teachers to be more “neutral” around the topic. When he talked about school staff, he mentioned there was one staff in particular that mocked him. He shared he never reported this to school authorities.

James told me about a teacher whom he deeply loves and appreciates because she was always there for him in school. She would tell him “don’t pay attention to that (being gay) or to them (my classmates). Work hard. I do not care who you are, follow your dreams. Do what you love. And that always stayed in my head.” He recalled other teachers told him to “behave better” so he would not have to see himself in that situation but that they “meant well.”

James said he began feeling fear when he finished high school. He shared he was used to the environment he was in and joining a new environment was scary for him. He said he felt “relatively protected” in school. He told me he thought to himself he needed to figure out what

he was going to do when he started college. He shared he did not tell anyone he identified as gay his first year of college and that he spent that first year denying it. If asked, he would ignore the question and changed the subject. After he saw how his friends and teachers accepted LGBTQ+ people, James said he began opening up about who he was.

James and I talked about suicide. He shared he thought about it once. “It was just a feeling. And it did not last long. I was like, I can’t deal with this anymore.” He said he did not tell anyone then. He later shared he thought his mother knew about the bullying he endured in school because some of his teachers always stayed in touch with her. He reminded me that because it was a small school, his teachers had a close relationship with his parents. “But like I said, my parents are both psychologists. They tried to help, but in their own way. But yes, I believe they had to know (what was going on).”

When talking about his friends, James shared although he did not remember specifically what it was that his classmates talked about, he remembered they would talk about LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom. He stated this talk was neither negative nor positive. James shared he had a teacher whom he perceived was gay and that he loved his classes. “He did not always mention it (homosexuality) because that does not look well in institutions, but he gave examples and went over the topic, in a good sense.” James stated he would have liked his school to talk about sexual identity. He shared he thinks it is a topic that needs to be covered in school because “it’s something that exists, and schools can’t just close their eyes to it.” He added he did not think schools need to be explicit about it, but that he understood it is important that they at least go over the topic. James also added he would have liked his school to have been more open-minded.

James shared his thoughts on bullying in schools. He stated bullying is never permitted in any school but that children do it anyway because “*muchacho es muchacho*” (“children are children.”) Although he shared the school never excluded anyone, he added teacher training on this topic may be good for the school and the students.

James told me he thought that if he had said at home at age 11 or 12 that he was not attracted to girls, his life would have been easier, and he would not find himself in “this position.” He said he would have been “on cloud nine” now. He added it would have been possible, though, that his parents would have sent him to therapy. He shared he had never visited a psychologist or psychiatrist and expressed he was inclined to do so soon. He shared the education he received from his parents made him grow up into an adult that does not share his feelings.

James stated he was a happy child for much of his childhood and adolescence and that he was never mistreated at home. James’ parents set clear rules, but he said he was always himself. He said he loved his childhood and never felt his parents inhibited him from being himself but shared his mother would not allow him to wear uniform shorts to school because he was a little more feminine than the rest of his peers. He said his mother told him they would mock him if he wore shorts, and shared they told him that playing with “girl toys” was wrong.

Today, James works in the creative field. He shared it is a “laid back environment” compared to “law or politics.” He stated his work environment is “flexible” but that he has to “control himself.” James added “he cannot be so open” because of the people he works with but that he is not “very explicit” regarding his sexuality either. “I don’t feel that you need to know that information if we meet and become friends. It’s one’s orientation, one has it and that’s it.”

Additionally, James told me he thinks not being explicit about his sexuality has a lot to do with the country we live in, his family, and not wanting to make another person feel uncomfortable.

We live in a totally religious country and the church does not allow this type of orientation. We live in a *machista* culture, whether we like it or not our families carry this type of culture and one has to inhibit oneself in some things, I'd say. It's not well seen to go out in public and wear a pink shirt... OK, that's not as weird anymore but they still say it's not correct.

James added he felt people need to choose between living in peace or being in conflict with everybody you are close to in the DR.

James and I talked about who he is today. He said he is much more "open-minded and tougher than before." He told me he considers he is "somewhat stable." Although he indicated he is sometimes confused and that he still has things to sort out, he feels supported by his family. He confessed he thought life was going to be worse, but that it has not been that way. He expressed he has made very good friends, he has had good relationships, and has not experienced any "major" rejection. He shared his experience in school made him who he is today. "I mean, how strong I am, how I manage myself at work and professionally, how I am with people, I would say the school experience impacted me positively." James added he feels he needs to be "loser" regarding his sexuality. "I am not afraid to tell you (I am gay). But I am still afraid, sometimes, get it?" James shared in family reunions he feels he sometimes cannot be the James he wants to be. He told me the James he wants to show the world is "much happier, dynamic, does not overthink things so much, and with much more family affection."

James expressed he thinks people in the DR have opened their minds a lot compared to a few years ago.

I am telling you as an openly gay man. People are much more open. If this was not the case, would we be sitting here talking about this for your dissertation topic? There's still a long way to go, but...

James stated he does not usually “support the LGBTQ+ community” because he does “not believe in supporting the community. I think it’s me. I respect everyone’s sexuality but I do not believe a lot in that. But I wanted to support somehow, know that my grain of sand will help somehow.”

We talked about the LGBTQ+ community in the country and he told me that he would have loved to have “the balls” young kids today have to come out and be themselves at an early age. He said he thinks it is much easier to come out of the closet today. He said he has a friend who came out in school and his parents support him. He added this person is “totally normal.” We ended our time together talking about respect. “Respect is the number one word for me. When a person lives with respect and humility, that person does not lack anything else.”

Leo

Leo is a self-identified gay cisgender man in his late teens who graduated from a religious, private, bilingual, upper-middle class high school in Santo Domingo. He shared his experience was “very bad” because he felt he had no support, be it from his teachers, school psychologist, or principal. He said it was a religious school where they celebrated mass several times a year and that they discussed how a family was supposed to be composed according to religion. He shared because his school was religious there was not going to be much information available on LGBTQ+ topics or any kind of support or help for that matter. Every time he heard the word “homosexuality” in school it was followed by a pejorative comment. Most of his teachers were religious. Despite not feeling any support from teachers or staff, he insisted he had supportive and understanding friends who were there for him when he started talking about this topic in ninth grade.

Before coming out, Leo recalled people in school said he was gay. He shared he did not reply because he was scared. "I am almost 20 years old. I said to myself I was not going to let this bring me down. It's the year 2019." He then talked about his coming out experience and told me he was outed by his friends. He was in ninth grade and had had a few drinks. In tears, he told two of his friends he identified as gay. These two friends outed him to others... he shared it was then impossible to contain. He did not recall if school authorities found out, and if they did, he said they never reached out to him. He shared he had a teacher who would hint him that if he wanted to talk, she was there.

After he was outed in school, Leo said he became more social. He started making male friends because up until then he only had female friends. However, he said most of the male friends he has now identify as gay. He talked about "toxic masculinity" and how "having a gay friend leads people to automatically assume that you too are gay." He added he thinks "gender or sexuality should not influence friendships, but unfortunately they do." Leo shared he was grateful for his friends and the support he received even when he was outed. He stated his friends said he "changed drastically" because he no longer feared to talk. Leo confessed he "faked his voice" and talked "super differently" before coming out. Because he was "very dramatic," Leo said it was a perfect role, but it was a "horrible" one, too. He added it was tough to keep it up. Leo excluded himself a lot. Once, in seventh or eighth grade, Leo's teacher asked him what the matter with him was because he looked sad. He made up a story about a fight with his brother, but the truth was he felt "weird. It was that feeling of 'I don't know what is happening here.'" That feeling of 'I would like to talk to somebody, but I have no one to talk to.'"

The first time he came out, on his own, without being outed, was to a friend who also identified as gay. Leo recalled this time it “flowed perfectly. I felt great and did not feel burdened at all.” He shared his friend’s coming out experience because it impacted him greatly.

When she came out, her mother rejected her at first, and the day before school ended, she picked up a microphone and said she realized how wrongly she had acted rejecting her daughter and asked other mothers not to follow her example. I thought she was brave.

He said his friend’s mother never said anything explicitly about her daughter’s sexual identity, but nevertheless he thought she was brave because she was able to admit she had made a mistake.

Leo expressed he had a teacher in school that once gave him a bad grade. “I assume it was because I was gay because he would always tell me I was too *“mariconcito”* (diminutive for faggot), that I was too feminine.” He shared his teacher would say these things in front of everybody in his class. Leo then told me he considered himself “very confident,” but that his teacher grading him wrongly because of who he was negatively affected him. “This was stressful. I found this was very stressful. I don’t ever want to feel that way. I felt rejected and sad.” He stated he did not understand how, despite his best effort, being effeminate could impact his academic development. Leo expressed he did not tell anyone at school about this teacher because he felt his best choice was to remain silent.

Leo also shared he had a teacher that he was close to at first but later steered away from her. She was going to assign a debate in class and told them to pick a topic. Leo said, his classmates, as always, wanted to talk about homosexuality. “The teacher said she did not want to talk about that because it was wrong and that she was not going to allow that in her class.” Leo recalled how “horrible” he felt and how his two best friends looked at him as soon as the teacher said that. He shared he at least had friends that stood up for him and used their voices to defend

him. Leo stated he was very “peaceful” in school and did not stand up for himself when he heard comments like these; he chose to stay quiet.

Leo also shared that he wore bandanas and sports bands on his hair when in school. He stated his female teachers would tell him to take them off because they “were for girls.” He shared he recently tied his hair up and his father reprimanded him and blamed Leo’s mother for allowing “this kind of behavior.” Leo stated this was painful for him.

Leo and I talked about his home and family situation. He said there were times when he would get home and he would throw a pillow to the floor because he had so much “rage accumulated.” He shared his parents are religious but that they do not go to church. He shared he moved away from the church because when he went, he felt that at any time they would pour holy water on him. He laughed and signaled he was joking. Leo told me his mother and two siblings know he identifies as gay but that he has yet to come out to his father. Leo confessed he thought he did not “belong” in his house because his parents would always make derogative comments about LGBTQ+ individuals they knew. He recalled his father tried to go through his phone once and that Leo’s brother defended him; he told their father he did not need to go over anyone’s phone. A couple of days later, Leo’s father sat down with Leo and told him he expected him to choose “the right way” and did not want him to “go the wrong way.” Leo recalled he was very upset after this conversation. “It was the first time I had heard him say something like that and it hit me hard. At the end of the day, parents should support your decisions because they raised you.”

Leo shared his siblings “assumed” he was gay because they were all in the same school and they would hear rumors from their friends. They were also together in a school prior to this one. He shared they were going to change schools, but his parents wanted Leo to stay. He

insisted to leave that school because he could not put up with the bullying anymore. Leo shared he had never had this conversation with neither of his siblings and that they never asked questions either. Regarding his mother, Leo said it was “interesting. Someone told her and she said she always tried to talk to me about it, but I never took her hint. Apparently, it was too indirect.” Leo said his mother asked him to dinner one day and they talked about it. He had thought she was going to take it badly and told me that is why he had not said anything before. Leo shared his mother stated she “assumed it” but that she feared how society was going to take it. Over dinner that night, he reassured her he can defend himself on his own. She reminded him that day that when he would play with his female cousins, they would play a game called “the wedding” and Leo wore the dress and his female cousin the tuxedo. He said she also reminded him that he would always want his sister’s Barbies and hated Max Steel and Power Rangers toys. The day after dinner Leo was traveling abroad and he recalled his mother texted him that she was his mother and would never reject him. He said she was very “understanding.” Two days later Leo went to a Pride parade in the US and said his mother sent pictures of him at the parade to all of her friends. He said he feared his mother would feel bad because “she had a gay son.” He added he feared the same with his father. Leo stated he has a family member who also identifies as gay and that his father did not take it well. “If it was like that with him, imagine what it will be with me.”

Leo and I talked about his elementary school years. He said as early as the first grades of elementary he remembers being called *maricón* by a boy in his class. He expressed he told his father and his father scolded him. Leo shared his father sent him to the school psychologist and forced him to tell his homeroom teacher too. According to Leo, he had that conversation without being prepared to do so. Later, Leo shared he did not know what *maricón* meant and had no idea

that it was not “acceptable.” He expressed the school psychologist was the one who told him what it meant.

I remember her perfectly. She was very understanding. I want to say she did not say it was good or bad, but she told me I could not let people attack my personality. And that at the end of the day, I am the one who needs to be happy. I remember that impacted me. I still think about it; she was nice.

He described himself as very “effeminate.” Since a young age, his father would tell him “not to sit that way, stand up straight, don’t yell, don’t play with this, play with this, do not get together with your (female) cousin. He would not let me see her sometimes.” Leo added he realized he was being effeminate when he yelled and when he acted out. When he did, he said he kept his mouth shut for a while trying to go unnoticed or waiting for others to forget quickly. Leo shared how in school, all he wanted was to make friends and have a good time, and he spent so much time thinking he looked or dressed “too gay.” He recalled in elementary school he would always sing songs that were “considered gay or feminine,” and he has known ever since. He shared he knew he was different since fifth grade, when he began using the internet. He expressed he never thought much about sexuality or if he identified as gay or straight but he remembered he thought a male friend was cute. He said he did not associate thinking a boy was cute with identifying as gay at the time. Leo shared when he was in eighth grade, he was watching a movie and there were women in bikinis and men in Speedos. The men in Speedos caught his attention. He shared once he identified as gay, he was neither scared nor happy, but that he cannot say he knew the negative repercussions this would have in his life.

I would always look at men instead of the women in the scene. I began to question myself even more. I needed to know, to get to the point. Because this constant (internal) fight had to stop. But then I was in that hole. I began watching movies and TV shows and it was like, ‘I don’t know what’s happening to me. I feel weird.’ I still can’t explain it. If you ask me to write about (how I felt), I will hand in a blank paper. I still do not know what it is. I do not know if it was fear or confusion... whatever it was.

Leo added he still gets “this” feeling from time to time, when he goes to a new place and does not want to abruptly say he identifies as gay. He recalled he has had that feeling since first or second grade, and it was only when he told his friend (on his own) that he felt he could begin to “let go.”

Leo shared he worked as a teacher for some time at the school he graduated from. There was a student he perceived as gay. The student reminded Leo of himself. The current school psychologist went to Leo and told him to “help that kid out” because he was “too gay and might end up *pájaro*. Leo shared he was he was “shocked” and that he “cried a lot that day, because if they talked liked that about a child recently, a child who is not half as effeminate as I was, imagine what they said about me back then.”

Leo shared girls never bullied him, which is the reason he has so many more female friends than male friends and added he feels “safe” around them. He said he still feels a little scared around men because he does not know how they are going to act if they find out. He shared he had a girlfriend once, in eighth grade, but said that she was a “beard.” A beard refers to a cover up, someone who helps another person hide their LGBTQ+ identity.

In his previous school, Leo shared he was a good student and never paid much attention to what the other children said about him. He added he had a “balanced self-esteem, not too high, not too low.” He stated he avoided giving thought to what they said about him by studying hard and focusing on homework. Leo said he did well academically in the school he graduated from. He shared in ninth grade he focused on himself, on developing personally and discovering who he was. His grades dropped but he still earned A’s. Leo did better in tenth grade after he was outed in school. He had his first same-sex relationship in eleventh grade. He shared it was difficult for him to hide it and he was always thinking about that in school. He sometimes did not

want to go to school to avoid being asked questions about his relationship. “It was not like nobody knew about it, but they (my classmates) heard things and they asked me, and I did not feel comfortable answering.”

Leo shared he would have liked to have at least some kind of sex education in school. He stated school authorities mentioned the topic once and it was a brief overview, that “obviously” did not include anything about LGBTQ+ individuals. “Everything I knew about LGBTQ+ topics was because I researched about it on my own.” Leo described himself as “always sad” and “depressed” in school. He shared it was not because they made fun of him, but because he did not feel comfortable with himself. He shared he had a good self-esteem, but he also had bad moments “most of the time.”

I wanted to fit in, to belong, I wanted not to have to sit a certain way, talk like I wanted to, without having to force my voice, and be able to be myself. That made me tense. They told me I always had my bookbag on my stomach. I never realized that. I think I was trying to hide myself. This way they would only see my face. I do not feel I lacked support in school, but it would have been beneficial. Having someone to talk to, that’s the best. Being able vent about what is happening at home and in your personal life. Having an adult let you know you can count on them. I think that would’ve been nice and would have made my life easier.

Leo shared he would have wanted this support at home, too. He would have wanted to talk to someone at home, to be able to ask for help. More specifically, he added he would have wanted to talk to his mother and father, even with his siblings. Leo told me he had never been to a psychologist, but that his mother insisted he goes. “My mother thinks I am suppressing my feelings. I think so too.” He indicated he is a happy individual who still has things to sort out but is sure of himself and supported by his friends. When we finished the interview, Leo thanked me and said our time together had been “therapeutic.”

Nathan

Nathan is a self-identified gay cisgender man from DR. He graduated from a private, religious, lower-middle class school in Santo Domingo in 2009. He is the smallest of three children. His parents divorced since he was a child. Nathan described himself as “close to the church” while in school. He said he went to prayer groups and other religion-related things like retreats organized by the school.

Nathan described his school as “very religious” and shared religion was part of their everyday life. They would go to mass at least one a week and had religion class at least three times a week. He shared these classes were taught by priests. If you misbehaved, you were taken to the school principal, who was also a priest. During the morning they said a prayer regularly after singing the national anthem. He added most of his teachers were religious: “they did not necessarily talk about religion in class, but before we took a test, they said a prayer, too.”

Nathan stated he knew he was different at an early age, but that he did not know what being gay was.

I couldn’t give a word to it. I just knew I liked boys. That’s it. Maybe I’m not too ‘out there’ because no one ever told me it (being gay) was wrong. They (school teachers and staff) simply did not talk about it.

Nathan shared he heard about “homosexuality” in school by the time he was in high school. Students talked about it, but teachers did not. “Not even in our religion classes. They never said it was a sin. At least I don’t remember they (teachers) did, it might be my mind blocking these memories.” He shared his classmates would joke around and call each other *maricón*, “but it was not like I knew what it meant.” He stated teachers did not get involved when they heard this term. He laughed and shared “it was as if someone had said wuss.”

Nathan stated everything “stunk” in school. He did not show interest for any subject. He said he was not an A student, but he never failed a subject. He recalled his family calling him out for not showing interest in anything. He shared he felt he could not live his life the way he wanted to, and that this may have indirectly affected the other areas in his life. Nathan told me he liked art and music, but that he feared saying he liked these things would evidence he identified as gay. He began playing an instrument and would hide it downstairs to avoid his mother finding out. “Having to hide the one thing I was really interested in made me lose interest in everything else.” We then talked about suicide. “I played a lot with scissors then, but I knew I was not going to do it. But maybe yes, I was contemplating it.”

He expressed he knew about a friend in school who identified as gay and that “everyone knew about it” but he did not talk about it with him while in school. This friend was once called by the school psychologist, who then called his mother. Although he remembered the issue “got ugly,” he stated did not know what really happened then. “But apparently, the school was not so friendly (towards LGBTQ+ people).”

Nathan expressed he was not out while in school. He shared was a good dancer in school and that he taught his male classmates the choreography for a school dance once. He remembered “everyone” mocked him for being the “choreographer.” He shared he calculated every step he took in order to avoid people finding out he was gay. He described having to be so meticulous was a “challenge.” He shared that if his classmates talked excessively about him, he did anything to find a girlfriend and avoid rumors and “cover it up.” He shared he tried hard to be the “coolest kid” in his class so no one would “mess” with him. His family was affluent, so he would invite his friends over and pay for everything trying to win his classmates over.

It was not really because I wanted to hang out with my friends, but because I needed to be popular so they would not mess with me. I remember that clearly. I may not have been so

effeminate, but I was skinny, I had never had a girlfriend, I did not play sports... all that could generate rumors.

After Nathan began dating girls, he said he felt “terrible.” He shared he met who would become his first same-sex partner while dating a girl. He recalled that while he and his girlfriend kissed, he would be thinking about men. She was a beard for him. He also shared he never really broke up with her, he just drew away until they stopped talking completely. Nathan told me that if he ever ran into her, he would apologize to her. Nathan then shared that after his first experience with a same-sex partner he did not leave home for over a week. “I felt I had done something wrong. I even threw up. I was too nervous. He even invited me to dinner afterwards, and I couldn’t. I needed to go home. I needed to throw up.”

When talking about his friends, Nathan told me he never felt he could confide this secret in any of them in school. In his last year of high school, his friends began using their Facebook status to hint Nathan they knew he identified as gay. He stated he knew these were for him and thought they would soon stop talking to him, so he avoided them first. “If these are my best friends and they took it this way, what will happen when the rest of the grade finds out?” So, Nathan marked his distance from his lifelong friends. Right after he graduated from high school, his best friend, who is still his best friend today, read his email and found a conversation between Nathan and a guy. She shared this with the rest of Nathan’s close friends. Nathan stated his friends did not take it so well. “Not the fact that I was gay, but that I never trusted them enough to tell them. I feel they felt a bit betrayed.” Nathan went on to tell me that he imagined these friends at some point may have had to stand up for him, and that this could be a reason why they were hurt, too. “I mean, they defend me and I’m not even being honest with them.” A few years later, while in college, Nathan said he came across a couple of his friends who told him they

knew he identified as gay and that this would not have changed their relationship in school. “I apologized and told them I feared they would have isolated me, and so I isolated myself first.”

We then talked about his friendships today. Nathan told me he did not feel supported by all of his friends. He shared some of his friends expressed being uncomfortable when Nathan shared details about his relationships.

It’s a big deal to me. I have to hear all about their relationships but as soon as I start talking about mine, they block me out. This may be one of the reasons I do not like talking about these things.

Nathan and I talked about his family. He shared he had a very “dark” era in high school. His relationship with his father was not good then and his parents argued constantly. He shared had he been straight, his relationship with his father would have been “100% different.” He shared he knew him identifying as gay would eventually be a problem between them, so he kept his distance. He then stated he felt he could count on his older sister, but that she sometimes made comments that would make him back out on coming out to her.

I overheard her saying I was weird because I liked rock music but also liked Alanis Morissette’s songs. I began locking myself in my room as soon as I got home from school. My mother thought I was on drugs and sent me to a psychologist. At the time, I was sure I could not count on anyone.

When Nathan finished high school, his mother “sensed” he identified as gay. He said she would not let him go out with friends and would tell him not to be surprised if he went out and came back home and the door was locked out. Nathan said this was her way of hinting she already knew. He was then outed to his family after being in a same-sex relationship for over half a year. According to Nathan, his other sister was the one who best took it. She did tell him she feared for him and how he was going to be treated with all the hate present in the world. He recalled she would ask their mother if she would rather have a sick son than one who identifies as gay. Their mother did not answer. The next day, Nathan’s mother kicked him out of the house.

He moved in with his father until he left to pursue higher education in the US. Nathan shared he did not get along with his dad's then wife.

While Nathan narrated his story, he told me most of these memories were blurry and that he had not given them much thought until our conversation. He shared that around two months after he moved in with his father, they all went to family therapy. His mother was still in denial and told the psychologist it was "just a phase. She told him I never showed interest in anything, and that gays usually do. She said gays are not supposed to be like me, that gays were flowers. And I wasn't a flower." He recalled the psychologist repeatedly told her that Nathan, in fact, identified as gay and that she should understand it sooner rather than later. He recalled his mother sitting on a couch, crying. Nathan shared the psychologist then suggested Nathan was temporarily hospitalized to be "oriented in life." Nathan told me he was shocked. He naively thought this psychologist was on his side until he suggested he should be hospitalized. Nathan said he was "not expecting this at all." He shared his middle sister insisted he did not need to do it, but that if he did it and he still identified as gay after that, then at least their mother may be more understanding. But the hospitalization was supposed to be from October to January, and Nathan was supposed to start college abroad in January. Nathan stated that when his father read "rehab center" on the brochure for the hospitalization, he said Nathan was not going to attend. And so, off he went to college.

He (my dad) is not a feelings guy. Not a words guy either. I take after him, I think. But he never told me it was wrong. He never asked me to reconsider. He was just indifferent. But for our dad, indifferent is good. Indifference meant 'I accept you, let's move on.'

Nathan and I talked for a while about his "strained" relationship with his mother.

You're the first person I've told this too. But here it goes. I think there are so many things unsaid between my mom and me. We had always had a good relationship until then. It's been years and we have never been able to have a good relationship again. I remember when I came

home during the summers, I did not even know if she was going to have me at her place. We have many things unresolved.

Nathan shared he and his mother made up after he came home from college, but that he does not think there will come a day when he and his mother resolve all the issues they have. “We get along well today, but not as great as we used to. That’s all.” He felt pressured to move out because he wanted to have the freedom to bring someone over without needing “permission.”

Nathan expressed he repressed so much of who he was in school, that today, he does not feel comfortable going out in public with a group of friends who identify as gay. “I do not like to be the center of attention. I do not like going to a restaurant and sitting in a table with only men. I do not like people knowing (I am gay) or talking about it.” He then added he sometimes feels like he is missing out, but that he finds it very tough to connect with a group of men who identify as gay. “They are way ahead of me. I still feel uncomfortable, and they are all happy. I’m not there yet.” He shared he had tried doing it a couple of times, but he definitely did not feel comfortable the times he did so. He shared he is open about his sexuality if asked, but that he “does not rub it in everyone’s face.”

Nathan told me he does not know if it is a preconception of his, but that he thinks “being so out” might negatively affect his professional life.

My dad often told me when I came out, that the moment I chose to come out publicly, my life would be harder. That if I was going to be a doctor, I had to be the best doctor. He told me I would always have to give more than others and work harder than others.

Nathan stated that, for the most part, he feels this to be true. He also feels he cannot be himself in professional environments. He stated he is “blessed” to work with women because he feels “they don’t judge as much and do not need me to tell them I am gay. Men are *machistas*. I feel like I even have to dress differently if I’m going to be surrounded by them at work.”

Nathan shared that much of who he is today is the byproduct of his school experience. “I’m meticulous, I’m strategic, I think things twice before acting, and I’m always on the defensive.” He also stated that he does not open up easily to people and that he is a person that is tough to really get to know. He talked about a song that said that “swimming among sharks you’ll definitely get bitten,” and told me his life felt exactly like those lyrics.

Nathan described his school experience as “endless, difficult, but also fun.” He indicated that although he feels he still has things to sort out, he had a “good support system” among his group of friends. They have been friends since they were in preschool and are still friends today. He shared one of his best friends also identifies as gay and that they had “more things in common” than any other member of their group. “We hated sports and would hide before PE class, we watched soap operas together... I did not know then it was because we were gay, but we connected in a whole other level.” Nathan shared they came out to each other on the same day in their last year of high school.

Nathan stated he is interested in creating a space where LGBTQ+ students can go if they are ever kicked out from home.

Not everyone has a dad like mine that welcomed me in his home. I love the ‘It gets better’ campaign. Because it does, it totally does. I never thought I would be successful, I never even knew what I liked, I did not know myself, I did not know what I was capable of, my abilities... I thought I was nothing.

He told me he would love to counsel LGBTQ+ youth if given the opportunity. “I would tell them to talk, to their friend, their parent, a psychologist, anyone. But take it off your chest, before it becomes toxic. Because if you don’t, it’s going to affect you. It will eat you up.” He added he would give the same advice to school authorities: “talk to your students. Don’t be indifferent to who they are. We need substantial sex education, I did not even know how AIDS was spread when I graduated from high school, to name an example.” He shared it was not just

homosexuality that was inexistent at his school, but that they never talked about sexuality either. He stated not talking about it “made it worse” because it “limited” the individual. He shared the “gay topic” was not “a boom” by the year he finished school; “no one really talked about that.” Nathan shared that had he had sex education in school, he would feel more “secure” about his sexuality, but that talking about “these things” today still made him feel uncomfortable.

Manuel

Manuel is a self-identified gay cisgender man in his late teens. He graduated in the year 2018 from a private, religious, lower-middle class school in Santo Domingo. He came in with his cousin for “emotional support.” This was a first for me, interviewing a participant with a third person present. Before we started, he shared his cousin knew everything he had gone through, and that he would not feel as comfortable if she stepped outside.

Manuel first described his school experience as “uncomfortable.” Academically, Manuel did well. He was a good student. He said he was smart and never really had to study for a test but that he knew he could have made more of an effort. Manuel shared in elementary school he heard his classmates saying *maricón* but that “this had always been there.” He shared he even jokes with his friends and they call each other *maricón*. He said this specific name-calling will “always be part of Dominican culture,” and that he never really gave it much thought then.

Manuel described himself as a quiet and reserved student. He was not one of the “popular” kids in his grade, but he got along well with everyone. He shared he never had an enemy or anyone he could not stand in school. In ninth grade, he said that when he self-identified as gay he became even more introverted. “No one knew practically anything about my life.” He began making friends in tenth grade when he started “loosening up.”

In eleventh grade, he began dating a same-sex partner from his school.

It was obvious he was gay; people did not notice I was. I felt comfortable with him and I began telling my best friends... and then everyone (in our grade) knew. Most of my classmates reacted well. They said they respected me and expected me to respect them, because this (an openly out gay student) had not happened in our grade yet. I was like 'OK, don't worry. I understand.'

Manuel talked about respect and how important it was for him. He shared he has always been respectful of others and expected others to treat him the same way.

I respect to be respected. If you respect me, I'll respect you. And my personality is not one of imposing or disrespecting anyone. I have always been very respectful of other people's privacy. Some of my closest friends were impacted, they were surprised, they said that they could not tell I was gay, they thought I was lying... My female friends had even labeled me as the only boy who was worth something in my grade... But then it got to a point where we would joke about it (because I was gay).

Manuel shared one of his friends had a prayer group and that he participated often because he enjoyed it. "I do not separate religion from who I am because of what I like." He said only two of his classmates rejected him but that it was because they were religious. He recalled once, in a debate class, they were discussing same-sex marriage and around 65% to 70% of his classmates were in favor. Manuel was in "denial" at that time and he was against same-sex marriage. He told me this was when he figured out his friends would react well towards the news once he came out to them. Manuel and I talked about how he thinks taboo topics are much more exciting to discuss for youth in religious schools.

Manuel told me that after he began coming out to his friends, rumors spread, and the school principal found out. She outed him to his parents: "they didn't ask me, they just told them." When he got home, his mother told him the principal had called and said he "was gay." He phoned his then-boyfriend who told him the principal had also called his parents. The next day, the principal called them both and told them she had taken the liberty to call their parents because the rumor had spread in school. Manuel shared the principal found out because he and his partner had taken a picture together when they went out for ice cream and one of his friends

had shared it with school authorities. He said he had thought there was a relationship of trust between him and the person that sent out the picture. The principal shared the picture with Manuel's dad. Manuel assured me the picture had not been taken inside school property.

She called my dad. My dad! My dad is not emotionally intelligent. The next day, he yelled at me and hit me hard. He hit me so hard he cut my lips. I was a child, and all I wanted was my dad to accept me, to love me... I mean, I did not know what to say. I guess when you are going to tell your parents you need to be confident and you need to have a good argument. I did not get a chance to do that.

Manuel shared he was not prepared either physically or mentally to tell his parents that he identified as gay, let alone that he had a boyfriend. "They took that away from me, I was thrown in deep waters." Manuel told me his father once said to him that had he "come out slowly" he might have accepted him. Manuel insisted the problem was that the school outed him. He said he had searched online what to do to overcome the difficult times ahead.

Manuel shared his parents are religious. He stated they used to go to church on Sundays but it had been years since the last time they went. Despite them not going to church, he stated "the Lord has always been present in their lives." According to Manuel, his grandparents are also religious. He called them "normal Christians." Although his then-boyfriend's family was very religious, Manuel said they are more "liberal" than his family members, that they "let him live his life," and that they "believe their children are capable of making their own decisions." Manuel told me he would have loved his family to be this way.

Manuel's parents are divorced. He lives with his mother and two sisters. His father remarried. He recalled that, at the beginning, his father would blame his mother for raising him in a "feminine environment." He told me that when his mother and sisters would talk about men he would leave because "being gay did not mean I wanted to hear them talk about that." He hoped his mother and father would have taken the news of his sexual identity as his sisters took

it. He said one of his sisters told him she was not going to “celebrate” that he identified as gay because of her “beliefs” but that she knew who and how he was and that she loved him still. Manuel told me he has never said anything to his younger sister, but that “she knows” and their relationship has not changed. Regarding his relationship with his mother, Manuel stated that things have gotten better after he finished high school and that he had been seeing a coach who has been helpful in improving their relationship, but that it still needs work. He said his mother had always been “very insecure” about the world and that she does not like it when Manuel goes out a lot. He shared that he told his mother that he is not telling everyone he knows he identifies as gay and that he is very aware of what he can and cannot do in the Dominican society. He also told her that he knew how to defend himself and that he is not out in the streets doing things he “should not be doing.”

Manuel expressed he did not like being scorned. He told me how he is not a person to “talk back” and that he never talked back to his school principal or his father. He said he would have wanted to have someone in school to mediate between his parents and him, like the coach he is seeing today who mediates between Manuel and his mother.

Manuel and I then talked about his school principal. He described her as a person with a “mentality of the past” and said it would be tough to ask her to “change” her perspective. He said she told Manuel and his partner that “there had been other homosexual couples in the school and that things had gone smoothly with them.” She went on to tell him that “this type” of relationship is not well seen and that they should not be seen together in school. He told me he felt it was unfair that his heterosexual friends that were couples could sit and be together in school and he could not do the same with his boyfriend. They were not allowed to walk down the hallways together or share their lunch. I asked him if he would like to talk to the principal today.

It's not like I'm going to go to her and tell her what I've been through. It is not something I would like to discuss with her. That is in the past, and it's not like I resent her. I don't. To a certain point, I can even say I appreciate her. She was my school principal for a long time. But it's not a topic I would like to talk to her about. I already know how that conversation is going to go.

Manuel shared how difficult it was to have a same-sex relationship in school, and how he was not even allowed to be close to his boyfriend. "I couldn't talk to him. I couldn't sit close to him. I couldn't even sit with him at lunch. There was always a teacher looking at us." Manuel said they never did anything in front of teachers that warranted these restrictions imposed on the two of them but that between classes, in a classroom, they would hug or kiss on the cheeks. "This never bothered my classmates."

Manuel said he never had a problem with his teachers; he got along well with them because they had known him since he was a child. "They never told me they were disappointed in me because they knew how I worked, how I was with them and my classmates. They knew Manuel the person." He said he never felt discriminated against by his teachers and that him identifying as gay never affected his grades. Additionally, Manuel said one of his teachers even joked with him and his boyfriend about their relationship and even told them that they were "lucky." He said he felt he could talk to this teacher and confide in her. He said she allowed them to sit next to each other in her class. He told me about a time when he and his partner were not speaking to each other and he went to the school psychologist for advice. He said she would talk about religion but that he did not pay much attention to that and that he never felt disrespected. The school psychologist said she was going to guide him but that he had to respect her beliefs. Manuel acknowledged her office space was a safe space for him to vent and express himself.

Manuel and I talked about his self-identification process. He said he first went through a denial phase in eighth grade, where he told himself he could not be attracted to men because it

was “wrong.” In tenth grade, he called this the “negotiation phase” where he identified as bisexual. By the end of tenth grade, he said he identified as gay. Nobody else knew then and, according to Manuel, nobody suspected it. He said he thought to himself: “This is my dilemma, I need to learn how to deal with this, to learn by myself, to develop in this, because this is who I am, and I feel comfortable with this.”

Manuel talked about how the fact that the school outed him negatively impacted the relationship with his partner. He said they got along well and that because of a decision the school principal made to tell their parents’ private information they did not approve she disclose, their relationship suffered. “She did not even consult me. I did not give her consent to reveal private information about me to my parents.” Manuel and his partner recently ended their relationship because of the tension it generated between their families. Their families disapproved of their relationship and would not even let them go out together. He told me he did not want to end this relationship because “people say gays change their partners as often as they change their socks” and he did not want people to think that about him. He said his partner valued his family and that he did too, which is one of the things that attracted Manuel to him.

Manuel recalled how once he was talking on the phone to his partner and his father came in and snatched Manuel’s phone out of his hand and insulted Manuel’s partner. He threatened his partner and his partner’s family. Once he hung up, he told Manuel: “look what you made me do! I just threatened a minor because of you.” Manuel’s father took his phone away and he spent his last two years of high school uncommunicated and without going out or getting together with anyone from his class; he would go straight home from school.

Manuel shared while holding back his tears that he was never going to forget how his relationship with his father was strained because he was outed. “The first time he beat me, he

said: ‘people are not going to say that my son is gay. They are going to say, poor me, that I have a son that is *maricón*.’” Manuel shared that when he heard that, he realized his father cared more about the opinion of others than about who he was. He said that when his father was yelling, he would stay quiet.

I would think: wow! Yes, I’m (a) *maricón*, but I’m a good student, I’m a good person, I’m responsible. Who I’m attracted to does not define who I am. This is a part of me but not all of me.

Manuel stated the beating was so hard he was bleeding. He shared after that first beating, he learned to act how his father expected him to when around him. He shared he lost all hope of having a relationship with him and of receiving his acceptance. “Today, it’s still like that. My dad still thinks it was a phase. A school thing, that I’m not dating men.” Manuel described his father as “very aggressive when he is mad.”

At one point during his high school years, Manuel was “very depressed.” He recalled he was sometimes afraid of going to school. Manuel shared he had contemplated suicide as an option the second time his father beat him. “That time he hit me real hard.” He had broken up with his partner. His mother would not intervene between him and his dad, she would “simply not get involved.” She would tell him that he needed to understand that his dad was “emotionally stupid. I thought, if I cannot even be with my family or the person I want to be with (romantically involved), then I am here to make others happy, but I myself cannot be happy.” He recalled he told the school psychologist about this and they proceeded to tell his father because they were obliged by law to do so. He said he now understood why she contacted his father. His father was mad.

You can imagine my dad’s level of emotional intelligence. He asked me how I could think that (suicide), that thinking that was a choice was stupid, that I was stupid, that if saying that at school was worth it. I was obviously crying, and he would scream and tell me to answer him and hit me. I was like, what did he expect me to answer? He’s arguing with me because I

was depressed enough to think about ending my life. What did he expect me to answer? That I was stupid and did not find a better solution, that I was a coward? I'm sorry I am not as smart as him and could not find a rational solution to this.

Manuel said his mother had never told him he was doing something wrong but later told me she had said he needed to understand that "being gay was wrong." Manuel replied that it was not wrong but that he understood he could not do anything to change her mind. Manuel shared he had told his mother once that he had thought about suicide because he was too upset, did not know what to do, and could not find a viable solution. He told me he did not end his life because of his partner, because he told Manuel he would be devastated if he went through with it. He stated he thought to himself that his mother and sisters would be devastated too and that he could not do that to them. He then added he thought he could not do that to his father either, but that he thought about him last because his father had treated him "like trash."

Manuel expressed that it got to a point where he did not want to have a relationship with his father but that because his parents shared custody, he and his sisters spend a couple of days a month at his father's place. While there, he said he never exchanged words with his father except when his father asked him questions and he would give him yes or no answers. He would lock himself in his room and play video games all day and would only go out to eat. Manuel has a younger sister from his father's second marriage, and he shared he continued to go to his father's house because of her. "This girl deserves the love of her siblings, so I do not go for him, I go for her." He then stated that his stepmother did not intervene between his father and him either. Once, after a beating, Manuel's father apologized. "He said to me: 'I want to tell you I'm sorry, but you need to understand me. I promise this is not going to happen again, but don't give me reasons to do it.'" Manuel's father has beat him three times in the last year. Despite this, he told

me he loves his father and would like to have a healthy relationship with him. “Everyone wants to have a relationship with their father, even if they have been abandoned.”

Manuel said he never confided enough in his mother to tell her what his father had done to him, so he would tell his older sister, who would stand up to their dad and defend him. He also stated he shared this with his cousin, the one that came with him to the interview. He told me she gave him the family acceptance he wanted from his direct family members. Part of Manuel’s family know he identifies as gay. He said he does not know how the rest of them will react because most of them are very religious. Some of his family members that do know still ask Manuel when he is going to get himself a girlfriend.

Manuel expressed extremists in the DR hate homosexuals and “practically everything that is different from them.” He said he thought people misunderstood the Bible when it says “love your neighbor as you love yourself” because “that is not what people are doing with homosexuals in the DR.” He said religious people think they are “part of a big movement” because they are the “majority” of the country.

Today, Manuel is in college. He described himself as “responsible” and “supportive of his friends.” Manuel likes to go out and has many interests and hobbies. He expressed identifying as gay does not make him less of a person, or less responsible, does not make him neither a good or bad person, or better or worse than anyone. He indicated he is clear about his future; he would like to continue his studies abroad. When asked, Manuel said he is 90% happy but that in the future he knows he will be successful and 100% happy.

Manuel expressed he has always liked his personality and his gender expression. “People in college always ask me if I’m serious (when they find out he identifies as gay). I always joke that I left my rainbow at home.” He shared he thought people in the DR “always expect gays to

have a feminine voice and feminine mannerisms,” but that he “met society’s standards of a masculine person.” Manuel told me he is an affectionate person. He stated he liked his personality and does not plan to change. Despite this, Manuel expressed he may not be affectionate in public because he fears what may happen to him or a partner and that he feels society restrains him. Manuel stated he has learned to “behave” in the DR, and that he knows well enough what places he can and cannot visit and what he can and cannot do when he is out in public.

Fabio

Fabio is a self-identified gay cisgender man in his twenties. He graduated from a lower-middle class, private, non-religious school in East Santo Domingo. He described his school experience as “constant repress and a struggle to be who I am not.” Fabio “always knew” he was “different” but shared he “gave meaning” to what being different meant at 11 years old. Fabio expressed he “always felt attracted to boys” and that he grew up hearing others call him *niña*, *pájaro* and *maricón*.

His elementary school experience was the most “traumatic” to him. He did not do well academically, and he felt “lonely” and “withdrawn.” Fabio shared it was “evident” that he was not like the rest of his classmates. His third-grade classmates were older than him and “knew more” than him about certain topics. He said he was subject to constant bullying and was always repressing who he was and wanting to be like the rest of his male classmates. He grew up with a lot of resentment, which made him argue constantly with his classmates.

Fabio began being bullied verbally and physically every day at age seven by a boy in his class. “He hit me a lot, he literally took my lunch money. Oh! it was... horrible.” He shared how his classmates did not intervene and how his teachers “turned a blind eye.” According to Fabio,

his teachers would “avoid conflict” and if there was conflict, they would not talk much about it. He described the school principal as “disengaged” from students. He told me about a time when this boy hit him so hard in the stomach that the teacher finally got involved and called Fabio’s mother.

Fabio’s mother went to the school and the school managed the situation “terribly. They said it was my fault and responsibility because I kept silent about the situation. I obviously did not say anything because I was afraid.” But Fabio shared how after that situation the bullying decreased in the following grades, at least with his classmates.

I don’t think it decreased because there was more acceptance, but because I was able to adapt to the group more. I needed to adapt, and I knew how to play their games now. The bullying was still there, but not as strong as before. They disguised it with jokes and sarcasm. It was not as physical.

Fabio expressed he feared going to school at the time. He would wake up and tell his parents he did not want to go or pretended to be sick. “I would tell them I had a headache. I remember I missed school a lot, until they told me I always had a headache.” However, he said his family never “suspected” why he wanted to skip school. When in fourth grade, Fabio shared many new classmates came into the school; he said this helped him to make new friends but that the verbal insults were always present.

We then talked about his middle school experience. Fabio told me that in eight grade his male friends would get together and talk about sex and about their sexual encounters with girls. He shared this made him distance himself from his friends because he felt he did “not belong” because of his sexual identity. He stated the things his friends talked about and what he was expected to do to be part of the group made him feel “uncomfortable. I couldn’t talk about what I had done with my girlfriend, I could not talk about a first kiss, I couldn’t, because I had not lived

any of that.” He said he hung out with more girls than boys in school, although he did have male friends.

When Fabio finished middle school, he went to a “prestigious” Catholic polytechnic. He described this school as “extremely strict and demanding” and said it was a completely different environment than his other school. The new school had a strict dress code. Fabio stated the school was strict about hairstyle too and that men were expected to wear their hair short. He shared there was obvious discrimination against those who had curly hair. Men with straight hair could wear their hair long if they wanted to.

Some of his classmates from his previous school also went to the polytechnic but they were on separate classrooms. He had to make new friends, but he was still “very shy.” Fabio stated the *machismo* was more present in high school and that he had trouble adapting that first year.

I had to be a man, dress a certain way, I was expected to hook up with girls, I needed to pretend (I did that). But because I was shy, I was somewhat protected, I did not interact much, and I did not expose myself.

Fabio said he had sex education at the polytechnic. They had “super well-drawn drawings” about the male and female organs but they never talked about homosexuality. “I feel it would have been too much, being it a highly conservative school.” Fabio said he never felt “comfortable” in that school and that he received plenty of “psychological abuse” from his teachers. He said their way of disciplining students was abusive. He shared he was bullied, although not as much as in his previous school. This time around, although he did experience some physical bullying, it was more verbal than physical. If the school intervened, teachers would reprimand all students, not just the bullies but also the victims. Fabio told me neither the school psychologist nor the school principal got involved, that he did not feel “supported at all”

in that school,” and that there was no interest in helping the students or knowing what was behind a given situation. “They just wanted to find a solution to the problem. They understood it was everyone’s responsibility.” Fabio expressed he felt so “emotionally loaded” that he contemplated suicide. “It was a fleeting thought. It was not like I meditated about how and when I was going to do it.” By the end of tenth grade, he failed a subject and decided to switch schools.

Fabio started eleventh grade in a small, private, non-religious school. He said because it was small, he felt attention to each student was more personalized. He used to feel like “one more” student at the polytechnic. “It was a place completely new for me, new people, new classmates, new teachers. There was more freedom. I began opening up to my classmates. I was very shy, but I found a good group of friends.” He began performing better academically and was doing a lot better emotionally. “There was bullying but I felt I could handle it; I was stronger and felt certain support from my friends. It was not as often, and it was only verbal.” Fabio told me this was the first time he felt he had good friends throughout his school years. He shared he felt the bullying was not strictly directed towards him but that he did feel alluded when he heard the pejorative terms they used to refer to LGBTQ+ people given his “condition.” He stated school authorities intervened and shared how the teachers and principal would do “interventions” in his classroom.

Of course, they did not talk about the topic as such, not about (sexual) identity or anything like it, but they tried to defend me. A teacher would say ‘no, he’s (Fabio) just quiet, the fact that he does not have a girlfriend does not mean he is gay.’

Fabio expressed he stayed quiet when his teacher said this because he had acknowledged his sexual identity, but he had yet to come out of the closet. “I felt good, in part, because they

were defending me. At least the bullying was addressed, although from her perspective. She had good intentions.”

At this new school, they learned about different cultures and religions in religion class. He told me he felt welcomed by this religion teacher, maybe because she was the “youngest one” and because she was “more open-minded” than the rest of the teachers in school. She was responsible for teaching sex education. He recalled the teacher once discussed homosexuality and that she did not say it was either negative or positive. He also recalled how his classmates murmured and giggled when she went over this topic. He said he felt “kind of welcomed” in this school, that although he could not be himself not because of the school but also because of his social environment, he felt more welcomed than before. He said there were “even people out of the closet at school” although this was not openly discussed. He shared he had moments at this new school that positively impacted him, like his launching of his senior class. Launching a class is a tradition in some Dominican schools, where the seniors announce a name they choose for their class. He felt he “fit in more,” although he continued to hide his sexual identity throughout high school. “I fit in more, at least more than before (at the polytechnic).”

Fabio and I discussed what he would have wanted his schools to do different. He would have wanted the polytechnic school to be more “open, to discuss homosexuality in sex education class, to promote respect of male and female classmates, to respect diversity, to be less strict academically, and not disregard a student if they did not do well academically.” He expressed he spent a good amount of time not performing well academically and nobody bothered asking what was going on with him. He felt there was no “psychosocial support” for students. Regarding the school he graduated from, he would have wanted the school to “talk more about respect and diversity.” He said he understood the teachers may not have had the “tools or knowledge” but

that they needed to “educate themselves about these topics” to avoid “speaking from prejudice and heteronormativity.”

Fabio lives with his mother, father, and older sister. Fabio’s mother is a practicing Catholic. He described her as “very flexible” today. He expressed he never told his parents he was bullied because he was perceived as gay because it was a topic that was “never discussed at home. It was super taboo.” He laughed and insisted it was a topic that was “never, ever” debated at home. Fabio said his parents were flexible with grades and never asked why he was not doing well in school, but that they did tell him to try harder.

Fabio came out of the closet recently. He told his mother first. He discussed her reaction.

She expected it but didn’t talk about it. She felt bad because she had many expectations for me. And because we didn’t talk about it, she thought I would continue ‘on track.’ My dad was ‘chill,’ maybe because he is not as religious as my mom. He has always been more chill.

Fabio said they do not support him but that they do not get involved. “If it were up to her (my mother), I would be married to a woman and everything.” He told me he feels that in the future he may be able to have a partner and bring him home but that he does not feel he is ready to do that himself just yet.

Today, Fabio is a senior in college and a social activist. He considers himself “much more stable” than he was a few years ago. He surrounds himself with people that are like him and think like him, with whom he does not need to “pretend. I am completely open with them.” He feels “extremely comfortable” and as if “a great weight has been lifted” off his shoulders; he feels he can be himself without fear. However, he told me there are things he still restricts, like for example, holding hands with a same-sex partner in public.

Not so much for me, but for him. I know my rights; I can stand up for them. But I wouldn’t want something to happen and for that person to have a rough time. I’d like to save myself from those moments.

Fabio shared his school experiences helped him to open up more to people, to be who he is, to not be resentful, and more “relaxed... happier.” He shared in our interview he considers himself “completely happy” and stated: Everybody has problems. But I think that problems have solutions, and if there’s no solution, then they stop being problems.” He said that in his last two years of high school his friends helped him pull through but that he sheltered himself in his hobbies while in elementary and middle school. He loves the movies and called himself a “cinophile.” He plans to graduate, pursue a master’s degree, and work in what he loves, social work.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the demographic profile of participants and participant narratives. The demographic profiles help the reader better understand the context in which the experiences took place. Moreover, the narratives portray in detail the participants’ backgrounds and stories as well as their thoughts and feelings as their stories unfolded.

The following chapter provides more of the data analysis process by first sharing a different attempt at bracketing, this time a pre-analysis bracketing trying to limit the biases and prejudices from the analysis process. The next chapter also presents the horizons obtained from the data and the themes that emerged from it. Finally, I present in Chapter Five the textural and structural descriptions of the participants’ experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA PRESENTATION

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings that emerged from extensive qualitative data analysis. In the first section of this chapter, I present my pre-analysis bracketing or epoche, as it is called in phenomenological research, providing examples of what this process looked like in my study. I then discuss the horizons obtained from the data and the process I used to crystallize the themes or clusters of meanings within and across each of the study participant's stories. Finally, I present the textural and structural descriptions of experience developed from study data.

Pre-Analysis Epoche

Before entering the data analysis process in this study, I engaged in epoche or bracketing. Through bracketing, the researcher intends to set aside assumptions and presuppositions to avoid possible impact on the participants' experiences (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas states (1994) that we can only understand the experiences of others once we acknowledge and identify ourselves in the experience being studied. Furthermore, Moustakas states that "many biases" can be set aside through epoche, but that a "perfect and pure state" cannot be obtained (p. 61). The current bracketing process refers to my assumptions and biases before entering the data analysis process. In this particular chapter of the study, this bracketing process differs from the bracketing I attempted in the Introduction section in Chapter One, where I unpacked my experiences growing up with my brother; this bracketing process entails understanding acquired while the data collection procedures took place.

As I have stated throughout this dissertation, growing up with a brother who identified as LGBTQ+ influenced me personally and professionally. This experience also influenced my

present interest in researching the K-12 school experiences of LGBTQ+ students in the DR. I work in a religious school in Santo Domingo that has proudly given baby steps to properly serve LGBTQ+ students and, as a school leader with this personal and professional experience, I assumed by now other school leaders in the country would at least have made visible the LGBTQ+ population in their schools through inclusive and protective policies that supported the social, emotional, psychological, and academic wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students. Although my brother graduated from high school almost a decade and a half ago, I wondered how much of his experience would be different had he graduated today, where activism in support of LGBTQ+ individuals that aims to promote the recognition of their rights is beginning to take place in the DR. I assumed that just as Corrales (2015,a) stated, younger generations would be more welcoming of LGBTQ+ students.

When I shared my recruitment flyer on social media and asked friends, family, and institutions that work to promote LGBTQ+ rights to do the same, I must admit I was concerned with how sensitive and intimate this topic is in a country where LGBTQ+ rights have yet to be recognized. I thought it would be difficult to gather the necessary number of participants actually interested in participating. To my surprise, I was overwhelmed by the amount of people that reached out to me who expressed interest in sharing their story in an effort to shed light about the reality of LGBTQ+ K-12 students in the country. Later, I learned that reaching out to me did not necessarily mean they would become participants and, more often than not, potential participants would cancel our scheduled interview with little to no notice. Most of those who cancelled ignored my request to reschedule our interview. However, I am in no position to be upset about this; I do not know what it means to discuss their school experience as LGBTQ+ individuals in the DR and how that experience could or could not have impacted their lives.

Despite cancellations, gathering the number of participants for the study was not a difficult task. My assumption that it would be difficult to recruit participants was an inaccurate one. Moreover, once the interviewing process was over, I realized that the assumption that schools in the DR would at least have policies that made visible LGBTQ+ students was also inaccurate. Realizing my assumptions were inadequate helped me to expand my mind and heart, becoming aware of my assumptions and biases and disregarding pre-conceived ideas and expectations. These realizations made me more mindful during the data analysis process and allowed me to limit my own biases as much as possible.

Findings

Horizons Obtained from the Data

According to Moustakas (1994), data organization begins when the primary researcher studies the transcribed interviews thoroughly through the chosen method of phenomenological analysis. To organize and analyze the data, I placed the complete, translated interview transcripts before me and thoroughly analyzed each relevant statement or horizon from every participant, “regarding every horizon as having equal value” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). Moustakas encourages the researcher to be receptive to each participant statement about their experience.

This process of horizontalization is part of the first step of the modification of the Van Kaam Method of analysis of phenomenological data, *Listing and Preliminary Grouping*. I initially developed a lengthy list of horizons. These statements or horizons contribute to help to understand the “nature and meaning” of the experience being studied (Moustakas, 1994, p. 123). I then engaged in the second step of the Van Kaam method, *Reduction and Elimination*. I tested the horizons for the two requirements that would help determine the invariant constituents. If the horizons did not contain a moment that is necessary to understand the experience or if they were

impossible to abstract and label, they were removed. “Overlapping, repetitive, and vague” statements were also removed (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The remaining horizons are the “invariant constituents of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Because of the extensive amount of data collected through the interviews, the final list of horizons resulted in 169 significant statements (see Appendix H).

Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents

To cluster and thematize, I printed and cut out each significant statement or horizons and engaged into open coding. Several rounds later, four primary categories or themes emerged. I color coded each category which made it visibly easier to select where each horizon belonged. Data that shared similarities were clustered and thematized, allowing the invariant constituents that are the core of the experience to provide better understanding of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Invariant constituents and their themes were then checked against the participants’ transcripts. I followed Moustakas (1994) recommendation and deleted those that were not “explicit or compatible,” meaning they were not relevant to the participants’ experience (p. 121). Appendix H contains the complete list of the horizons that emerged from the data divided into its themes or clusters of meaning to provide the reader with a deeper contact with participant experiences. Table 2 presents emergent themes, sub-themes, and quotes from participants that illustrate the themes.

Table 1

Emergent Themes, Sub-Themes, and Participant Illustration

Theme	Sub-Theme	<i>Participant Illustration</i>
Theme One: Arriving at Self-Acceptance	Realizing I am “different”	“I always knew I was different.”
	Identifying as LGBTQ+	“It took me a long time to say it... to accept who I was.”

	Rock bottom	"It was not like I meditated about how and when I was going to do it. I was so emotionally loaded with work and all that, so I think it was just that, a fleeting thought."
	Coping mechanism	"Growing up in system that excludes you and becoming resilient..."
		"Despite being told I couldn't, I found the way."
Theme Two: Adjusting to Home Expectations	Desire to be happy and whole	"I want to give. I want to do something that makes me feel whole."
	Suspicious of a "different" identity	"Of course they knew, even if, I don't know if that's a phase, but they simply did not accept it or did not want to see it."
	Seeking approval at home	"Everyone wants to have a relationship with their father, even if they have been abandoned."
	A tough time coming out	"Let's see how you take this up with your mother."
Theme Three: Adjusting to School Expectations	Calm after the storm	"Everything is fine now, really."
	School culture, beliefs, and environment shaped school experience	"I've always thought schools should be a safe place for students."
	Teachers and staff turned a blind eye	"They turned a blind eye."
	Teachers and staff offered a helping hand	"I felt support from some of them."

Theme Four: Adjusting to Societal Expectations	Bullying and isolation from peers	“The name-calling was always there.”
	A shoulder to lean on from peers	“My friends supported me.”
	Identifying as LGBTQ+ impacted school performance	"Nothing interested me, really."
	The experience was different than the espoused culture and religion	“The last thing they do is follow their Bible. The first commandment is ‘love thy neighbor.’” “That’s part of the Dominican culture.”
	Adjusting personal expectations	“I think that would’ve been nice and would have made my life easier.”
	Denying of self as a survival tool	“I needed to try to fit in.”

Theme I: Arriving at Self-Acceptance

During the interviews, it was tough for participants to talk about their school experience without talking about their personal experience as LGBTQ+ individuals. The first theme that emerged from the data was Arriving at Self-Acceptance. Individuals narrated what it was like for them to acknowledge their sexual or gender identity and the different phases they went through before finally arriving at self-acceptance. Five sub-themes emerged: (a) realizing I am “different,” (b) identifying as LGBTQ+, (c) rock bottom, (d) coping mechanism, and (e) desire to be happy and whole.

Realizing I Am “Different”

Most participants expressed they realized they were “different” from the rest of their classmates at a young age, some as early as four or five years old. Boris, Martha, Fabio, and

James all stated they “always knew” they were different. Aaron, who identified as a trans* man, recalled always thinking he “was a boy,” and asking where his penis was after being bathed with his brothers. Julia and Leo stated they realized they were different at some point during elementary school, and Nathan explained he realized he was different at around six years old, because he had “feelings” for his sister’s male friends. Grace stated she felt different since she was in fourth grade but that she “never knew what it was” that made her different. Alana and Manuel both expressed they realized they were different in eighth or ninth grade. Alana stated: “Like all my life I thought, since I was little, let’s say, until eighth or ninth grade, I thought I was a normal person, like society says, because this is still not considered normal.” Manuel expressed: “When I started... I mean, I understand there are several stages. The first stage is denial, it’s when you say no, I can’t like this, this is wrong. That was around eighth, ninth grade.”

Some participants realized they were different because they were bullied. Grace expressed she was bullied because of her gender expression: “But my classmates could identify it in everything that had to do with my gender expression. They began bullying me because I was supposedly a lesbian.” Fabio expressed: “It was very evident I was not like my classmates. I experienced a lot of bullying, I argued a lot, because of this thing I was repressing, of wanting to be like others, I lived with resentment...” Leo recalled: “They called me *maricón*, faggot, things like that. Because I’ve always been very effeminate. I arrived at school singing High School Musical and all those things that are considered gay, feminine. I knew since then...” Leo and Boris stated being constantly told at home to change their behavior helped them to realize they were different. Leo stated: “I saw how my dad would always tell me, ‘don’t sit like that, stand up straight, don’t yell like that,’ I yelled a lot... or don’t play with this, play with that.” Boris stated

his parents tried to “masculinize” him: “Don’t walk like this, don’t talk like this, don’t wear this. Ever since I can remember my parents would call me out for this.”

Amelia “hung out with more boys than with girls” during childhood and both she and Grace expressed they excelled in sports. Amelia stated she considered herself a tomboy during childhood: “I was always a tomboy and all that, and they called me *marimacho*, but I never connected that being *marimacho* meant I was... (gay).” In Grace’s case, she stated she “did not feel comfortable with either girls or boys.” She added: “I played sports, and yes, I was discriminated against, and I felt different, but it is tough. In fourth grade, you are a child. What do you do? You play. But I did know I was never like my female friends.”

Identifying as LGBTQ+

In the case of the study participants, self-identifying as trans*, lesbian, or gay did not mean they were out of the closet to family and friends yet, but that they had internally acknowledged their sexual or gender identity. This process of identification was frequently accompanied by fear, guilt, confusion, and questioning. Leo stated: “I still can’t explain it. If you ask me to write about (how I felt), I will hand in a blank paper. I still do not know what it is. I do not know if it was fear or confusion... whatever it was.”

Although most of the participants realized they were different at an early age, to most, it would be many years until they came to terms with their sexual identity and identified as lesbian or gay. Aaron, who identified as a trans* man, shared he told his teacher during his early elementary school years he was not a girl and that he did not want to wear the skirt assigned as school uniform for girls. “I said to her, ‘do not comb my hair. I am not a girl.’ She told me I was wearing a skirt... I told her my mom made me wear it; I was not wearing it because I wanted to.” He stated he found out what being trans* was at 21, and it was then when he identified as such,

despite feeling practically all his life he was not female. “I found out what a trans* person was at age 21. When I saw a trans* man, I asked him for pictures and proof. When he showed me, I was shocked.”

Some participants acknowledged their sexual identity in elementary school. Such was Martha’s case, who at age seven already knew the meaning of homosexuality and identified as such. She stated: “I heard it was wrong, a sin, like you said, but I’ve never cared what people thought (about me). It’s like yeah, if I’m happy, and this is me, I’m not going to be pretending to be someone I’m not.” Julia and Leo self-identified as lesbian and gay respectively in fourth and fifth grade. Amelia had her “boom moment” when she was 14 and said this was when she “connected the dots.” Grace, Boris, Alana, James, Nathan, Manuel, and Fabio self-identified as gay or lesbian during high school.

Rock Bottom

During the interviews, most of the participants described feeling “emotionally loaded” (Fabio), “depressed” (Boris) and “sad” (Manuel). Boris described it as “the most catastrophic period” and added that being rejected and pressured by family is “the most painful of all.” All but three participants expressed they had suicidal ideation during their school years. Manuel stated he considered suicide because he thought to himself: “...then I am here to make others happy, but I myself cannot be happy.” Fabio expressed it was just “a fleeting thought” and James expressed “it did not last long.” Nathan expressed: “I played a lot with scissors then, but I knew I was not going to do it. But maybe yes, I was contemplating it.” Leo shared he contemplated it but never acted upon the thought. Two participants, Julia and Aaron, expressed they had attempted suicide. Julia described her attempt as “a stupid choice,” and Aaron shared he still

engages in self-harm once in a while to “relieve stress. And I do it like that. I cut my leg. Not a lot, but I do cut myself. as soon as I see blood, I clean myself up and I regret it.”

Amelia, Martha, and Alana expressed not having suicidal ideation during their school years. Martha said she “never contemplated suicide” because she wanted to “accomplish many things in life.” She added, “you can’t just squander your life and everything you have, you have to have something good, you can’t just look at what is wrong.” Alana and Amelia also stated they “never” contemplated suicide. Two participants, Aaron and Grace, stated they had friends or close ones from the LGBTQ+ community who attempted or committed suicide, which impacted them greatly.

Coping Mechanism

After discussing suicide, the participants usually talked about what helped them cope with the bullying most of them endured in school or how they felt they lacked support at home or at school. Julia and Fabio stated they found solace in their hobbies; the former shared: “Music was the only thing that soothed me. I would get home and lock myself in my room. I wouldn’t even say hi to my parents. It was an argument where I had no voice. They wouldn’t listen.” The latter expressed he was a “cinophile” and that he “could spend hours watching a movie” he liked. Fabio added: “My good friends helped me through.” Grace also stated she had support from her friends: “I acquired a group of friends where homosexuality was not seen as something abnormal.”

Other participants shared they created a “defense mechanism.” James stated:

When the bullying happened, I tried not to pay attention to it. I heard it. They told me I needed to stand up for myself, and I was like no... but it hurt a lot. I mean, I had to think things through to not be misinterpreted. But I think that was my defense mechanism, not talking back. Not answer anything, and letting things happen when they were supposed to happen.

Boris stated: “I had a defense mechanism. I did not want to be bullied. I did not want to be rejected. So, I tried not to express who I truly was. It was not that I was hiding, but I would not go to a guy and tell him I liked him. I mean, none of that.”

Nathan shared he felt he was “swimming among sharks” and “needed to be on the defensive,” and that he isolated himself from his friends because he did not want others to pull away from him first. Martha also shared she isolated herself but from her family. Leo shared he carried his bookbag around all day long: “I think I was trying to hide myself. This way they could only see my face.” In Amelia’s case, she shared her friends “talked about everything” but that she “was not open” with them. She expressed she “did not isolate” herself but she kept quiet instead. Aaron expressed in tears how much crying helped him: “I pulled through. I cried. I cried a lot. I still do today.”

Alana and Manuel stated how much they valued respect and how respecting others helped them to be respected as well. In Alana’s case, she had her family’s support and recalled how her father taught her “no one had the right to disrespect” her. Manuel shared his “foundation” is to “respect to be respected,” adding he does not impose on or disrespect others and feels this helped him throughout his school years.

One participant, Grace, expressed she had become resilient. “Growing up in system that excludes you and becoming resilient... sometimes I ask my friends how it was that we made it.” Neither one of the participants could say their personal, family, or school experience were positive altogether, and despite the hardships, they pulled through or found a way to keep going. Aaron shared: “After all the beatings, I pulled through. That’s the only positive thing I can find from this. Despite being told I couldn’t, I found the way.”

Desire to Be Happy and Whole

At a given point during the interview, each participant described who they are today and how they are living their lives. Ten participants, Grace, Alana, Amelia, Martha, Manuel, Boris, Leo, Julia, Aaron, and Fabio described themselves as “happy.” Aaron shared this was the “happiest” he had ever been, Fabio stated he was “completely happy,” and Julia stated she was “always going to be happy.” She recalled how many people tell her that despite everything she went through in school, she “always had a smile” on her face. She added she likes “to share good vibes.” Martha stated: “people are happy when they do what they want and love themselves.”

Nathan shared it “totally gets better,” although he still feels “repressed and uncomfortable.” Additionally, Manuel shared he feels repressed but that he “has learned to behave in this environment.” James also stated he continues to repress a lot of who he is and that he feels he has room to grow when it comes to happiness. James added that despite identifying as gay, he does not “believe in supporting the (LGBTQ+) community.” He went on to share that he “respect’s everyone’s sexuality” but he does not “believe a lot in that.” However, he participated in the study because he wanted to “support” or “help somehow.”

Boris shared how it was “uncomfortable” when he came out and began dating because he was “scared,” but that he is now open about his sexuality. On the contrary, Alana expressed being out was something she felt “comfortable” with and that it was a different experience: “I had a girlfriend, it was totally different. It was something I felt comfortable with, I talked to people about it, I went out with her, I didn’t have a single care. My friends never judged me.”

Grace, Aaron, and Fabio stated they work helping others less fortunate than them. Grace shared: “I don’t want to be rich. I want to give. I want to do something that makes me feel whole.” Aaron recalled how because he was called weird in school he wants to help: “The

weirder they are, the more they catch my attention, and the more I want to help.” Fabio stated he works “in defense of youth and women,” more specifically “with social media campaigns that help spread awareness about sexual harassment.” Julia shared she has positively influenced the lives of many people and will continue to do so. “I don’t know what my profession is going to be when I grow up, because life changes too much and one never knows. But I know I’ve somehow influenced and will continue to influence many people.”

Three of the participants, Alana, Boris, and Grace stated they want to leave the country. Alana stated: “I don’t like anything about this country” and shared she is moving abroad. Grace stated: “Despite wanting to be in my country, I’m leaving because I want to start a family.” Finally, Boris stated:

I need to revalidate my career in the US, I want to have a family. I can’t even adopt in DR. I don’t know if you get me... it’s a lot of things, it’s tough. I think about marriage, I think about having a house, a life, about having a basically normal life. A life free from stereotypes. I see myself with a good job, kids, a house, and I don’t feel the Dominican society can offer that. I need to run away from this society. Let’s be honest.

Theme II: Adjusting to Home Expectations

The second common theme that emerged from the data was Adjusting to Home Expectations. Each participant, while talking about their school experience, discussed their situation at home. My participants had to adjust to the expectations of their families, especially from their direct family members. Much of what happened at home impacted their school experience. Four sub-themes emerged: (a) suspicions of a “different” identity, (b) seeking approval at home, (c) a tough time coming out, (d) calm after the storm.

Suspicious of A “Different” Identity

During the interviews, the participants discussed their current situation at home and their relationships with the family members that live or lived in their household when they were in

school. Most of the study participants expressed their parents “knew” or “imagined” they would identify as gay or lesbian before they came out to them. Boris shared: “Of course they knew, even if, I don’t know if that’s a phase, but they simply did not accept it or did not want to see it. Just like it happens to us, at first it is hard to accept it, one tries to hide it, one thinks it is wrong.” Amelia stated: “They imagined it. I imagine they thought I could be (gay).” Julia’s case was similar: “They had yet to realize I was, because I still wore the clothes my mother bought for me. But as I grew older, they began to realize I was gay. Things got real for them.” Grace shared: “I imagine she did. Listen, parents prefer, at least in my mom’s case, not my dad’s, because my dad asked, but they rather not ask the question because they do not want to hear the answer.” Nathan expressed: “My mom began sensing things. She would not let me go out, she would tell me not to be surprised if I came home and found myself locked out.” Manuel stated his mother “suspected it” and Fabio shared his mother “somehow knew.” Finally, James also stated he thought his parents suspected he would identify as gay before he came out: “My parents are both psychologists. They tried to help, but in their own way. But yes, I believe they had to know (what was going on).”

According to the participants that stated their parents knew or imagined they would identify as gay or lesbian, their parents took different actions because of this. James shared his parents did not let him be who he “was meant to be. They did not prohibit me to play with girl toys, but they would tell me it was wrong and that I shouldn’t do it.” He also stated he felt his parents did not want him to be close to his younger brother: “It’s like, he’s your brother, you need to protect him, you need to take care of him, you can have fun with him, but keep your distance.” James added his parents “tried to instill a love for sports” and that his mother would not let him wear shorts:

I always wanted to wear smaller uniforms, different pants than the ones I used. For example, I love to wear shorts, and they were allowed in school, but my mom wouldn't let me wear them. I don't know why, but I think it was because of that, because of my behavior. Because I was a little more effeminate, she would tell me not to wear shorts because others would make fun of me. She was protecting me, I think.

Despite this, James shared that throughout his childhood and “part” of his adolescence, he was “happy.” He added he was never “mistreated... I can't complain about my parents, they gave me everything, with clear rules, but I was always me. I loved my childhood. I was an extremely happy boy. I was never repressed, but I had many ups and down.”

Boris shared he believed he is not “so effeminate” because his parents tried to “masculinize” him and would constantly call him out for being the way he was. “My dad was the one who started with the comments, he would tell me I was like this because my mom had me under her skirt. And then my mom, she continued... she continued his behavior.” He expressed how his father would constantly ask him why he was not friends with boys but with girls, and shared: “I don't doubt my parents chose religious schools for me because deep down they knew (I was gay.)” Boris confessed he “never said anything at home about what was going on at school; that would have aggravated the situation at home.” Leo, like Boris, was also called out for being effeminate:

I realized I was effeminate since young. Because I saw how my dad would always tell me not to sit that way, stand up straight, don't yell, don't play with this, play with this, do not get together with your (female) cousin. He would not let me see her sometimes.

Leo also talked about a situation that happened when he was in second grade and how his father reacted to it:

It was when I was in second grade, I remember that I did tell my dad, and he snapped at me. A boy in school told me ‘you're a *maricón*, get out of here.’ They told me to talk to the school psychologist and to tell my teacher, but I did not want to tell my teacher. I had to have that conversation without being ready for it.

Leo talked about his siblings. He shared they “heard things from their friends, or the rumors that are always in school, when they begin saying, ‘oh, that kid is gay.’ He went on to say “they assumed it,” but that they had “never had that conversation.” Martha and Alana both expressed their parents did not suspect or imagine they would identify as LGBTQ+ but one of their siblings, in both their cases, did. Nathan also talked about his sisters. He shared how he thought he could rely on one of his sisters, who he thinks suspected it, but that he heard her make comments that would make him think the opposite:

I overheard her saying I was weird because I liked rock music but also liked Alanis Morissette’s songs. I began locking myself in my room as soon as I got home from school. My mother thought I was on drugs and sent me to a psychologist. At the time, I was sure I could not count on anyone. I became even more repressed; I would lock myself in my room and spend the whole afternoon there.

Seeking Approval at Home

Parental approval was important to all of my participants. Feeling rejected or lacking support at home was common within the study participants. Boris was very verbal about this. He stated: “I do not think that what most affected me has been (the lack of support in) school, but my family. When you feel your family is rejecting you, pressuring you, I think that is the most painful of all.” He switched to a science major, just like his father. He stated: “My dad and I have the same career. I’m working with him. I don’t want our relationship to suffer. I’m trying to bond with him.” He added that not having his parents’ approval or support makes him “depressed, sad” and “uncomfortable.”

Leo shared he “lacked the support at home. Because that’s where you spend your day. I mean, you do so in school, but you know, on weekends, afternoons, and that. At home is where I am.” He stated “parents should support your decisions because they raised you.” He expressed how upset he was about his father’s reaction when he saw Leo was wearing his hair up.

He told my mom that if she had been awake at that time this would not have happened. I felt... I remember... it had been so long since I felt like that. and that was, I mean I still get the chills, because, that was the other day, a couple of weeks ago. I had my hair up; I did nothing wrong. I wore a ponytail, and he snapped because of that.

Martha shared it took her mother around three years to accept her identity and recalled how she felt during the years her mother did not accept her: "I don't remember how long exactly, but I do know it felt like 10 years. It was horrible. I don't remember clearly but I felt resentment, rage, because I felt alone." In James' case, he shared that even if he is out of the closet to his family, he feels he cannot be himself yet, because he wants to have his family's support. "I mean, in a family reunion, my family already know, but many times I can't be the James I really want to be."

Aaron stated he reprimands his mother because she did not love him for who he is. "I tell my mom every time we get into an argument. I tell her I did not know love in her house. I knew love on the streets, where she put me." Alana shared her "biggest fear" was her family hearing she identified as lesbian from someone else:

I wanted them to hear it from me. That was my fear. I did not want them to catch me in a lie. I did not want them to lose their trust in me. That is something I never want to see happening. Ever.

Grace shared her mother has yet to accept her, and she thinks she never will. "She won't accept it, I mean, she's going to see me move in with a woman, and she is not going to accept it, and that is very difficult, emotionally." Fabio shared he is close to his parents and sister, and that having the support from his parents gives him "security and trust."

Amelia shared having her parents' approval was "very important" and told me she would cry when they discussed this topic. "They discussed it generally, because they did not know I was (gay). After the discussion was over, I would leave and cry. I thought they weren't going to

support me.” Manuel shared that despite the beatings his father gave him, he still yearns to have his father’s support:

He’s my dad, even if I resent him or hate him for it. Whatever. I love my dad because he’s my dad. I want to have a relationship with him... everyone wants to have a relationship with their father, even if they have been abandoned.

Nathan shared he feels he will never have his parents’ approval, and that he has come to terms with that: “that’s just the way it is, I can only do/control so much.” Like Nathan, Julia also feels this is something she’ll never have. She shared there was a time when having this approval and support was important to her. “It was important to me, of course it was. I think things would have been different if I would’ve had their acceptance. But not having it has made me grow.”

A Tough Time Coming Out

Coming out to their families was a difficult process to most of my participants. Grace, Martha, Aaron, Nathan, and Julia had a tough time when they came out to their mothers. Alana and Leo received support from their father and mother respectively. Aaron, Julia, and Nathan were outed to their parents, the first two by their schools. Grace and Manuel received beatings from their mother and father respectively.

Grace shared her father took it well. “My father told me. You are my daughter; I am going to love you anyway. I am afraid of how society will treat you. Let’s see how you take this up with your mother.” When she came out to her mother, she said her mother “lost control:”

My mother did not know how to handle it. I don’t blame her. She hit me. My brother had to take her off me. She was frustrated because she understood it was a choice. She felt I was doing it on purpose. She lost control. People lose control a lot with things they do not understand. Sometimes I ask myself what would have been of me had my brother not been there. Because obviously, I never fought back, I was not going to hit my mom.

Grace added she has come out to her mother “at least seven times” and she continues to tell her to find herself a boyfriend.

Martha explained her dad “acted normal” but that her mother fell into depression: “When I told my mom, she got depressed, but she’s fine now. That was a long time ago. My sister was mad at me because I told other people first, and my brother told me he already knew.” James also stated his mother was depressed when he came out and that it took her a “while to adapt.” He said his father “did well. My mother was a bit sad; she was depressed for a bit. My dad, I thought my dad was going to act differently... He expressed his support; he saw it more normal.” James stated he first told his cousin, who is “like a brother” to him, and then told his aunts and friends; he came out to his parents last.

Fabio shared he first told his mother, and that it was something that “she knew but didn’t talk about.” He stated: “she felt bad, because of all of her expectations, even if we ... she somehow knew but didn’t talk about it, she thought that I was going to ‘continue on the right track.’ But yeah, my dad was more chill.”

Aaron was the participant that came out earlier. It all happened when he told his teacher he was a boy, not a girl, and the teacher told his mother. “That’s the moment when it all started,” he shared. “I wanted to dress like boys in school, I wore pants instead of skirts.” He shared his mother began taking him to psychologists and psychiatrists.

I... I have spent more time visiting psychologists and psychiatrists than any other place in my life. My mom insisted on keeping me occupied so I wouldn’t think about that. I was enrolled in every possible class in the afternoon. I went from school straight to karate class, then to English class, then homework, then bed. I had no free time. At age 15, she enrolled me in modeling class. She thought that would ‘fix’ me, but I ended up liking girls even more because I saw them naked.

Aaron stated his mother told him his “lifestyle was against her religion,” but that she “has never gone to church.” He insisted that’s just an “excuse.” His mother kicked him out of home one night, and he went to live under a bridge. “My mom used to tell me people without money lived under a bridge.” But Aaron’s father was supportive. He told him he could “fall in love with

a stick” and that he could “have AIDS” and he would still love him. Although he was supportive, he continues to use she/her/hers pronouns on Aaron. Aaron stated it was because he is “supposedly his only daughter, his girl... (I let him) call me whatever you want.”

Nathan also recalled how his mother kicked him out from home. He shared he was outed to his father, but that he thought his dad “took it well.” One night, he came home, and his sister was crying, begging his mother not to kick him out. “But I knew it was going to happen. So, I packed up my things.” He added this sister took it well, but that she told him his world “was going to be different” and that she feared what could happen to him “with so much hate in this world.”

I remember she asked my mom if she would rather have a sick son than a gay son, and my mom didn’t answer. She said it was not a disease, that there are worse things that can happen, that I could be dying. But my mom didn’t care. The next day I finished packing, a friend lent me her car, and I went to live with my dad.

Nathan was sent to a psychologist after he was outed. He shared his mother was “still in denial” two months later.” “She said gays are not supposed to be like me, that gays were flowers. And I wasn’t a flower.”

Like Aaron, Julia’s parents found out because she was outed by her school. The school psychologist suggested they take her to a psychologist because she was maybe confused.

They had taken me to five psychologists already in the last three years. The first two told my dad that I was confused because I was still a young girl, but as I grew older, and I was mentally more mature, the last two told him that I was not confused, that this was simply who I was. What’s funny is the first three psychologists were Christian, the last two weren’t. Then they stopped taking me to psychologists. We never went back because they did not agree with them.

Leo shared someone outed him to his mother, but that his mother “took it very well” and was very “understanding.” He added she “assumed it,” but that she feared how others would take it. Leo shared how his mother “never said anything” despite assuming it, but that she later insisted she tried to talk to him about it, but that he never “took the hint.” A couple of days after

he came out, he went to a pride parade in the US and sent his mother a picture of him at the parade. He shared how she proudly showed the picture to all of her friends. He said the day after he went on his trip, his mother texted him every day: “I’m your mom, I can’t reject you, I can’t believe you thought I would, but I understand.” He feared her friends would ask her “if she wasn’t going to do anything” and that she would become “overwhelmed.”

My fear was that, the same fear I have with my dad, I mean, I don’t care, I can tell him, but my fear was that she would feel bad with her friends because she had a gay son, a different one, however you want to call it.

Alana came out to her father after she broke up with her first girlfriend. She described that break up as a “catastrophe” in her life, but one that taught her a lot. She shared she got to know herself and that this “resulted in a better relationship” with her family. “Because after that, I sat down with my dad. I came out. He said it was OK and asked me if I was happy, and I said yes.”

Manuel was outed to his parents by the school principal. His parents are divorced. When he got home, his mother told him she had received a phone call from the school and that she was told he was gay. “Ummm.. I was like no, I lied.” He said his sisters’ reaction was the reaction he hoped his parents would have. Manuel shared the school principal also called his father. He described his father as “very aggressive when he’s mad.”

She called my dad. My dad! My dad is not emotionally intelligent. The next day, he yelled at me and hit me hard. He hit me so hard he cut my lips. I was a child, and all I wanted was my dad to accept me, to love me... I mean, I did not know what to say. I guess when you are going to tell your parents you need to be confident and you need to have a good argument. I did not get a chance to do that.

Manuel’s mother asked Manuel what had happened after his father beat him. When Manuel told her what had happened, she told him his father was “emotionally stupid” and that he “needed to understand” how he was. “At certain point she told me that I was doing something

wrong. And I told her *she* thought I was, but that I didn't. and that I knew I wasn't going to change her mind." Manuel's father took away his cell phone his last two years of high school and he "missed out on every activity" his class had as seniors. He went straight to his house from school.

In Boris' case, both of his parents sat with him and asked him if he identified as gay, and he said yes. "Their suspicions were confirmed." His mother felt "guilty," "she felt she had failed as a mother, but she was supportive." His father blamed his mother. "He blamed the entire society (laughs), he blamed everyone around me."

Calm After the Storm

During the interviews, the participants described what their family situation was like once they came out to them. Most of them shared they are navigating calmer waters now. Julia's relationship with her parents has improved since she came out. She stated: "Everything is fine now, really. She described her dad as "more chill" around the topic and her mom as not "into it, but now she's like 'OK, do whatever you have to do.'" She said things are like that now because she is working and earning money, and if that were not the case, she "wouldn't be able to do anything. As long as I'm working, everything's fine (at home)." After she came out, she had to "leave home at least three times." She would go to her last therapist's office (who was non-religious), and she would let her sleep in her office, or she would go to her grandmother's house. She said she feels supported by her grandmother and her cousins. "My grandma is the one who tells my mom to let me go. Other than them, no one else in the family supports me." She added her grandmother tells her not to listen to her mom and that she is going to "try and talk to her." But overall, her parents "don't get involved." They tell her she is "an adult" and that she can do

whatever she wants as long as it is not in their home. Julia shared her sister does not support her but “she’s calmer around the topic now. She’s not supportive, but she respects it a lot.”

Like Julia’s parents, Fabio shared his parents do not support him and “do not get involved” either. Fabio stated that if it were up to his mother, he would be married to a woman. He shared he believes he will be able to spend time with his family and a partner in the future. “I think so, in the future... but maybe I myself don’t feel ready to do that right now.”

Manuel shared how hard it has been to safeguard his relationship with his father. His father continues to blame his mother because she raised him in “a feminine environment.” His father beat him several times after he came out, but he promised not to beat him again. “He said to me: ‘I want to tell you I’m sorry, but you need to understand me. I promise this is not going to happen again, but don’t give me reasons to do it.’” He stated his father has always been “rough” and that he knows he could fight back, but he’s not going to. “He’s my dad, even if I resent him or hate him for it. Whatever. I love my dad because he’s my dad. I want to have a relationship with him... everyone wants to have a relationship with their father...”

Despite this, he stated he “lost hope of having a relationship with him” and believes his father will never accept him as he is. “Today, it’s still like that. My dad still thinks it was a phase. A school thing, that I’m not dating men.” Manuel shared he has “learned to be whatever” his father wants him to be when he’s around him. Regarding his mother, however, Manuel said their relationship has improved, but that she still does not let him go out often because she is afraid of what can happen to him.

I tell her: first, people can’t tell... it’s not like I’m telling everyone I see. I know what I can and cannot do in this society. and I also know how to stand up for myself. it’s not that I’m going to be in the streets doing things like a crazy person. I need you to trust me. And we’ve been building that confidence. We’re practically OK now.

Nathan shared he had a good relationship with his mother until he came out. “It’s been years and we have never been able to have a good relationship again... we have many things unresolved. We get along well today, but not as great as we used to. That’s all.” Regarding his relationship with his father, Nathan shared: “...he never told me it was wrong. He never asked me to reconsider. He was just indifferent. But for our dad, indifferent is good. Indifference meant ‘I accept you, let’s move on.’” Nathan then told me he does not wish to spend time with his family and a partner, and shared he thinks many individuals who identify as gay do wish so. “Not me, I don’t have that kind of relationship with my family. I think it has a lot to do with being gay. I think need my space.”

James and Boris also talked about spending time with their partners and their families. James said he cannot force his parents to spend time with his boyfriend “every two weeks, that’s impossible and it’s not correct.” He suggested things should be “slow” because generations are different and compared the situation to people forcing you to like a book you simply dislike. On the other hand, Boris said he knew with time his parents were going to accept him, but that he still cannot bring his partner over.

We’re at a point that they already know, but we simply don’t talk about the fact that I’m gay. Because I still live with them, I rather them not be mad at me. They know, I know, but we don’t discuss it. Acceptance takes time. I rely on them economically. I work with my father. I want to do a master’s degree abroad and I need them to pay for my education.

Boris then talked about acceptance. He said his dad is in “denial” and that he “does not want to accept reality.” He shared he thinks his parents are at a point “where they still have hope I’m going through a phase. They make certain comments that don’t make me feel good, they don’t make me feel comfortable.” These “derogatory comments” are common according to Boris. His father tells him he’s not going to accept “*maricones*” and that he does not “love *maricones*” and then tries to get on Boris’ “good side.”

Aaron told me how he paid for college and “everything” himself. At age 18, his mother did not want to give him his identification documents, because according to him, she does not want him to have “the benefits” he should have because he is her son. But he said his father accepts him. “My dad would sit with me and tell me I could like whatever I wanted, that I did not have to follow the masses.” He described his brothers as “*machistas*” like their mother and shared they can’t understand how “a person was born female but feels male.” He then stated: “I just let them be. They don’t get involved in my life; I don’t get involved in theirs. They continue to use she/her/hers pronouns, but I don’t pay attention to them anymore.”

Leo shared his mother, his female cousins, and his siblings support him. He has yet to come out to his father, but that his father thinks something is “going on.” His father tried to read his text messages, but his phone had a passcode. Leo’s brother told their father that he had no right to go through his phone. After that incident, he sat with Leo. “He told me I needed to choose the right way, that he does not want me to go the wrong way... it was the first time I had heard him say something like that and it hit me hard.” He stated he wishes him “the best of luck” when he finds out his son identifies as gay. “I’m scared because he’s my dad at the end of the day, and he raised me and I care about him and I love him, but I won’t let him destroy my life because of my choice, so to speak.” Leo also shared how his father snapped at him a couple of weeks ago because he had his hair up.

He told my mom that if she had been awake at that time this would not have happened. I felt... I remember... it had been so long since I felt like that. and that was, I mean I still get the chills, because, that was the other day, a couple of weeks ago. I had my hair up; I did nothing wrong. I wore a ponytail, and he snapped because of that. it also happened at school.

Like Leo, Julia and Manuel both expressed how important their cousins’ support has been to them. Julia shared how she went to the same school as her cousins, and how they never left her side. “They never turned their back on me. They would have lunch with me. That’s the only

reason I was calm. People would tell them I was weird, but they stayed.” Manuel stated his cousin gave him the “family acceptance” he was looking for. “She was the first person I told. My family is religious, one side is Catholic and the other is protestant. With her, I knew she was not going to react badly because we had already discussed these topics.”

Martha shared she has a good relationship with her mother, and that she likes to spend time with her, but not with the rest of her family. “I feel identified with my mom. I feel supported by her. My brother lives abroad, he comes and goes, my sister lives with us, but she comes and goes too. My dad is rarely home.”

Amelia shared she now has her family’s acceptance. “I talked about the negative things I heard about LGBTQ+ people in my family, but my family accepts it now. It isn’t an issue.” She shared she knows there are people doing much worse who “will never receive correct information from their family.” Alana has always had her family’s acceptance, and she shared everyone in her family knew her then-partner, except her grandmother. “I’ve never told her, and I don’t want to tell her. I don’t want to cause her a heart attack.” She shared she has “grown” after she came out to her family and “told things as they are.” She said her father told her if her mother was still alive, they would be celebrating together.

Two participants described themselves as “privileged” despite the hardships that came with coming out. Grace stated: “I am privileged. I am privileged. I was not kicked out of home, I went to a private school, a private university, my mother could pay for a psychologist, I have always had health insurance.” Boris also described himself as privileged. “My family is not rich. But we are middle class, upper-middle class, and compared to (my classmates), I felt privileged. My parents gave me a good education, they tried to give me the best they could.” Nathan shared

that despite his struggles at home, he valued how his father welcomed him in his home after his mother kicked him out: “Not everyone has a dad like mine that welcomed me in his home.”

Theme III: Adjusting to School Expectations

The third theme that emerged from the data was Adjusting to School Expectations. The participants’ school experience was shaped by the culture of their schools. As LGBTQ+ individuals, some were met with lack of support from teachers and school staff in general, and others experienced bullying, harassment, and isolation. At one point or another, all but one participant expected their school experience to have been different. Six sub-themes emerged: (a) school culture, beliefs, and environment shaped school experience, (b) teachers and staff turned a blind eye, (c), teachers and staff offered a helping hand, (d) bullying and isolation, (e) a shoulder to lean on, and (f) identifying as LGBTQ+ impacted school performance.

School Culture, Beliefs, and Environment Shaped School Experience

During the interviews, each participant described their school culture, beliefs, and environments, and illustrated as they talked how the characteristics of their schools shaped their school experience. Whether they had an enjoyable school experience or one that they expected to be different heavily depended on these characteristics. For the purpose of this research, the schools were classified into (a) religious or non-religious, (b) private or public, and (c) monolingual or bilingual.

The schools were either non-religious or religious. The religious schools were either Catholic or Christian (protestant). Eight of the twelve participants graduated from religious schools in Santo Domingo: Boris, Alana, Julia, Aaron, James, Leo, Nathan, and Manuel. Although Grace and Fabio did not graduate from religious schools, they attended either

elementary or middle schools that were religious. Martha and Amelia never attended religious schools.

Julia described her school as monolingual and “Christian,” and described her experience as “traumatic.” She stated:

I went through a lot. It was a Christian school, and people were still very closed-minded in 2008. I endured a lot of bullying until around ninth grade. Because it was a Christian school, the psychologist told me they were going to kick me out if I did not change.

Alana’s school was also monolingual and Christian. It was a strict school where “if you were against any school belief, you were wrong. Not only regarding homosexuality, but with everything religion-related.” She added the school did not include any LGBTQ+-related topics and said that, according to the school, identifying as LGBTQ+ was “a sin.” She described the topic as “taboo” and added that “if the school would have included LGBTQ+ topics as something normal... it would have been much better.” She said she felt “restricted” and that she did not consider schools should be a place where you feel scared or restricted.

You spend more time in school than at home. You need a safe place to be, where you don’t feel judged or like a freak, or wrong, or that you’re living in sin because of your beliefs, or doing something wrong because you have a different point of view. That safe place should be school.

Alana added: “I’ve always thought schools should be a safe place for students.” She shared her school experience was not so bad, “except in religion class, when those topics that bothered me arose.” Manuel’s school was also monolingual and Christian. He also described LGBTQ+ topics as “taboo” and stated “taboo topics always get the attention of young people.” He described his school experience as “uncomfortable” and shared he “was afraid both at school and at home.”

James attended a monolingual school he described as “somewhat religious” where they had Catholic mass “sporadically, on very special occasions.” He stated he was “not afraid” while

in school, but that he began to be afraid when he “finished high school.” He added that while in school, he was “inside a bubble. You’re used to the environment. When they automatically burst the bubble, you realize you’re relatively alone in the world. I was very scared.” James “loved” his school and his teachers and said he is “never going to talk bad about” it because “it was a school that did not exclude anyone.” However, James contradicted himself when he shared teachers did not intervene when the bullying occurred or turned a blind eye. He stated the school “should at least train teachers around this (LGBTQ+) topic.”

Nathan attended a monolingual Catholic school directed by priests. “At least once a week we would go to mass, we had religion class at least three times a week, taught by priests. In the morning after singing the national anthem, we would say a prayer.” He added the prayers were not “always, but almost always.” Nathan also shared he does not remember school authorities or teachers ever talking about LGBTQ+ topics or LGBTQ+ people. “It was simply a topic that was not addressed.” He added: “they never said it was a sin, at least I don’t remember they did.”

Boris graduated from a polytechnic monolingual Catholic school directed by nuns. It was not an environment he felt safe in. “A school run by Salesian nuns, where the school psychologist told my teachers to ask me if I was gay and if she could approach me, do you think I am going to feel safe in an environment like that?” Before this polytechnic Catholic school, Boris also attended a religious private school where he did not feel safe either. He asked his parents to switch schools.

Aaron graduated from a polytechnic school, but he spent most of his school years in a private Catholic school directed by nuns. He described his school experience as “tedious. When they realized I was attracted to girls, they would send me to Bible class every single day and said I had a demon inside that needed to be pulled out of me.” He also described LGBTQ+ topics as

“taboo” and said that “since no one knew about it, no one talked about it. And if they talked about it, they said it was antinatural, that it was a sin. And that was it.” He stated he “never had sex education” and that “all they said was women and men are for this and that.” Aaron would ask “OK, but how are children made? How can one avoid STDs?” but they never answered. “They should teach about gender, about gender identity, homosexuality. They never talked about any of that.”

Fabio attended a middle school that was monolingual, which he described as a “prestigious Catholic polytechnic.” He shared the school was “extremely strict and demanding.” “They were super strict with hairdo... the dress code was demanding...” He shared they were “treated unequal” because children with straight hair could wear their hair as desired but “those of us with curly hair, we could only wear it to a certain length, after that we needed to get a haircut.” Moreover, Fabio shared the “*machismo* was much more prominent” in this school than in elementary. Despite it being a religious school, Fabio shared it was “weird” because they had sex education class that was “very explicit, they showed us drawings of vaginas and penises, super well-drawn drawings.” He said they did not talk about homosexuality and that he felt “it would have been too much, being it a highly conservative school.” Fabio then switched to a private, non-religious high school, where he graduated from. “In this new school, we had religion class, but not exactly about the Catholic religion. We learned about other religions and cultures.” He added he felt “kind of welcomed, at least more than in the last school.”

Leo described his school experience as “very bad.” He also graduated from a Catholic school, but it was bilingual. “It was a religious school, so they don’t like talking about that topic (homosexuality). He added “they had mass, Ash Wednesday, everything. I always said I didn’t

want to go...” Even if he did not want to go, he was forced to. He shared “most of the teachers were religious.” The religion class was also “mandatory”.

In the last years, the class was about family. But they always had to intervene with Jesus, and it’s OK... it’s not like... to me, religion has many positive aspects, morality, the values they teach, maybe some rules that we need to follow as humans. But it also causes many problems, especially within our community, and I don’t want to be a part of that.

Grace graduated from a non-religious polytechnic school but had previously attended a Catholic school, and she asked her mom to switch schools. She shared that while attending the religious school, she did not have a safe place in “either place” (at home or at school).

Neither Amelia nor Martha attended religious schools. Both of her schools were bilingual. Amelia described her school as “very different than the rest.” She said that when she was in fifth grade, while in sex education class, “our teachers mentioned that men had to wear condoms because of aids. They also said that men also have sex with men and women have sex with women. It was not a deep conversation, but they mentioned it.” Amelia shared this “was never a taboo topic” at her school. She stated she felt “extremely comfortable” and that she “never had it so difficult. All the information I received outside of school was that being gay was wrong, and it was the opposite in school.” She described her school environment as “positive” and stated it was “like a safe place,” but stated that although the school was supposed to be completely non-religious, “sometimes there were discussions, I mean, about religion.” Amelia said her school was “antibullying, but they never said explicitly that bullying on the basis of sexual or gender identity was not going to be allowed. They had a zero-bullying policy in general.” She also mentioned the school did not have a policy about outing anyone, but that she does not believe it has been done.

Martha described her school as “a school for everybody,” where “any religion is welcome” and judging is not well-seen. “If (in class) they were talking about religion, you were

not obliged to attend.” She added her school “would not sustain meetings with parents, only to hand out our grades, once during the school year.”

Teachers and Staff Turned a Blind Eye

Grace, Fabio, Nathan, James, and Julia stated their teachers “turned a blind eye,” “didn’t intervene,” or “didn’t get involved” when they were being bullied or harassed. Most participants stated that, in general, they felt “unsupported” by teachers and staff. Grace stated that when it came to bullying, neither the teachers nor the school would take action. She said, “the teachers didn’t do anything” and that “no one intervened. If there was a bullying situation, they did not get involved.” Moreover, she stated, “the teacher did not care what the student was going through” and that her “biggest problem at school is that I had nowhere to go.” Grace stated she did not feel protected by anyone in school. “You’re not in a safe space. If they knew and did nothing, who is going to defend me?”

When Fabio was in elementary school, he was physically bullied and harassed daily. One time he was hit so hard the teacher called his mother. “That’s when they intervened, not before.” He said the school “managed it terribly” and blamed him for staying silent, but that he stayed silent because “he was afraid.” Fabio then attended a religious school middle school. Like many participants, he also felt “the teachers turned a blind eye. Maybe to avoid conflict.” He shared the teachers did not address the “many conflicts” that arose. He stated the principal was “disengaged” with everything that “concerned the students” and that she “didn’t get involved” either. Fabio added “there was no interest in knowing what was going on with the student nor what was their situation” and that he did not feel “supported at all.” In the non-religious school Fabio graduated from, he stated “the principal would lead in-class interventions” when there was

bullying, but “of course, they did not talk about the topic as such, not about (sexual) identity or anything like it, but they tried to defend me.”

Nathan stated, “the teachers did not get involved” when there was name-calling, “it was as if someone had said wuss.” He said teachers “ignored” LGBTQ+ topics. James also stated his teachers “turned a blind eye:”

I feel that’s how it was. There were many teachers that cared about me, but they did not totally defend me... there were different situations. It was more like ‘stop it, let’s carry on with our class.’ It was not like ‘hey, come here, let’s talk.’

James shared that when things “escalated,” the teachers would involve the principal, but that “they wouldn’t talk much about the topic” either. He added some teachers would tell him to “behave better,” but that they meant well. He also said the cafeteria lady “mocked him... sporadically” when he placed orders.

In Julia’s case, the school psychologist addressed her and told her that she needed to “become heterosexual” or she would be “kicked out of school or sent to prison.” She shared the psychologist would tell her she was “negatively influencing” younger children and that when those children came to her to talk about the topic privately their families could argue Julia was :sexually abusing them.” She stated the principal would “send the psychologist” to “talk” to her and “advise her,” so she would not have to do it herself. She said the “principal simply did not get involved.” Julia felt she was on her own. “The other teachers in the school turned a blind eye, that’s it.” She added: “I never had someone tell me to be calm, I mean, there were people that did not get involved, that’s it.” She said she was “the lesbianism focal point at school” and that teachers and staff “blamed” her “for everything that happened around it.” When Julia was bullied, she stated she tried without success to let school authorities know what was going on.

“But because more people were complaining about me (being a lesbian), the school psychologist would tell me I was lying. That I was saying this to cover up what was really going on.”

Julia was outed to her parents by school authorities. “The school psychologist called my parents and referred me to a psychologist saying maybe I was confused.” Julia’s parents took her to five different psychologists in three years. The first three told them that she was, in fact, confused, but the last two told them that she was “not confused,” and that this was “simply” who she was.

Manuel met who would become his partner in school. They began dating and when he felt comfortable enough, in eleventh grade, he told his friends. That’s when the principal found out and called his parents “without” his “consent.”

She (the principal) called my dad. My dad! My dad is not emotionally intelligent. The next day, he yelled at me and hit me hard. He hit me so hard he cut my lips. I was a child, and all I wanted was my dad to accept me, to love me... I mean, I did not know what to say. I guess when you are going to tell your parents you need to be confident and you need to have a good argument. I did not get a chance to do that.

Manuel then shared he was not ready “physically or mentally” to come out to his parents, but he was forced to by the school principal. He recalled how much his relationship with his both his father and his then-partner suffered because he was outed. Manuel was not allowed to sit close to his then-partner or share their lunch because “there was always a teacher on the lookout” and the principal would tell him he could not sit with his partner in recess because “this type of relationship... would not be well seen.” Manuel described his school principal as “a person with a mentality of the past” and stated, “it’s tough to want her to change her behavior,” and that despite this, “he appreciates her.”

Alana shared she had a religion teacher that would say that homosexuality “is a sin, that it is very wrong, that LGBTQ+ people have attention deficit disorder or are missing a ‘figure’, for

example, if you're female and you're attracted to girls it is because you're missing a maternal figure." Alana recalled how bad she felt because she, in fact, was missing a maternal figure; her mother had passed away when she was nine. She expressed this teacher "wanted to make you addicted to her religion" and stated how upset the teacher made her. Alana added "it is not OK for her to make a student in her class feel bad because they think differently."

In Boris' case, he felt pressured by his school psychologist because she would tell teachers to ask him if he was gay, and that if he was, they should tell him to go talk to her, because she could "help" him. He shared the psychologist also addressed him directly. "The psychologist would tell me: if you ever feel like you feel attracted to men, let me know."

Aaron shared he also lacked support in school. He was outed at an early age to his mother when he told a teacher he "was not a girl." His teacher called his mother and let her know that he was saying he was not female but male. He stated he "failed a grade" because he was kicked out of school for denouncing "what was wrong." The nuns would "put their hands" on his head and "pour holy water" on him. He stated he had to go for an hour daily to a "pastoral juvenile" to talk about God and religion. Additionally, Aaron stated he had a teacher that insinuated himself to him because he was attracted to girls.

He even talked about the color of his penis and what he did to girls in schools, I failed the grade because of that. I grabbed my cellphone and recorded him talking about all of that, and I took the recording to the principal. So, they kicked me out of school.

Leo shared he had "no support in that school, not from my teachers, the school psychologist..." He continued to say they "did not share any information about it (homosexuality), they would not support you or help you if you had a problem." Leo had a teacher who gave him a bad grade, and he assumed it was because he was gay. He said the teacher would tell him in front of the class that he was "too *mariconcito*," that he was "too

feminine.” He said he felt “rejected and sad” and that he does not “ever want to feel that way.” He was upset because his school performance should not be impacted by what he “chooses to do” with his life. He stated “every time someone mentioned homosexuality was always with negative comments. Not like what the teacher said, they were always more subtle, but the comments were always there.”

Teachers and Staff Offered a Helping Hand

Although many participants expressed their teachers turned a blind eye, some of them also had a teacher or school staff offer a helping hand, something that they valued as positive. Other participants had their teachers and staff who treated them with respect. James shared that despite having teachers turn a blind eye, he felt “relatively protected in school.” He added he had a French teacher who identified as gay. “It was obvious, he talked about homosexuality, but in a good sense, one could say, I felt comfortable around him. I liked his classes.” James also talked about a teacher who “always supported” him. He described her as “kind of her mentor” and said: “She would tell me ‘don’t pay attention to that (being gay). Work hard. I do not care who you are, follow your dreams. Do what you love.’ And that always stayed in my head.” He said he got along with his teachers and that they “respected him.”

Manuel stated that after he was outed by the principal, his teachers did not change with him. “The teachers already knew me. They never told me they were disappointed of me because they knew how I worked, how I was with them and my classmates. They knew Manuel the person. I never had trouble with any teacher.” Moreover, Manuel said he had teachers that joked with him and his partner and that “everyone knew” they were together. Manuel also shared the school psychologist talked him through an emotional crisis, and that even when she talked about her religion while working with him and told him she could not tell him she approved of his

relationship, he did not feel disrespected: “I felt her office was a safe space.” Alana’s case was similar. She recalled how, despite having the one teacher that was unsupportive, she had others who were. She shared how she asked her biology teacher “if people become gay or are born gay” and that the teacher answered privately what she thought but told Alana she did not want her “to change her mind” because of her beliefs. She said this teacher joked with her and treated her with respect.

Like Alana, Leo said there was this one teacher who hinted that if he ever wanted to talk about anything, she would be there, but he never approached her. One day, the school psychologist talked to Leo.

I remember her perfectly. She was very understanding. I want to say she did not say it was good or bad, but she told me I could not let people attack my personality. And that at the end of the day, I am the one who needs to be happy. I remember that impacted me. I still think about it; she was nice.

Martha said everyone at her school was “super open-minded.” If they were going to discuss religion in class, it was OK to leave the room if you were not interested. She stated “all” of her teachers would talk about homosexuality. “They would bring news to the classroom, there was one female teacher that defended homosexuality vigorously.” Martha said if someone talked about it, “the teachers would talk about it and all of them would defend homosexuality.” Martha added the school principal “always defended her,” but that the principal had a daughter that identified as LGBTQ+ and that she was not supportive of her.

Amelia also said her teachers were respectful of LGBTQ+ individuals. She said she “had a gay teacher” when she was in eighth grade, although he “was not openly gay, there was no problem with that.” She did recall a teacher that said LGBTQ+ people needed to be “tolerated. She was saying that you did not mandatorily need to accept LGBTQ+ people, but that you needed to tolerate them.” She remembered how her classmates and her said that LGBTQ+ people

needed to be respected, not tolerated, because you “tolerate a toothache.” The same teacher also said a prayer before tests when the school was supposed to be non-religious. The teacher got in trouble for this.

Bullying and Isolation from Peers

Half of the study participants, Grace, Fabio, Boris, Leo, James, and Nathan were bullied long before they identified as lesbian or gay because they were perceived as such. Grace was called “lesbian” before she even knew what that meant: “They bullied me because I was supposedly a lesbian even though I had not identified as a lesbian yet.” She added “some days” she “did not want to go to school.” She had a “breakdown moment,” when she told her mom she “wanted to switch schools.” She added her mom did not understand why she wanted to switch but that they “never had the conversation either.”

Fabio stated the bullying started when he was seven years old. The “name-calling” was always present since elementary school. He was called *niña*, *pájaro*, and *maricón*. Like Grace, he stated there were days when “he did not want to go to school” and he told his parents he was sick. “I remember I missed school a lot.” He recalled he experienced “physical bullying” every day in elementary school. “There was this kid... he hit me a lot, he literally took my lunch money. Oh! It was ... horrible.” The teachers intervened when this child punched him in the stomach badly. The teacher told his mom and she went to the school. “And that’s when it got ugly. I didn’t want to say anything, because if you say something then you’re a tattletale. Other kids would get upset, not just the bully.” He had skipped a grade and had older classmates, and this placed him at a disadvantage towards the rest of the class. After this situation, in fourth grade, the bullying diminished. He shared he had new classmates in fourth grade, which helped

him, “because in third grade they were older and they already knew each other, and this made me feel more alone, more withdrawn. (The new classmates), it helped me to make friends.”

Boris stated kids in school “noticed” he identified as gay and began bullying him. He said the bullying was only verbal, not physical. “It was not like I was telling the world (that I was gay), but I don’t know, you were in school once, you know that this is normal, they notice.” He said in elementary school he was called “*maricón*, *pájaro*, and they said I slept with men. But that was it. Nothing major.” Boris shared he “suffered a lot” and that this “cost” him a lot too. “I tried to be close to my male classmates, I tried to cover up I was gay, but I felt rejected. As soon as I got close to them, they would call me *maricón* and tell me to leave.” He said he “did not have a lot of friends in that period” and added “no one talked” to him. He shared he “did not fit in” and he also asked to be changed from schools while in elementary school. “They called me *maricón* and I had this reputation and had to leave that school. I just told her (my mother) I did not want to be there.” After he switched schools, he said he felt “less emotional pressure” because he did not have the “gay reputation” anymore. When in high school, he shared he saw how other peers who were more effeminate than him were mocked and bullied and how he tried to avoid this at all costs.

Leo shared he did not know what being *maricón* meant when he was first called that. “I mean, I really did not have the slightest idea that it was not acceptable.” He also switched schools because of the bullying he endured. “My siblings left that school for other reasons, but I left because of the bullying. My parents wanted me to stay there, but I said I couldn’t take it any longer.” He shared he noticed he “sounded gay” when he screamed, and that he “would stay quiet for a bit” hoping no one noticed, and if they did, he hoped that they forgot soon. Leo told me he came out to friends in a “situation that involved alcohol” in high school. He was in ninth

or tenth grade. He told “two people” who then “spread the word” and outed him to the rest of the school.

James stated his classmates “would make feminine voices” and call him *pájaro* and *gordita*. They also suggested he “buy bras” to cover his breasts. James was bullied because of his weight and stated he is still “very insecure” and “very self-conscious” about it. Because he was always with a female best friend, they called him “girlfriend.” However, James expressed this bullying was never physical. In Nathan’s case, he expressed he was made fun of a lot because he “had all the flags” that he identified as gay. “They mocked me, but not to a point that they would say it to my face.”

Some participants expressed they experienced more bullying in elementary school than middle school or high school. Such was the case for Grace, Fabio, Boris, Leo, and Nathan. Fabio expressed:

When I finished elementary school, I think the bullying decreased, at least with my classmates it did. But I don’t think it decreased because there was more acceptance, but because I was able to adapt to the group more. I needed to adapt, and I knew how to play their games now. The bullying was still there, but not as strong as before. They disguised it with jokes and sarcasm. It was not as physical.

James stated he was “bullied the most in tenth grade.” In Aaron’s case, the bullying was constant throughout all of his school years. He stated his classmates would write words like “weird” and “nerd” on his notebooks. Julia was bullied the most “from sixth to ninth grade,” and like Fabio, she also experienced physical bullying. She shared she felt the rumor that she identified as lesbian “followed” her “everywhere” and that she was “pushed off the staircase at least twice a week.” She stated she was “threatened constantly” by her peers and school psychologist. “I couldn’t do anything. It wasn’t something I could change. But I had to adapt. The insults, the beatings, that was normal for me.”

Some participants like Manuel, Martha, Alana, and Amelia expressed they were not bullied in school. However, Martha and Amelia shared other classmates were bullied because they were perceived as gay. Martha shared she is “not a person that’s easily humiliated” and that if she was upset about something she never evidenced it because that would “allow room for it to happen again.” She expressed she had a classmate that was bullied and that “his problem was that he was not open about his (sexual) identity.” Amelia shared she heard comments like *pájaro* but that they were never attacks on her.

A Shoulder to Lean on from Peers

Despite the constant bullying most of the participants experienced, many of them stated they had support from their friends or close family members. Amelia stated she “always got along” with her classmates and that she was “not into gossip.” She shared that had she come out while in school, she knew her friends would have been supportive of her. Martha said everything “always flowed” with her friends. She shared she “never had to come out” to anyone but her mother because everything fell “into place.” She said her classmates found out she identified as lesbian in eleventh grade. She added she had her first girlfriend at 15. “I took her to a get together. No one said anything.”

Alana stated her “friends never judged” her and that her “classmates never had a problem with LGBTQ+ people.” She shared she took her then-girlfriend to a school get together and her friends were “super nice” to her. “I felt I could be myself with them. I felt good. Every person I told was a relief.” Manuel expressed “most” of his classmates “reacted well. They said they respected me and expected me to respect them.” He stated he was the first openly gay student in his grade. Manuel also expressed he received a lot of support from his partner at the time.

When Grace switched schools, she “acquired a group of friends where homosexuality was not seen as something abnormal.” She stated these new friends gave her “a lot of support” and that they “cared so little” that she “didn’t even need to come out of the closet.” She shared how she felt “normal” for the first time with her sexual identity when she was 16 thanks to this group of friends. Her then-girlfriend sat on her lap in recess and her friends “did not care. They began to joke about it, like they would with any heterosexual couple.”

The same thing happened to Fabio. This new school was “completely new... new people, new classmates, new teachers... I began opening up to my classmates. I was shy but I found a good group of friends.” He shared he felt “much better” emotionally due to this good group of friends. “I felt much more comfortable, I was doing better academically. There was bullying but I felt I could handle it; I was stronger and felt certain support from my friends.” Boris also said he did not have many friends in elementary school but that once he changed schools, he “opened up” more. Nonetheless, he did not state he felt supported by his classmates.

Leo, James, and Nathan expressed they were “supported” by their friends. Leo expressed he “had very little friends,” but that after he was outed in school, he made more friends. He said he had few male friends, but that he had friends “who were supportive, that were always there” and “always stood up” for him. He described them as “understanding.” Leo also shared he had a coming out experience that “was not forced” when he told his friend who also happens to identify as gay: “everything flowed perfectly... I felt great and did not feel burdened at all.”

Like Leo, James shared he was “supported” by his friends when he came out. He shared he has had the same female best friend “since forever” and that she “always stood up” for him. He shared that out of the 12 or 13 people that were in his grade, only three male classmates bullied him. Nathan expressed he had “a good circle of friends. I had a good support system.”

Aaron expressed he never “had a group” because he was always “the nerd” that was “always far away.” He shared he only had one male friend who was always with him. He said his best friend “knew everything” and respected his preferred pronouns. Julia shared she “basically grew up alone” and that she “didn’t feel support from anyone.” She added she was lucky to have her cousins in the same school as her, because they “never left her side” despite others telling them she was “weird.” She was apologetic of her classmates, saying “it is very normal for a young person that is seeing a friend go through a process like that not want to get close or involved because they could result adversely affected.” However, she expressed that her last two years of high school many social media influencers came out of the closet and that she suddenly became “popular” because “everyone wanted to have a gay friend.”

Identifying as LGBTQ+ Impacted School Performance

Alana, Boris, Grace, Amelia, Julia, Leo, and Fabio all stated there was a time when they did not do well in school. Alana shared “she was lazy and elusive” and that she does not know how she graduated. Boris expressed he “usually earned Cs.” He also shared that he did “terrible” during elementary school due to the bullying he was exposed to. Grace stated her “academic performance fell” after she “came out of the closet at home.” Like Grace, Amelia stated her sexual identity impacted her grades because she “sometimes did not hand in homework.” Julia said she was a very good student “at the beginning” but her grades dropped because “psychologically” she “was not doing well.” She expressed she was not “a horrible student” but not a “good one either.” She added she “could no longer concentrate” and that she could not hand in group projects because everyone in her class treated her “poorly.” Leo shared there was a time when he “did not do very well in school.” It was not that he had bad grades, but his grades were not as high as they used to be. Fabio shared he “failed a subject” in middle school. He

expressed his parents were “flexible” when it came to grades but that they told him to “work harder.” Aaron failed a grade for denouncing a priest in his school who made a pass at him because of his sexual and gender identity.

Martha expressed she “tried to be good but it did not work out that way.” She stated she “didn’t like any subject in particular” and that they were all the same” to her. Nathan also expressed he did not have interest in anything. “I mean, I began showing interest for things in college, because in school everything stunk, I didn’t like anything, I didn’t even like art, I mean, nothing. Being repressed also affected other areas, I was literally not into anything.” He described himself as an “average student.” On the contrary, Manuel said he was academically “one of the best” of his class and James described himself as a “very dedicated student... I was dedicated, I did my homework, studied for tests, and always held a good average.”

Theme IV: Adjusting to Societal Expectations

The last theme that emerged from the data was Adjusting to Societal Expectations. During the interviews, each participant described how the cultural norms in the DR impacted their experiences directly. Participants shared how religion played a big role in their lives as well. Three sub-themes emerged: (a) the experience was different than the espoused culture and religion, (b) adjusting personal expectations, (c) denying of self as a survival tool.

The Experience Was Different Than the Espoused Culture and Religion

The cultural beliefs and assumptions engrained in people and institutions in the DR were evident throughout the interviews. It was also evident that their experiences were contrary to what was espoused and expected in the country’s culture and religion. The *machismo* present in the Dominican culture permeated through the participants’ experiences. Manuel, Boris, Nathan,

James, Leo, and Amelia stated they heard words like *maricón* and *pájaro*, some of them on a daily basis. When talking about these derogatory terms, Boris said they were “nothing major.”

Manuel stated:

They mocked others saying *maricón* and all that, but that has always been there... it has always been around. Even to this day, I use it to joke around with my friends. But that’s part of the Dominican culture, it’s always going to be present. I paid no mind to it, I never thought of it as important.

Nathan shared he is “blessed to work with women” because he feels they do not judge him as much and do not expect him to tell them he identifies as gay. “Men are *machistas*. I feel like I even have to dress differently if I’m going to be surrounded by them at work. James stated, “we live in a *machista* culture” and that “whether we like it or not our families carry this type of culture and one has to inhibit oneself in some things.” He went on to say: “that’s wrong, but it’s the society we live in. What would you rather do? Live in peace with everyone or be in constant conflict with the people you have around you?” Aaron also described his brothers as *machistas* and said he just lets “them be.” Boris shared he grew up with repression because of the *machismo* and the constant derogatory terms towards the LGBTQ+ community he heard at home growing up. “I grew up with all this repression. I criticized a person for being *amanerado*, I criticized transsexuals, I could not see a transsexual person, I grew up that way because my dad would automatically make comments about them.” Leo talked about how “prevalent” the “toxic masculinity” is in the country and how his sexual identity “influences his friendships.” He shared “if you have a gay friend, they assume you’re gay too” and how he only has a couple of male friends who are straight that “accept” him.

Some participants, especially those who identified as gay, stated they were told there were girl or feminine and boy or masculine toys, sports, and even careers. James stated: “they told me playing with girl toys was not OK.” In Leo’s case, he was told both at home and at

school that he could not wear ponytails, bandanas, or sports bands. “I wore it all the time in school, and bandanas too, and my female teachers would tell me not to wear them because they were for girls.” Amelia expressed: “I think it’s different between men and women because if a man is effeminate, they automatically think he’s gay; but if a woman is a tomboy, they just think she likes sports.” Boris shared how his father asked why he was “studying hospitality at the polytechnic” because it was considered a “feminine area.” His father told him he was not going to pay “all that money” for him to study “*that*” in college. Boris said once he switched to a science major when in college, his father was happy about it and did not hesitate to pay. This mindset is also engrained in my participants. Boris expressed: “incredibly, I was the only gay person in a feminine career. The others were in accounting or electronics. That doesn’t mean anything, but you know...” Aaron, who identifies as a trans* man, expressed how “they (teachers) made” him “play volleyball, a sport known to be feminine.”

Grace stated how she did not “assume” gender roles like they were “established in society” and how what she wears is something that makes her get labeled and discriminated against. Grace expressed her gender expression “has always been considered masculine in our society.” She shared: “the more different you were, to what was standardized in school, at least regarding to gender, the worst you would be bullied. Everyone in the group who did not fit into the heteronormative model was bullied.”

Regarding access to healthcare, Aaron expressed “Dominican psychologists think I am ill. They think I have mental health problems. I am not going to go.” Amelia corroborated: “sadly, psychology is outdated. There are psychologists that still think that gay boys are gay because they were too attached to their mothers. No.”

The interviews reflected religion played a big role in the family and school lives of some of the participants. Manuel, Grace, and Aaron stated that despite the commandment *love thy neighbor*, they feel the opposite is being done by religious people in the country towards LGBTQ+ individuals. Manuel stated:

I think it's a verse that's misunderstood, I mean, people misinterpret it. Because when it says love, it is, I understand, it means respect each other. Understand each other, understand their pain, understand their life, because that's going to come back to you.

Grace also stated: "At the end, the basis for every religion is love thy neighbor." She shared her mother is "extremely religious" and, when talking about her mother, shared "religious people really believe God is going to punish us. I mean, they really believe this is a sin." Aaron shared: "religious people, the last thing they do is follow their Bible. The first commandment is love thy neighbor. And that's the first thing they do not do."

Amelia stated there is no separation between church and state. "Religion here is so part of what people are, there is no separation at all. People who are religious think everyone needs to be like them, that they need to live their lives up to their standards." She stated her parents "are religious because of their family" but that they "don't go to church." When talking about his parents, Boris stated: "you know, all Dominicans think they are Catholic and never go to church, so no, they are not religious." Leo described his parents as "religious" but added "they don't go to church." He shared he "distanced" himself from the church because he felt "uncomfortable." In Nathan's case, he stated that while in school he "was very close to the church and all that" but later distanced himself from it.

Grace, Manuel, and Fabio also talked about their family's religion. Grace described her mother as "extremely religious" and Manuel, when talking about his parents, said "the Lord has

always been present in their lives.” Fabio shared: “My family is Catholic, especially my mom. She goes to church and all that.”

Martha shared she grew up hearing that “homosexuality was wrong, that it was a sin,” but that she “never cared about what other people thought about” her. Additionally, she shared her mother “pressured” her and “compared” her to her “female cousins.” When describing her family, she said her dad is a “square peg” and that her sister is “just like him.” She described them as “closed-minded and archaic.” She added: “They’re not the type of people that are going to go around talking about God, because it’s nothing like that. But they have their say and think they’re always right.” She said her mother and her brother are “happier, so to speak.”

Regarding sex education in school, only three participants, Fabio, Martha, and Amelia expressed they received sex education in school, but only Amelia was taught about same-sex sexual relationships in that class. However, Amelia shared that she felt she “had little to no information about this topic.” She stated:

I get the country we live in. But my school, it can be hippie, open, progressive, but it doesn’t want to be labeled. It’s not like they were going to have pamphlets that read “are you gay?” Get it? They do this in the US. They also have gay-straight alliances, clubs, not here. No, never.

The rest of the participants expressed they did not have sex education or learned about any LGBTQ+ topic in school. Leo stated:

something I don’t like about schools here, I don’t know if it was just mine, but they don’t address that topic. Including everything that has to do with sexual reproduction and all that, they don’t address it... I’m going to remove the LGBTQ+ topic, all that, let’s talk about sex ed. I only had sex ed once, and it was over the book, I mean, I had to, I researched everything, I researched in school.

Adjusting Personal Expectations

For the most part, childhood was not what they expected. All participants expressed they expected things to be different either at school or at home. Their expectations were shaped by

societal norms in the DR. Manuel expressed he would have wanted someone to mediate at school between his parents and him and also between his family and his boyfriend's family, because "they were the ones who created this mess." In addition, Manuel expressed he would have wanted his family to believe he was capable of making his own decisions, just like his boyfriend's family.

Fabio expressed he would have wanted the religious school he attended to promote respect for diversity and between classmates, to be more open-minded and discuss homosexuality in sex education and "and not disregard a student if they did not do well academically... maybe more concern as to why the student was not doing well." He added he spent a long time unwell and no one asked him what the matter with him was, and that he "felt there was no psychosocial support for students." Moreover, Fabio shared he would have wanted the non-religious school to promote respect and inclusion, and to have teacher training on "these topics, because they talked from their prejudice and heteronormativity."

Leo, Grace, Nathan, and Aaron shared they would have benefited from having someone to talk to in school. Leo stated:

Having someone to talk to, that's the best... having an adult let you now you can count on them if anything, that they're going to be there for you no matter what happens at home or with friends, I think that would've been nice and would have made my life easier.

Nathan expressed: "I would tell school authorities: talk to your students. Don't be indifferent to who they are." Aaron shared: "I would have wanted someone to talk to me, at least a school psychologist. That's what they're there for, to say this kid has issues, let me help him. They never did it. Never."

James shared he thinks schools should address the topic of homosexuality.

It's something schools need to talk about, because the world is open to it... it exists and schools can't just close their eyes. Schools should address it, should educate about it, not make fun of it or talk about it in a derogatory way. But address it normally, that's all.

Alana also stated she would have wanted her school to address LGBTQ+ topics as "normal instead of saying it was a sin." She added students need "a safe place to be" because they "spend more time in school than at home."

Grace expressed several times throughout her interview she "had nowhere to go at school." She went on to say that she would have benefited from her school having "clear rules, a code of conduct that would have led to a healthy school environment." Julia also expressed she felt she had no support in school and added she would have wanted the school principal and psychologist not to "have focused so much in the fact the school was a Christian school." She added she would have benefited from them not being so "closed-minded," and that her life would have been different had her parents continued taking her to therapy because she would have had "someone who would have stopped and listened."

Denying of Self as a Survival Tool

Most participants in this study felt compelled to fulfill the expectations others had from them regarding gender roles imposed by society, because as Fabio stated, they "needed to fit in." Many participants forced themselves to date an opposite sex person even when they had already acknowledged their sexual identity and identified as lesbian or gay. Boris stated he "dated a girl" and that it was "the most uncomfortable moment" of his life. He shared he felt "bad" and "like a hypocrite." Nathan also shared he dated a girl. "I felt terrible when I dated her, and even more because I met my first same-sex partner being with her. So, I would go to her house and be all cozy with her, but I was texting him." Leo also shared he "had a girlfriend once" when he was in eighth grade. He described it as a "defense mechanism." Moreover, Nathan and Leo described

these girls as coverups or “beards.” James shared he “tried to force” himself to like his female best friend and stated “it didn’t work out. I was always sure of who I was and what I liked.”

Aaron shared in school he dated a boy to fulfill his mother’s expectations for him, but he had not identified as trans* yet. “But in the end, I told the guy, look, you gross me out, so let’s leave it at that and just be friends. He shared they became friends after that.

Grace shared: “my cousins taught me how to put make up on, they bought me dresses, they even found me a boyfriend from our *barrio*, but evidently I never felt comfortable” and “it obviously didn’t work out.” Amelia also shared she felt “pressured” because she “already knew” she was not attracted to boys. “I mean, I tried, dating a guy, but I remember I was afraid others would find out.” Martha stated she had a boyfriend, but that it was “on and off.” She shared he knew she identified as lesbian but he did not care. She would take him home because her mother “was in denial and fell depressed” when she came out.

Some participants shared they “modified their behavior” to try and fit in. Boris stated he “masculinized” himself. “I was too effeminate. I had no male friends in elementary school. Not one. I only hung out with girls.” Boris described “changing his behavior” as his “defense mechanism” because he avoided being bullied or rejected. “I tried not to express who I truly was.” He stated that he changed at home too. “I knew I had to hide something. I knew that I... that it was wrong. I knew the only way for my parents to stop correcting me was if I tried to act like they wanted me to.”

Leo shared he “faked” his voice. “I spoke super...differently... I’m very dramatic, it was my perfect role, horrible, but perfect.” James stated he “had to calculate exactly where I was going to sit in school, where we could eat lunch without being seen, tried to behave in front of people, not talk too much. I suffered. I was stressed out.” Nathan described his time in school as

“a challenge” because he “had to be so careful.” He added he “had to be the coolest kid in my class so people would not mess with me.” He shared he organized trips for his birthday and paid for everything. “I remember I did that to win people over.”

Fabio stated “it was tough to adapt.” He confessed he “had to be a man, dress a certain way, I was expected to hook up with girls, I needed to pretend I did that.” He added that he was “somewhat protected” because he was shy and did not “expose” himself as much. He felt “pressured” to be like the rest of his classmates, and “repressed certain things,” the things he “understood did not go well with others.” He described his time in school as “a constant repress and struggle to be who I am not.”

In Alana's case, she had a boyfriend but it was before she was conscious of her sexual identity. After she acknowledged her identity she did not deny who she was. In Julia's case, she did not try and fulfill any expectations either and built up the courage to be herself, with everything that entitled. She shared "everyone knew from the start because if asked because I never denied it. They would ask me since I was nine years old."

Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Across Participants

In order to illustrate the strength of the themes and sub-themes described in this chapter across all study participants, I created the following cross-tabulation table. Table 2 utilizes an X to indicate where I derived elements from the data that resulted in each theme and sub-theme. This table was helpful in assessing the strength of themes and sub-themes and developing the textural and structural descriptions of participants' experiences in the next section.

Table 2

Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Across Participants

[illegible]

[illegible]

Identifying as LGBTQ+ impacted school performance	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x
Adjusting to Societal Expectations	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Culture and religion influence the experience	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Adjusting personal expectations	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Denying of self as a survival tool	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x

Textural and Structural Descriptions of Experience

The themes and invariant constituents help the researcher to construct a textural and then a structural description of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas states the structural description provides a graphic account of the essence of the experience, taking into consideration the categories or themes that emerged "for how feelings and thoughts" connect with the experience. (p. 135). According to Moustakas, the researcher then develops a Composite Textural Description in which the invariant constituents and themes of every participant help to depict the experiences of the group of participants in the study as a whole. The researcher should then develop a Composite Structural Description employing the Imaginative Variation, also representing the experiences of the group of participants as a whole. This Composite Structural Description allows room for understanding "*how*" the study participants altogether "*experience what they experience*" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 142).

Textural description of experience. Student life as an LGBTQ+ individual in K-12 schools is an experience that varies from student to student. As children, they come to school

with a desire to be children, to learn, play, and do whatever children their age do. But most of them realized, some at a very young age, that childhood would not be as they expected and more often than not would be accompanied by the sadness, confusion, pain, fear, and the questioning that comes with being “different.”

Participants realized they were “not like the rest of their classmates” at some point during their school life, some as early as four or five years old. Others realized in elementary, middle, or high school. Being different meant feeling out of place, unfitting, and, in general, not belonging. Despite realizing they were different, it would be years before they acknowledged their sexual or gender identity, and perhaps many more until they felt comfortable enough to come out of the closet to family and friends.

Being different went hand in hand with not fitting into traditional gender roles engrained in the Dominican culture. Some were bullied and harassed because they were perceived as LGBTQ+ before they had even acknowledged their sexual or gender identity. To some, the name-calling became “normal.” Other participants experienced physical violence from peers in school, although most endured this violence in silence for fear of retribution. One participant told school authorities about this physical violence, but they dismissed her.

At school, the study participants were bullied and harassed by their peers and sometimes even school staff. It was difficult; the name-calling, the bullying and harassment, and to some, the physical violence were present since as long as they can remember. They felt unsupported at school and believed they could not count on anyone. Luckily, some of them had friends or relatives that helped them through when times got rough. These friends and relatives were by their side and sometimes stood up for them. But in most cases, the adults who were responsible

for the well-being of these students “turned a blind eye” or “did not intervene” when these events took place, leading many to think that they were, in fact, alone.

Participants, in general, lacked support at school. They withdrew, alienated, or repressed who they were to try to fit in, most of the time without success. Feelings of unworthiness, helplessness, and feeling meaningless, led ten of 12 participants to hit rock bottom. They had suicidal ideation and contemplated suicide as a viable option. Two participants attempted suicide. Luckily, those who attempted it lived to tell their story.

Other participants experienced lack of support at home. Two of them experienced physical violence from their parents and some were even kicked out of home. Participants who lacked support at home yearned to share this part of their lives with their families. They desired acceptance, understanding, and support, and to this day, some continue to be hopeful that they will be accepted by their families sometime in the future. This acceptance is important to them; some crave it since childhood. In general, they felt misunderstood. Despite this, most of them are apologetic of their parents and family members who rejected them and justify their actions even when they have caused them pain and suffering. When talking about her mother, one participant shared: “we need to understand everyone is doing the best they can.”

The study participants grew up in the Dominican Republic, immersed in families and/or school environments where religious beliefs are prominent. They were impacted by the lack of understanding of a population that, for the most part, continues to be ignored in educational environments in the DR and in almost every other environment that they have come across in their young lives. There was a general sense of being alone and unsupported throughout their school years either at home or at school, or both. Two participants attended schools that were “open-minded” and did not reject LGBTQ+ students, and even so, one of these participants felt

alone or lacked the necessary guidance and information about LGBTQ+ topics. Overall, common feelings among participants, whatever value they had given to their experience, were sadness, rejection, confusion, hopelessness, loneliness, and depression.

Participants who received support either at home or at school were positively impacted. Having someone to talk to or a place where they could be themselves meant the world to them. Only one participant expressed feeling supported by her mother and feeling supported at school, although she admitted this support from her mother did not come right away when she came out and that she still does not feel supported by the rest of her family. Two other participants who had the support of their fathers from day one expressed how much this meant to them even if they were in a school environment that did not support them. Nevertheless, this support did not mean the feelings of confusion or fear went away.

All participants expressed they were out to family and friends today. Some of them, however, still repress who they are and yearn to have the freedom and courage to be themselves. Despite the feelings of rejection, sadness, confusion, and helplessness mentioned above, most participants seek out ways to help others in an effort to help those who are going through the same experiences they have been through and to give back to the community, and long to do things they love and make them feel whole.

Overall, some participants wish they would have had more time to talk to their parents instead of being outed, they would have wanted their schools to train teachers and personnel in LGBTQ+ topics, and to be respectful of all individuals. All participants have found a group of supportive friends and/or significant others whom they rely on today. They wonder what their future will bring and, although some have it clearer than others, they know they want to be true to themselves, be happy, be at peace with themselves, and impact people's lives positively.

Structural description of experience. Many factors influence *how* study participants perceive their lived experience as K-12 LGBTQ+ students in the DR. The first factor that emerged was their road to self-acceptance as lesbian, gay, or trans* individuals, which directly influences the participants' lived experience. The process of realizing they are different and later of identifying themselves as gay, lesbian, or trans* in the case of my study participants comes with feelings of confusion, fear, and loneliness. They feel as if they have nothing in common with their classmates and it is tough for them to fit in, especially in environments that promote heteronormativity such as religious school settings in Santo Domingo. The sadness that comes with not belonging and how they force themselves to repress who they are in order to go unnoticed in an environment that constantly called them out for being different is difficult to overcome without help.

The study participants rarely had an adult at home or at school that listened to them and understood where they were coming from. At the time, most of them could not count on their friends either. They were afraid to share their thoughts to others because they did not know how they would react and feared being judged or labeled. The same adults that did their best to protect them sometimes hurt them by wanting to change their behavior and, in general, who they were. Some participants expressed they “had nowhere to go either at school or at home.” They had nothing but their voices full of self-doubt and despair. This loneliness led them to become depressed and even contemplate suicide. A couple of them attempted suicide. Instead of receiving support, this alienated them even more from their family, school staff, and peers. But even if their childhood and adolescence were not what they expected, they coped; they pulled through. Each participant demonstrated being resilient. They held unto music, art, movies, and

the few friends and family members that were supportive. They let their feelings out and allowed themselves to be vulnerable to overcome the obstacles they were facing.

Another factor that directly influences the participants' lived experience is their experiences within their families. Participants yearned to have their family's approval and more often than not felt they were not meeting the expectations their families had for them. They felt the need to pretend to be something they were not at home, some because of the pressure their families put on them to stop being effeminate in the case of boys, or masculine in the case of girls. Almost all participants expressed their parents "knew" or "suspected" they would identify as gay or lesbian, and despite suspicions or knowing, the adults did not come to them with understanding but with disdain, and scorned their children for not being what they expected them to be... or what society instilled in them their children should be.

For participants, coming out is a personal process and should be done when the individual feels ready to do so. Some participants had the chance to come out to their parents when they chose to, but others were outed to their parents by school staff or others who found out. Either way, as participants expressed, coming out is a difficult time, especially in a country where LGBTQ+ people are labeled as "sinners" and where LGBTQ+ people are discriminated against on a daily basis, even by church authorities. Most of my participants' families did not react well to the news that their sons and daughters were gay, lesbian, or trans*. Some participants were abused verbally and physically, leaving the participants feeling even more depressed and helpless.

Despite the struggles before coming out and when they came out, today, most participants said things are OK between them and their families and expressed the waters are calmer now. Some still want to be "looser," "happier," and "more themselves" around them, but

overall, things have gotten better. However, better does not mean they are fully supported by their families. Some participants said their parents “don’t intervene” when it comes to the topic but that they do not support them either. Most of them still do not engage in conversations about this topic with their family members, and some have yet to reconcile with their families. Not being able to be themselves among family is something that keeps them on edge, sad, uncomfortable, and even depressed.

The third factor that influences the participants’ lived experiences is the school culture, beliefs, and environment in which their experiences took place. Only four out of the twelve participants attended non-religious schools. The rest of the participants attended either Catholic or Christian Protestant schools. Some participants graduated from non-religious schools but attended religious schools during elementary and middle school. Three participants attended bilingual schools, but one of these participants attended a bilingual religious school. Overall, schools with a religious background ignored LGBTQ+ topics and made the participants feel out of place for being different and, those who later identified as lesbian, gay, or trans* while still in school, were discriminated against. Even if some school staff treated them fairly and with respect, the rest of the staff and school principals and administrators did not. As one participant said, “this is one of the most emotionally difficult periods in adolescence,” and feeling unsupported in a place where you spend most of your days is hard. Some participants simply did not want to go to school and some insisted on switching schools.

Many participants insisted school staff did not reach out to them, and some stated the staff did not intervene when they were name-called, bullied, or harassed by their classmates and peers. When bullied, individuals felt rejection, anger, rage, inner war with themselves, sadness, confusion, fear, among many other feelings. Some participants were up to a point where the

bullying was “unbearable,” saying they do not even want to remember the bullying they endured. Feeling left out or as if they did not fit in or belong is painful for any person, let alone for children and adolescents that have expressed the need to be accepted by their family, friends, and school staff.

Some participants did have support from their friends, but this support mostly came in high school. Having no one to talk to or nowhere to go was tough, especially for participants who also had a difficult time at home. Most had a hard time concentrating and handing in assignments, this resulting in disinterest; hence, in low academic performance.

Finally, the impact of the culture and religion in the DR is another factor that influences the participants’ lived experience. The fact that the country is deeply influenced by Catholic beliefs and the church permeates at home and at school. All participants in the study felt the need to fulfill expectations regarding gender roles. Most of the participants went through a period of self-denial as a means to survive either in a household or school environment that expected them to act differently; that expected them to *be* different. They did many things to try and go unnoticed like date people of the opposite sex because it was what society expected of them, try playing sports, change their mannerisms and even the way they talk to be more masculine, or wear clothes considered feminine because their families expected them to. This made them feel uncomfortable, upset, and hypocritical. They pretended to be someone who they were not and attempted to change who they were to “fit in” in school and at home.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings that emerged from the data analysis process. First, I engaged in bracketing or *epoche* again, attempting to leave as much as possible my biases aside before entering the data analysis process. This second round of

bracketing allowed me to be receptive of the participants' statements and overall experiences. I then engaged in horizontalization, giving equal value to each statement of the study participants and deleting vague or repetitive statements. The horizons that remained were the invariant constituents, that helped me to develop the participant narratives and the textural and structural descriptions of my participants' experiences, finally including the textural and structural descriptions of the participants as a whole. The horizons and the textural and structural descriptions helped to discover the essence for the LGBTQ+ students' experiences in K-12 schools in the Dominican Republic. The next chapter will contain a discussion of the study findings tied to the research questions and previous literature, as well as the meaning and essences of the participants' experiences. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research will also be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this final chapter is to discuss the findings presented in Chapter Five. I first state the relationship between the themes that emerged from the data and the existing literature on LGBTQ+ student experience in K-12 schools. Second, I state an overview of the primary research question and then present a textural-structural synthesis, which is an integration of both the composite textural and the composite structural descriptions presented in the previous chapter, providing the meaning and essences of participants' lived experiences. I then present additional findings, implications for policy and practice that arose from the study analysis, and recommendations for future research. Finally, I present my conclusions as a person and as a researcher.

Relationship Between Themes and Existing Literature

The themes presented in Chapter Five emerged from the data collected through narrative, in-depth, face-to-face interviews and the demographic profile questionnaire completed by each participant. In this section, I will frame the themes presented in the previous chapter within the context of existing literature on the topic. These findings contribute specific knowledge of LGBTQ+ student experience in the DR.

Theme I: Arriving at Self-Acceptance

Research suggests LGBTQ+ students are more likely to be bullied, harassed, and assaulted, and more likely to be depressed, attempt suicide, or self-harm than their heterosexual peers (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar & Azrael, 2009; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull & Greytak, 2012). This is consistent with the results of this study, where all but four participants (Martha, Alana, Manuel, and Amelia) shared they were bullied and harassed, and two

participants (Fabio and Julia) expressed they were physically assaulted. Julia expressed: “The insults, the beatings, that was normal for me.” Moreover, the results of this study reveal participants described feeling “emotionally loaded” (Fabio), “depressed” (Boris and Leo), and “sad” (Manuel), and had suicidal ideation (all but Martha and Alana), attempted self-harm (Aaron), or attempted suicide (Aaron, Julia). Aaron stated: “I cut my legs all the time, I still do it today. That’s how I relief stress, I’m no longer smoking, so I needed to find another way. And I do it like that. I cut my leg.”

Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, and Bogaert (2006) suggest LGBTQ+ students are more open to accessing illegal substances. This topic did not emerge in the interviews with most study participants. However, one participant, Grace, revealed during her interview having used illegal substances during her school years.

Theme II: Adjusting to Home Expectations

Research described most parents and family members usually have a hard time when finding out that their child identifies as LGBTQ+, mainly because most LGBTQ+ individuals do not come from LGBTQ+ families (Castro & Sujak, 2014; Macgillivray, 2000; Pollock, 2006). This is consistent with my study’s findings, that suggests that most participants expressed coming out to their family was tough. Five participants (Grace, Martha, Aaron, Nathan, and Julia) had a difficult time when they came out to their mothers, and Manuel and Boris had a difficult time when they came out to their fathers. Also, Grace and Manuel received beatings from their mother and father respectively. Leo has yet to come out to his father because he fears what his reaction will be.

According to Castro and Sujak (2014), LGBTQ+ students are twice as likely to run away from home. In my study, the participants did not run away from home but three of them were

kicked out of home once they came out. However, this is consistent with Marzan et. al's (2014) study, that stated LGBTQ+ individuals are forced out of their homes in the DR. Aaron, Julia, and Nathan were kicked out of home. Nathan expressed: "The day I was outed, I came home and saw my other sister crying in the floor, begging her to not kick me out. But I knew it was going to happen. So I packed up my things." Aaron shared: "when I told my mother I was in a stable relationship, she kicked me out of home."

Theme III: Adjusting to School Expectations

Research suggests schools assume individuals are heterosexual and fail to recognize different forms of sexuality and gender (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). Additionally, schools encourage heteronormativity and rarely include LGBTQ+ topics, representation, events, or history in their curriculums (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). This is compatible with my study's findings, where all but two participants (Alana and Martha) expressed their schools did not talk about homosexuality at any moment, not even during sex education class, if that class was part of their school curriculum. Aaron stated, "They should teach about gender, about gender identity, homosexuality. They never talked about any of that." Fabio expressed his school "talked from prejudice and heteronormativity."

LGBTQ+ students are at a disadvantage compared to their heterosexual cisgender peers in school (Castro & Sujak, 2014) because they lack in-school resources or support (Bailey, 2005). This is also consistent with my study findings, where most participants lacked in-school support; Leo stated, "Everything I knew about LGBTQ+ topics was because I researched about it on my own." Fabio expressed, "I felt there was no psychosocial support for students."

Regarding school performance, research evidences LGBTQ+ students are also more likely to be outperformed academically by their heterosexual peers (Busseri, Willoughby,

Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2006). This fits with my study findings, where seven (Alana, Boris, Grace, Amelia, Julia, Leo, and Fabio) out of the 12 participants did not do well in school at a certain time. Julia stated it was “difficult to concentrate” and Nathan stated, “nothing interested me, literally.”

Research suggests students in the US feel unsafe in school due to their gender expression or gender identity. It is common for LGBTQ+ students to skip school and avoid bathrooms, locker rooms, and extracurricular activities due to safety concerns (GLSEN, 2018). Three of my study participants (Boris, Grace, and Fabio) expressed they lied to their parents and faked being sick in order to avoid school, “There were days that I would wake up and not want to go to school. I’d say I was sick. I would tell them I had a headache. I remember I missed school a lot, until they told me I always had a headache” (Fabio).

The 2017 National School Climate Survey revealed schools throughout the US continue to be a hostile environment for the majority of LGBTQ+ students (GLSEN, 2018). This is also consistent with my study findings. Ten out of 12 participants described being mocked, bullied, harassed, and name-called by peers. The literature available suggests LGBTQ+ students regularly hear homophobic remarks in schools across the US and feel tormented due to these remarks. To make matters worse, it is not only peers that use this kind of language, teachers and staff also use homophobic language and negative language about gender expression (GLSEN, 2018). Moreover, research suggests staff regularly ignore or fail to address homophobic or transphobic remarks in schools; some of these teachers employ these remarks themselves (GLSEN, 2018). It is no surprise many LGBTQ+ students often feel alone and do not have even one person to talk to about LGBTQ+ topics in school (Taylor et al., 2011). This is consistent with the lived experience of my participants. Even if not directed to them, all of them heard

homophobic remarks like *maricón*, *niña*, *gordita*, *mariconcito*, gay, faggot, girl, weird, and monster. Nine out of 12 participants were name-called throughout their school years. One of my participants, Leo, was addressed by a teacher using homophobic remarks and James was mocked by a school staff member. In addition, five participants (Grace, Fabio, Julia, Leo, Manuel) expressed they felt unsupported by school authorities. “There was no interest in knowing what was going on with the student nor what was their situation” (Fabio).

Research also suggests school staff fail to address the situations that arise or ask the students involved to simply ignore them (GLSEN, 2018). Such was the case for James, who was told by his teachers not to pay attention to his classmates. Also, five participants (Grace, Fabio, Nathan, James, and Julia) expressed teachers “turned a blind eye,” “didn’t intervene,” or “didn’t get involved” when it came to homophobic remarks. Moreover, Julia, Aaron, and Fabio expressed feeling “alone” in school.

When it comes to policies, research states school policies and practices are far from inclusive; LGBTQ+ students continue to be victims of in-school anti-LGBTQ+ discriminatory policies. Transgender and genderqueer students are not likely to be allowed to use their preferred name, pronoun, bathroom, or locker room (GLSEN, 2018). This is also true for my study participants; even those who had a positive school experience and described their environment as inclusive shared their schools did not have any policies that explicitly protect LGBTQ+ students. Manuel was told by the principal he was not allowed to sit with his boyfriend during lunch or be seen together in hallways or other school settings, although he expressed there were teachers that allowed them to sit together in class. Also, the participant who identified as a trans* man, Aaron, shared he was not allowed to wear the uniform of his preference and was not called by his preferred name or pronouns.

Research states very few schools in the US provide LGBTQ+-inclusive sex education, but the majority of LGBTQ+ students have at least one in-school supportive staff and attend schools with “Safe Space” stickers that help pinpoint supportive educators (GLSEN, 2018). This study reveals my participants’ cases were similar; they expressed not having substantial sex education, let alone education about LGBTQ+ topics. Only one participant, Amelia, stated she had sex education that included LGBTQ+ topics, although Amelia stated, “it was not a deep conversation, but they mentioned it.” Furthermore, seven out of my twelve participants (Fabio, Manuel, Leo, James, Amelia, Alana, and Martha) expressed having at least one supportive staff in school. However, not one participant expressed having “Safe Space” stickers in their schools.

Research suggests LGBTQ+ students consider locker rooms and bathrooms the most unsafe places in schools. In the case of my study participants, they did not mention one specific place they thought was the most unsafe, but the school in general. Grace expressed “You’re not in a safe space. If they knew and did nothing, who is going to defend me?” On the contrary, Martha and Amelia described their school “a school for all” and “safe” respectively.

Theme IV: Adjusting to Societal Expectations

Research from the Latin American region, more specifically Brazil, indicated religion plays an important role and impedes the correct development of activities about sexuality in schools (Carrara et al., 2016). All participants in the study who attended religious schools had a challenging experience. However, Fabio shared he received sexual education when he attended a religious school: “It was weird because it was not like God created man and woman class, it wasn’t. It was very explicit, they showed us drawings of vaginas and penis, super well-drawn drawings. But no, they didn’t talk about homosexuality.” James stated he had a French teacher

who “talked about homosexuality, but in a good sense, one could say. I felt comfortable around him.”

Research suggests not only LGBTQ+ individuals are subject to homophobic bullying, but also individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles (Baruch-Dominguez et al., 2016). The authors posit this may be partially due to the existence of unyielding gender stereotypes in the Latin American region, Mexico included. Moreover, they state, the Mexican society continues to view LGBTQ+ individuals as “sick or confused” (p. 25). Such is the case of the study participants, who were subject to homophobic bullying before they even knew what identifying as lesbian or gay meant. Grace stated, “I think it has a lot to do with gender roles. When you do not assume them like they are established in society, it is very paradigmatic, and no one helps you.”

Corrales (2015,a) suggests younger generations are more welcoming of LGBTQ+ than older ones. This study does not provide enough evidence to support this statement. Aaron, for example, who graduated in 2008, expressed having been bullied and harassed and only having one supportive friend throughout his school years. But Julia, who graduated in 2015, expressed she did not have friends who were supportive of her, that they simply “did not get involved.” She was bullied and harassed throughout all of her school years. Leo, who graduated in 2017 reported having been bullied and harassed but also reported having supportive friends. Grace and Boris graduated in 2012 and expressed they endured bullying and harassment throughout their school years as well, but Grace expressed she found a group of supportive friends in high school. Amelia and James, who also graduated in 2012, expressed having supportive friends.

Overview of Primary Research Question

I stated my research questions in Chapter One. The overarching research question for this study was: *What are the lived experiences of recent LGBTQ+ graduates from the Dominican K-12 education system?* This overarching question fits a phenomenological approach. According to Patton (1990) phenomenology focuses “on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (p. 71). Particularly, transcendental phenomenology enables us to answer this question by discovering the “meaning and essences” of the experiences of study participants, which I present in the following textural-structural synthesis (Moustakas, 1994, p. 144). In order to address the overarching research question, it is important to examine the essence of participants’ experience as described in the next section. The study sub-questions are not distinct from the overarching question; rather, they are a means for giving breadth and depth to the exploration of participants’ experiences and the meaning they derive from those experiences. Thus, the synthesis of textural and structural elements from the data analysis will provide both a holistic sense of the findings (i.e. the essence) and a conversation that addresses the overarching question and sub-questions that framed the study.

Textural-Structural Synthesis; i.e. The Essence of Participants’ Experience

According to Moustakas (1994), the final step of his phenomenological model is an integration of both the composite textural and composite structural descriptions that encompasses all of the participants experiences and provides a “synthesis of meaning and essences” of the common experience (p. 144). The following textural-structural synthesis provides a vivid presentation of the four distinctive common themes that deeply impacted how my study participants perceive their school experience as LGBTQ+ students in the DR. I describe the challenges of the four major themes in the study: (a) Arriving at Self-Acceptance, (b) Adjusting

to Home Expectations, (c) Adjusting to School Expectations, and (e) Adjusting to Societal Expectations. Their lived experiences all encompass challenges either at home or school environments unprepared to address their needs as LGBTQ+ individuals but resulted in the growth of strong and resilient human beings.

Arriving at Self-Acceptance

The first category or theme that emerged from the data was *Arriving at Self-Acceptance*. The participants developed their sense of self or identity at different points in their lives, but one thing was common, they felt “different.” Feeling different came with silence, discomfort, self-reflection, curiosity, questioning the self, questioning worth, fear, confusion, and denial. Participants felt did they not fit in, as if they did not belong. It took most participants many years until they could pinpoint what it was about them that was different, and finally acknowledged they were sexually or gender diverse. Acceptance also came with time, and it took raw honesty and courage to self-identify as lesbian, gay, or trans* in the case of my participants.

Self-identifying as LGBTQ+, for most, was followed with a period of depression, sadness, self-rejection, and feeling unworthy. Being afraid to speak up and fearing what speaking up would entail was common. Suicidal ideation began at some point during adolescence and some participants even attempted suicide. One participant confessed still engaging in self-harm every now and then as a method to relieve stress.

All of them, even if they did not think about or attempt suicide, coped. Participant background and context helped them to manage and cope in different ways. They coped with the fact that they were different, that they were being treated differently by friends, family, and school staff, with the fact that this was not the childhood or adolescence they expected. All of them expected supportive families, friends, and supportive school environments, but to some,

this was not the case. However, they pulled through. They held unto music, art, hobbies, they cried and let themselves be vulnerable, they developed defense mechanisms, and few held unto uplifting words from a couple of family members... they became resilient.

Today, they are strong human beings with clear goals and dreams, who know what they want and what they do not want in their lives. Some identified themselves as happy and shared it gets better, they shared how much they have learned from identifying as LGBTQ+ in the DR, and how for better or for worse, their personal and school experiences shaped them into individuals they are today. Some expressed they work or want to work helping others, giving back to the community. All without exception expressed being out of the closet to friends and most family members. Being out comes with feelings of relief and freedom, of permission to be oneself. But some have repressed so much of who they were that they have yet to feel comfortable revealing their truest and most honest self.

Adjusting to Home Expectations

The second category or theme that emerged was *Adjusting to Home Expectations*. My study participants revealed most of their parents knew, sensed, imagined, or suspected they would, in the future, identify as LGBTQ+ before they came out. These thoughts caused fear and tension in most of their parents, leading them to act differently around their children. The parents would restrict their social encounters with friends, take away their phones, and subtly and sometimes not so subtly threaten them. The patriarchal society we live in led fathers to blame mothers for their male children's behavior. They tried desperately to modify these behaviors, to get them to talk, walk, stand, and dress a certain way, trying to avoid their children being labeled as different. They would make clear what toys were acceptable at home and which were not. They would not let participants be themselves. Their attempts were futile because not one of my

participants managed to not identify as LGBTQ+ in the future. They did, however, live in constant repression and fear. During this time, participants felt alone, isolated, and felt they could not rely on anyone at home. They shared little of what happened in school for fear of retribution.

Coming out to their families was different for each participant. Some participants did not get the chance to do it themselves because they were outed by school authorities or others. Being outed felt as betrayal; they felt their intimacy was violated. To this day, they cannot make sense of why they were outed because, to them, this was something personal and had nothing to do with their academic development. Being outed resulted in some participants lying to cover up their identity because they were not ready to come out yet, but these lies did not last long. Three participants were taken to psychologists or psychiatrists who aimed to use conversion therapy on them, seeking to “convert” them into heterosexual individuals. If taken to psychologists that did not agree with their stand on homosexuality, the families searched for different opinions and different professionals. Participants felt they could not think or choose for themselves. One participant confessed trying drugs and alcohol and even going to school drunk because she was not accepted either at school or at home. Some participants expressed not feeling safe at either place. Today, not one of my participants continues to go to therapy. Some have created an aversion to therapy, but others understand their lives would have been different had they received proper therapy. Some expressed desire to attend therapy in a place where they feel seen and heard.

Overall, fathers were more understanding than mothers, with three of them expressing support to their children. Some participants expressed religion had a deep impact on how their parents took the news. They were told their “preference” or “choice” was against their parents’ or family’s religious beliefs. Some participants expressed their mothers became depressed, and

although some of them got over it with time, others have yet to do so. Some participants faced extreme consequences when they came out: some were beaten repetitively and even kicked out of home. They felt they were disappointing their parents, and, despite the extreme measures taken against them, they yearned to feel loved and accepted at home. Some participants expressed their parents also went through denial phases, just like them, and some were apologetic of their parents and stated they did the best they could with the tools and little knowledge on the topic they had available.

After coming out, some participants expressed the waters are calmer now, that this is no longer an issue. Other participants lack support at home and have been told that they can do whatever they want, but outside their homes. Some parents simply do not get involved in the lives of their children anymore. Not getting involved does not mean their children have their support, which is something the participants all hope to gain at some point. Nonetheless, some participants expressed they have support from siblings, cousins, aunts, and grandmothers.

Others, however, are still having a bad time at home. They feel depressed, sad, and uncomfortable when their parents make derogatory comments about LGBTQ+ individuals. Some of these comments are constant and in front of them, as if they have still not given up hope that they will become straight. These participants expressed their parents continue to think it was just a phase, a school thing, and continue to ask them when they will bring a partner from the opposite sex home. One participant said she has come out to her mother at least seven times. Another participant added if it were up to his mother, he would be married to an opposite sex partner. In the case of the trans* participant, he stated all of his family members but his father continue to use she/her/hers pronouns, not acknowledging and disrespecting his preferred pronouns.

Adjusting to School Expectations

Adjusting to School Expectations was another category or theme that emerged from the data collected through the interviews with participants. The school culture, beliefs, and overall school environment set the tone for how my participants' experiences would take place. There were different types of environments described: private and public schools, monolingual and bilingual schools, non-religious and religious schools. The religious schools were either Catholic or Christian Protestant. Participants who attended religious schools, either monolingual or bilingual or Catholic or Christian, considered, for the most part, their school experience as challenging, negative, and, in general, lacked support from school authorities, teachers, and staff. Most Catholic institutions were mostly directed by nuns or priests who were part of the daily school life. Religion class was also taught by nuns or priests and prayers would be said almost every morning during flag ceremony.

Participants who attended non-religious bilingual schools described their experiences as positive. These school environments were embracing of all. One of them had anti-bullying policies, although the participant expressed the policy never mentioned LGBTQ+ students explicitly. However, this participant described her school as a safe place. These participants felt comfortable and welcomed and received a positive energy in school. One of them had sex education that mentioned LGBTQ+ topics, although the participant expressed the school did not mention these topics thoroughly, but that at least they were covered. These participants expressed that despite their experience being positive, they knew of other peers who were bullied in school for being perceived as LGBTQ+.

Participants who attended non-religious monolingual schools discussed how because these schools were so big and had so many students, they each acquired a group of friends who

did not judge them and did not see homosexuality as something negative. This helped them to open up about who they were, make real friends who supported them, and helped them to feel normal, even if only when being around these friends.

Participants who attended religious schools had staff that without the student's consent addressed the topic of homosexuality at school with them. One of the participants had nuns come to him to try to convert him. Also, some participants had school psychologists come to them. One in particular threatened a participant by saying that if she did not change her "behavior" and became heterosexual she would be kicked out of school and even mentioned the participant could go to jail. A participant expressed the school psychologist would make derogatory comments about LGBTQ+ people and suggest these individuals became LGBTQ+ because they were missing paternal or maternal figures or had ADHD. Another school psychologist told teachers and staff to be on the lookout for a participant whom she perceived as LGBTQ+, because she could help him change. Nonetheless, a participant who attended a monolingual religious school felt comfortable and safe while talking to his school psychologist although she did express she had her beliefs and that he had to respect them. The same was true for a participant who attended a religious bilingual school; the psychologist was understanding and encouraged him to be himself and to be happy. One participant was constantly abused by his teacher, who called him *mariconcito* in front of the class. He shared his grades with this teacher were severely impacted although he had always been a good student. It is important to point out that some participants who attended religious schools only felt judged and disrespected by certain school staff or school authorities; some staff were understanding and evidenced interest in the well-being of the student.

Three participants that attended monolingual religious schools were outed to their parents by either a teacher, psychologist, or principal without first informing the students' and without having the students' consent. These participants felt disrespected and had their rights violated as students. They are still facing the negative repercussions that being outed by school staff brought upon them. Being outed resulted in emotional or physical violence from parents that led to severed relationships with them, to isolation in school and at home, and to sadness, depression, and feelings of unworthiness.

The participants who attended non-religious bilingual schools expressed their teachers were open-minded and talked about homosexuality in school. One participant expressed some of her teachers would bring these topics to the classroom and discuss news about them. In the case of the other participant, everything she heard about homosexuality in school was positive, contrary to what she heard at home. The participants who attended non-religious monolingual schools shared some teachers would talk about homosexuality neither as a negative or a positive thing. These teachers tried to address the homosexuality topic as best they could, given the little tools they had and having possibly never received training on these topics. These participants felt somewhat supported by some teachers and staff, although not all of them.

Overall, participants who attended religious schools, be it monolingual or bilingual, had a much harder time in school than those who did not attend religious schools. They described their experience as negative, challenging, terrible, lonely, and uncomfortable. On the other hand, participants who attended non-religious bilingual schools described their experience as positive, drama-free, and stated that things flowed perfectly. They also said if they have children, they would feel comfortable enrolling them in the schools they attended.

Regarding bullying, all but four participants experienced bullying and harassment in school. The type of school or denomination had no influence over who got bullied or not. Two of the participants who were not bullied attended non-religious bilingual schools and the other two attended monolingual religious schools. However, these participants self-identified as gay, lesbian, or trans* while in high school. Their later process of identification compared to the rest of the participants who were bullied may have impacted the fact that they did not experience bullying in school. However, the rest of the participants did experience bullying and harassment, most on a daily basis. To some, especially to those participants who later identified as gay and the participant who identified as trans*, the name-calling was always present. They heard terms like *maricón*, *niña*, *gordita*, *mariconcito*, gay, faggot, girl, weird, and monster. They heard these terms regularly, up to a point where they considered them normal. The two participants who identified as lesbians who were bullied were called *marimacho*. Two participants experienced physical bullying, one of them was punched daily and had his lunch money stolen, and the other expressed she was pushed off the staircase at least twice a week. To some, the bullying was unbearable. They sometimes did not want to go to school, and as the bullying escalated, they later begged their parents to switch schools. Their parents complied but never discussed with their children why it was that they wanted to switch schools. For some, switching schools signified a relief. The bullying was still present, but not as much or as often as before; they felt they had more tools to handle it and had acquired a group of friends who supported them.

Some of the participants were first outed by friends whom they had shared their secret with, who later shared it with school authorities. My participants were devastated to say the least, they felt betrayed and overwhelmed. They felt they could not rely or count on anyone,

sometimes neither at school nor at home. Some of them thought they would not be able to handle all these things at once.

Overall, my study revealed bullying of LGBTQ+ individuals is more prevalent in elementary and middle school. The participants were bullied because they were perceived as LGBTQ+, sometimes before they had self-identified as LGBTQ+. When in high school, the participants who were bullied reported not being bullied as much, maybe because they already knew how to handle themselves in these situations. Some stated that in high school they had already modified their behavior to try and fit in with the rest of the students, which may have led to a lesser degree of bullying.

Some participants expressed their friends always supported them, especially participants who were not bullied. Other participants who were bullied expressed having little to no friends in elementary and middle school. However, those few friends stood up for them or were there for them to offer a shoulder to lean on. Other participants did not run the same fate. Some who identified as gay reported not having any male friends during elementary and much of middle school. The participant who identified as trans* reported having one only friend, male, who was his best friend throughout all of his school years and always stood up for him. Participants who had friends that stood up for them described them as their support system and were grateful to have them in their lives. Participants who switched schools because the bullying was no longer bearable reported opening up and gaining friends in their new schools once in high school. The support they received from friends pushed them to do better. They began going out after school and finding things that interested them.

Regarding school performance, most of the participants who were bullied did not do well in school. They did not show interest in anything, despite some considering themselves smart.

Participants' academic performance fell after they were outed or came out of the closet. They described themselves as terrible, horrible, or average students. They acknowledged being so overwhelmed sometimes that it was difficult for them to concentrate. Other students, despite the bullying, did well in school, although not as well as they would have wanted. They described themselves as dedicated and as students who held good averages.

Adjusting to Societal Expectations

The last common theme that played a big role in how LGBTQ+ students perceive their school experience was *Adjusting to Societal Expectations*. The cultural beliefs and assumptions in the DR are very much present in our everyday lives and are so engrained in who we are as Dominicans that can sometimes even go unnoticed. The truth is they highly impact the social structures in which the experiences of my participants took place. Some of my study participants were bullied because they did not fit into the traditional gender roles expected from them. For example, students who identified as gay, for the most part, hung out with more girls than boys, sometimes not having any male friends in school, and they disliked sports or did not excel at them. They were also considered effeminate (by themselves and others) because they had mannerisms considered feminine in the DR. On the contrary, students who identified as lesbian, for the most part, hung out with more boys than girls, sometimes having few to no female friends in school, and played sports, sometimes exceling in them. Most participants who identified as lesbian had a gender expression known in the Dominican society as masculine. Most of the participants who began experiencing bullying in elementary school had no idea what being gay or lesbian meant, but their peers already perceived them as LGBTQ+.

Another important aspect instilled in our families and institutions is religion. My study participants were mostly rejected and made to feel unworthy on the basis of religion. They

argued, however, that the foundation of every religion, especially in the Catholic and Christian Protestant religions is *love thy neighbor*. Most of their families and institution leaders and teachers used their religion to justify the bullying, harassment, verbal, and sometimes physical violence they were exposed to either at home or at school.

Additional Findings

In addition to the findings presented above, in this section I present additional findings that emerged from the data. Among these findings are the fact that school staff and classmates outed study participants, the unawareness of the meaning of bullying, and the lack of support within the members of the LGBTQ+ community. Some of my study participants came out when they felt ready to do so and others were outed. Those who were outed expressed not feeling ready to do so, especially not feeling prepared to talk to their families about their sexual or gender identity. Being outed came with resentment, sadness, hopelessness, and fear. They expressed feeling betrayed and having been caught off guard. Their situation at home became more complex after being outed. Two of the participants who were outed were kicked out of home, and one was beaten by his father.

Another additional finding was the fact that some participants did not seem to acknowledge they were bullied, but rather considered it a “normal” part of childhood or adolescence. One participant stated “*muchacho es muchacho*,” [children are children], meaning this behavior was common and therefore normal between children. Another participant stated that what he was exposed to was “nothing major.”

Another additional finding was the lack of support evident within the LGBTQ+ community. Some participants talked negatively about lesbians or trans* individuals, while others talked negatively about gays. One participant that identified as lesbian, when asked what

she identified as, replied “the L word, ugh, I hate that word, but gays took ownership of the word gay.” Another participant said lesbians are always “on the defensive” adding “you know how they are.” Moreover, another participant said she does “not know what it is the LGBTQ+ community in the DR is fighting for” and another participant said he “does not believe in supporting the community.” This suggests a lack of integration and unity within the members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Study Implications

Implications for Policy

The fact that not one of the 12 participants in the study expressed their school had policies inclusive of LGBTQ+ individuals suggests the need to create these policies. Moreover, the participants expressed they would have benefited from these policies that give visibility to LGBTQ+ students in schools. According to GLSEN (2018), inclusive and supportive school policies help LGBTQ+ students to feel they have in-school support, help lower LGBTQ+-related victimization, increase acceptance from peers, and add a greater sense of belonging.

Policies that welcome, embrace, and protect LGBTQ+ students not only comply with the Dominican Constitution of 2015, but also with the General Youth Law (2000), and the Norms of the Dominican Education System for the Harmonious Coexistence in Public and Private Educational Institutions (2013). In the case of public schools, all policies are created at the ministry level by the Ministry of Education of the DR (MINERD). In the case of private schools, school administrators and principals could create policies protective and supportive of LGBTQ+ students without an order from MINERD. The policies at the ministry level should not only give visibility to the LGBTQ+ community in educational environments in the country, but should also

establish training programs for teachers, school psychologists, and school staff in general to properly address the situations that arise regarding LGBTQ+ students.

Implications for Practice

Research suggests in-school resources for LGBTQ+ students, such as Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) and LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula help decrease the frequency of homophobic or negative remarks and increase the likeliness of school staff intervening when witnessing these incidents (GLSEN, 2018). The findings from this study suggest the need for the creation of spaces like these that may help LGBTQ+ students in Dominican K-12 schools feel heard, welcomed, and safe.

Research also suggests that addressing LGBTQ+ topics in schools as well as homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia positively impacts the student life of LGBTQ+ individuals, helping them to develop a positive attitude toward their schooling and therefore, perform better academically (Blackburn & McCreedy, 2009). Addressing these topics in school and training personnel to properly address them could help alleviate the fact that some LGBTQ+ students do not want to attend school because of the bullying and harassment they endure.

The findings from this study suggest that the Christ-centered religion is very present in the Dominican education system and impacted the study participants' school experiences and environment in general. Gender roles expectations also influenced the school experience of the study participants. Participants revealed they were alienated or mistreated based on school authorities', teachers', and staff's religious beliefs and because they ultimately did not fit into traditional gender roles. If addressed by promoting environments free from gender stereotypes and gender roles expectations, and environments that do not allow the rejection of individuals on the basis of religion, LGBTQ+ students could feel more welcomed and supported in school.

All students interviewed agreed on the fact that teacher training on these topics is needed to help prevent negative situations like the ones most of them experienced. Another implication for practice is not only training in LGBTQ+ topics school authorities, teachers, and staff, but also students and parents. Some added they felt their schools should also guide their parents around the topic instead of outing them and then disregarding them. It is not enough for schools to train their personnel and not work with the families and students who, knowingly or not, perpetuate the bullying and harassment these students face in educational environments. It is also futile to train personnel without constant supervision until they acknowledge and demonstrate they have the tools needed to continue on their own.

Suggestions for Further Research

The first recommendation I provide is following up on LGBTQ+ students to see how their LGBTQ+ student experience continues to impact their lives in the long term. Because this study only interviewed participants who had recently (2008-2018) graduated from high school, I understand it is still too recent to know what future long-term impact their school experience will have on their lives.

Many participants expressed being mocked or bullied during their early school years because they were perceived as LGBTQ+. They expressed this happened before they even knew what that meant or before they had identified as LGBTQ+. It would be interesting to study how young children, as early as five or six years old, already bully others because of their perceived sexual identity and if and how they know what this means.

I also recommend research to hear the voices of parents and families as well as school authorities, teachers, and staff. Although this study meant to give voice to LGBTQ+ students, an underrepresented population in the DR, I believe it would be rich to research the lived

experiences of families with LGBTQ+ students and institutions with LGBTQ+ students and compare and contrast their experiences to the results of this study. Another recommendation for further research is to find out what made some of my participants choose to be advocates for the LGBTQ+ population in the DR versus others who would rather not and explicitly stated “they do not believe in helping the LGBTQ+ community” or that they do not “understand what the LGBTQ+ community is fighting for.”

According to the latest UN Report of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual and gender identity (2019), whether it be intentionally or by negligence neither policymakers, administrative personnel, nor the teachers are well prepared to address bullying and discrimination. Moreover, they fear the families enrolled in the schools as well as other social groups may come after them if they advocate for including concerns related to violence and discrimination in internal policies or components of sexual education in school curricula. It would be interest to study if in fact, it is due to negligence or because school authorities, at least in DR, do not know where to begin or what programs and tools are necessary to address such a serious issue in our schools, let alone how to train administrative personnel, school staff, students, and their families.

Conclusion

“This is the beauty of knowledge and discovery. It keeps us forever awake, alive, and connected with what is and with what matters in life” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 62)

When I chose transcendental phenomenology as the methodology for this study, I did not know the impact this particular methodology was going to have on me. Moustakas’ (1994) book, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, felt impossible to read at the beginning. It was not until I understood my job as a phenomenological researcher was not to explain or analyze, but to describe that I finally began understanding Moustakas’ language. I internalized the impossibility

of a “suppositionless” state (p. 62) and I recognized the importance of consciously making an effort to limit preconceptions to discover knowledge regardless.

As Moustakas (1994) states, I was “intimately connected” (p. 59) and passionately involved with the participants’ experiences. My goal was to derive meaning from my commitment to the description of these experiences. The author asserts descriptions make the experience come to life. The opportunity to have described the participants’ experiences and to honor their voices is a privilege, and the ability to do so separating myself from the experience comes from Moustakas’ book. Moustakas (1994) became not only a guide for phenomenological studies, but a guide for life.

Moustakas (1994) posits that too often we are taught to value other people’s opinions above our own. As a researcher, I have learned to “listen to my inner dialogue, purified as much as possible from other voices, opinions, judgments, and values” (p. 62). I have learned to let go as much as possible of my own judgments, preconceptions, and biases. I have become “attuned to my own being, thinking, and choosing” before considering the “point of view of others” (p. 62). But I must be honest: making a conscious effort to become aware of the many voices and prejudices I carried with me, of the stories I have believed since childhood, and of the beliefs that were an obstacle to my growth as a human being was not an easy job.

Today, I am well aware of my biases, but I am also well aware of my privileges. This growth in consciousness is a result of having conducted this study. It is through this study that I have learned people are not born vulnerable but are made vulnerable by those exercising their privileges. Once I understood the meaning of privilege, once I became aware of my own, it was impossible to look the other way. I suddenly got in touch with my years as a K-12 student in the country and became more appreciative of my school experience. I began to cherish things I had

taken for granted during my school years: a helping hand from a teacher, a friend's shoulder to lean on, an environment that more often than not allowed me to be myself.

Conducting this study made me grow as a researcher, but most importantly, as a human being. I recognize I have no experience as an LGBTQ+ individual because I identify as a heterosexual cisgender woman, I did so publicly on stage at the first National LGBTI Dialogue in the DR a few months ago. I have never been told whom I can or cannot marry or what restroom I can or cannot use. However, I do have the experience of being ripped off my rights to decide over my body. I know firsthand what it is like to have the institution supposed to protect you limit your rights. My rights have been up for debate, too. But I also need to acknowledge the immense privilege I have to have been able to fly to another country to access my rights as a woman and terminate a pregnancy. This experience not only leads me to heightened consciousness, but also further commits me to work in favor of those who lack access to basic, fundamental human rights. As hooks and Mesa-Bains (2018) suggested, I am committed to use my privilege "in ways that empower those who lack it."

Through this study, I aimed to give voice to this underrepresented population in the country, but the truth is it led me to find my own voice... it led me to find myself. I confirmed I am an empathic and compassionate soul, a good listener, a supportive educator, and that I strive to be a kind and mindful human. I have learned that only through an open heart and an open mind can one see what is truly there to be seen. I have seen how life's struggles result in resilience and growth and wings to fly high. I have learned that my fears should not limit my fight for justice and equity, but instead push me to fight harder. If I am to be known as something, I hope it is as Rosa Parks wanted to be remembered, "as a person who is concerned about freedom and equality and justice and prosperity for all people."

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Appendix A

HSIRB Approval Letter

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Institutional Review Board
FWA00007042
IRB00000254

Date: May 21, 2019

To: Patricia Reeves, Principal Investigator
Rossina Matos, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 19-01-22

This letter will serve as confirmation that the changes to your research project titled "Understanding the School Experience of Recent LGBTQ Graduates in the Dominican Republic's Education System" requested in your memo received May 13, 2019 (to change study title to "Understanding the School Experience of Recent LGBTQ Graduates in the Dominican Republic's Education System"; to increase the maximum total number of participants to N=15; to revise methodological approach to "transcendental phenomenological"; to add participant demographic survey; to revise LGBT to LGBTQ; to revise recruitment and consent materials to reflect these changes) have been approved by the WMU Institutional Review Board.

The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination:

January 23, 2020

Office of the Vice President for Research
Research Compliance Office
1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5456
PHONE: (269) 387-8293 FAX: (269) 387-8276
WEBSITE: wmich.edu/research/compliance/hsirb

CAMPUS SITE: Room 251 W. Walwood Hall

Appendix B

Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Participant:

I am writing to inform you about an opportunity to participate in a research study about the evolution of the Dominican educational system in the last decade regarding LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) issues in schools. This study is being conducted by Student Investigator Rossina Matos, supervised by Dr. Patricia Reeves at Western Michigan University.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the lived experience of recent (2008-2018) graduates of the K-12 Dominican educational system. Additionally, this study aims to explore how these students derived meaning from their experiences and how said experiences have shaped who they are today and how they are living their lives. The findings from this study will provide insight for schools interested in shifting their culture into an openly inclusive one for LGBTQ+ students. In addition, the study might be useful to leaders of schools in terms of understanding how the culture has changed throughout the years. Moreover, the study will provide a deeper understanding of the issues and problems that LGBTQ+ individuals confronted while in school, as well as inform school leaders of the approach and process necessary to support said population. If you choose to participate, interviews will be conducted to obtain information about your experiences as an LGBTQ+ student in the Dominican Republic.

If you are interested in learning more about participating, please contact me through phone (809-966-6462) or email (rossinaamelia.matosescoto@wmich.edu). Contacting me does not obligate you to participate in the study. Participating is completely voluntary and you can withdraw from participating at any time if you wish to do so.

Thank you for your time and for considering participating in this research study.

Best Regards,
Rossina Matos

Correo Electrónico de Reclutamiento

Estimado Potencial Participante:

Te escribo para informarte sobre la oportunidad de participar en un estudio de investigación sobre la evolución del sistema educativo dominicano en la última década en relación a los desafíos que viven los estudiantes LGBTI en los centros educativos. Este estudio está siendo dirigido por la estudiante investigadora Rossina Matos, supervisada por la Dra. Patricia Reeves de Western Michigan University.

El propósito de este estudio fenomenológico es explorar cómo personas LGBTI graduadas recientemente (2008-2018) en la República Dominicana describen la esencia de su experiencia como estudiantes del sistema educativo dominicano. Adicionalmente, este estudio busca explorar cómo estas personas extraen significado de estas experiencias y cómo dichas experiencias han impactado quiénes son y cómo viven sus vidas hoy. Los hallazgos de este estudio podrían proporcionar una visión para los centros educativos interesados en cambiar su cultura a una más inclusiva para estudiantes LGBTI. Este estudio podría ser de utilidad para líderes de centros que deseen entender cómo la cultura ha cambiado en los últimos años. Además, este estudio podría proveer un mejor entendimiento sobre los desafíos que experimentan los estudiantes LGBTI mientras están en el sistema educativo dominicano, así como informar a estos líderes de centros educativos sobre el enfoque y proceso necesario para dar apoyo a dicha población. Si decides participar, se llevarán a cabo entrevistas para obtener información sobre tu experiencia como estudiante LGBTI en la República Dominicana.

Si te interesa obtener información adicional sobre la participación en este estudio, por favor contáctame por vía telefónica (809-966-6462) o por correo electrónico (rossinaamelia.matosescoto@wmich.edu). Contactarme no te obliga a participar en el estudio. La participación es completamente voluntaria y puedes optar por retirarte en cualquier momento si así lo deseas.

Gracias por tu tiempo y por considerar participar en este estudio de investigación.

Atentamente,
Rossina Matos

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP,
RESEARCH, AND TECHNOLOGY



WESTERN MICHIGAN
UNIVERSITY

**FOR MORE INFORMATION
CONTACT**

ROSSINA MATOS
809.966.6462
rossinaamelia.matosescoto@wmich.edu

LGBTQ+ RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE AS AN LGBTQ+
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

PARTICIPANTS

18 or older
Must identify as LGBTQ+
Have attended and graduated high school in the
Dominican Republic in the last decade (2008-2018)

DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP,
RESEARCH, AND TECHNOLOGY



WESTERN MICHIGAN
UNIVERSITY

**PARA MÁS INFORMACIÓN
CONTACTA**

ROSSINA MATOS
809.966.6462
rossinaamelia.matosescoto@wmich.edu

OPORTUNIDAD DE INVESTIGACIÓN LGBTQ+

CUÉNTANOS SOBRE TU EXPERIENCIA COMO
ESTUDIANTE LGBTQ+ EN REPÚBLICA DOMINICANA

PARTICIPANTES

Mayor de 18 años
Debes identificarte como LGBTI
Debes haber cursado y terminado el bachillerato en
República Dominicana en la última década (2008-2018)

Appendix D

Consent Form

Western Michigan University Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology

Student Investigator: Rossina Matos
Principal Investigator: Dr. Patricia Reeves
Title of Study: **Understanding the School Experience of Recent LGBTQ+ Graduates in the Dominican Republic's Educational System**

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "Understanding the School Experience of Recent LGBTQ+ Graduates in the Dominican Republic's Educational System." This project will serve as Rossina Matos' dissertation for the requirements of earning a Ph.D. degree. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the lived experience of recent (2008-2018) graduates of the K-12 Dominican educational system. Additionally, this study aims to explore how these students derived meaning from their experiences and how said experiences have shaped who they are today and how they are living their lives.

Who can participate in this study?

To participate in this study:

1. You must identify as LGBTQ+.
2. You must have attended and graduated a Dominican school in the last decade (2008-2018) and, be at least 18 years of age.
3. Persons who spent any of their school years in another country cannot participate.

Where will this study take place?

The study will take place in the Dominican Republic. The researcher has access to a private office in the school where she works, so she will use that office to conduct in-person interviews in the Santo Domingo area, or determine another non-residential location that is convenient to you where the interview can be conducted in private. It is worth noting that some participants may not live in the Santo Domingo area. In such cases, the researcher will travel to conduct in-person interviews. The interviews outside the Santo Domingo area will take place in a location of your choice to ensure your privacy.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

You will be asked to participate in an interview of 60 to 90 minutes if you participate in this study.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?

To participate, you will be asked to show the researcher a copy of your high school diploma to confirm you have attended and graduated a Dominican high school in the last decade. The diploma will not be published or discussed anywhere in the dissertation. The interview will take place in a private room or office to insure confidentiality and protect your identity as a participant. This could be the researcher's office or a conference room at the school where the researcher works or another public facility such as a library. You will be asked to answer a list of questions prepared by the researcher, but are free to decline to answer any of the questions at any time during the interview. The interview questions will be about your time in school as an LGBTQ individual.

What information is being measured during the study?

The researcher will collect information from you regarding your experiences as an LGBTQ+ individual in the Dominican educational system. The researcher will ask you about challenges you may have encountered, support you received (if any), and any significant or especially meaningful experiences that you choose to describe relating to your gender identity or sexual orientation. Through your responses and those of other participants, the researcher hopes to produce an authentic picture of what it is like to be an LGBTQ+ student during current times in Dominican high schools.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

There are no known risks to participants other than the following:

- You could experience loss of anonymity; however, the researcher will take all precautions to protect your anonymity beyond the fact that the researcher alone will know your identity. To protect against anyone other than the researcher knowing your identity, the researcher will assign you a pseudonym on all recorded data for the study.
- You may also find that you experience some level of emotional response or, discomfort, or even trauma while participating in the interview. If this occurs, you may decline to answer any question or stop the interview if your discomfort is such that you do not want to respond or continue.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

There is no direct benefit to you except for sharing the results with you. The findings from this study may provide insight for schools interested in shifting their culture into an openly inclusive one for LGBTQ+ students. Moreover, the study may be useful to leaders of schools in terms of understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and how these experiences impact and shape their school performance. Moreover, the study may provide a deeper understanding of the situations that LGBTQ+ students experienced while in the Dominican educational system.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?

There are no costs associated with participating in this study other than the time you will devote to the interview.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?

1. The principal investigator and the student investigator will be the only two people with access to the information collected.
2. The researcher will protect your anonymity by assigning your data a pseudonym and redacting any personally identifying information from the interview when transcribing it into a text document. After transcription, the researcher will destroy the audio recording and place the transcribed document in a password protected and encrypted electronic storage device that only the researcher can access.
3. Your data will be kept in the researcher's possession or in a locked file in the researcher's office, or a lockable compartment in the researcher's automobile when the researcher is in transit.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty if you choose to stop participating. You will not experience personal consequences if you choose to withdraw from this study. The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the student investigator, Rossina Matos (809)966-6462 or at rossinaamelia.matosescoto@wmich.edu or you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Patricia Reeves (269)387-3527 or at patricia.reeves@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Participant's signature

Date

Formulario de Consentimiento
Western Michigan University
Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology

Estudiante Investigador: Rossina Matos
Investigador Primario: Dr. Patricia Reeves
Título del Estudio: **Entendiendo la experiencia educativa de graduados recientes LGBTQ+ del sistema educativo dominicano**

Has sido invitado a participar en un estudio de investigación titulado “Entendiendo la experiencia educativa de graduados recientes LGBTQ+ del sistema educativo dominicano.” Este proyecto servirá como la disertación de Rossina Matos para optar por el grado de Ph.D. Este formulario de consentimiento explicará el propósito de este proyecto de investigación y repasará todo lo referente a compromisos de tiempo, los procedimientos a utilizar en el estudio y los riesgos y beneficios de participar en el mismo. Por favor lee detenidamente y completamente el formulario y por favor, si necesitas más explicación, no dude en hacer las preguntas necesarias

¿Qué tratamos de descubrir con este estudio?

El propósito de este estudio fenomenológico es entender cómo graduados LGBTQ+ describen la esencia de su experiencia como estudiantes en el sistema educativo dominicano. Además, este estudio busca explorar el sentido que estos estudiantes le dan a su experiencia en el sistema educativo dominicano, y cómo esas experiencias impactaron quiénes son y cómo viven sus vidas hoy.

¿Quién puede participar en este estudio?

Para participar en este estudio:

1. Debes identificarte como LGBTQ+.
2. Debes haber cursado y haberte graduado de un centro educativo en República Dominicana en la última década (2008-2018), y, tener al menos 18 años.
3. Personas que cursaron algunos años de su escolaridad en otro país no pueden participar.

¿Dónde tomará lugar este estudio?

Este estudio tomará lugar en la República Dominicana. El investigador tiene acceso a una oficina privada en el centro educativo donde trabaja, y utilizará dicha oficina para conducir las entrevistas en persona en caso de que los posibles entrevistados vivan en Santo Domingo, o determinará algún lugar no residencial que sea conveniente para ti donde puedan conducir la entrevista en privado. Puede que algunos participantes no vivan en Santo Domingo. En esos casos, el investigador se trasladará para conducir las entrevistas en persona. Estas entrevistas fuera de Santo Domingo tendrán lugar en una locación de tu preferencia donde puedas asegurar tu privacidad.

¿Cuál es el compromiso de tiempo para participar en este estudio?

Las entrevistas tomarán de 60 a 90 minutos si participas en este estudio.

¿Qué te pedirán hacer si participas en este estudio?

Para participar en este estudio, el investigador te pedirá enseñar una copia de tu diploma de bachiller que confirme que te has graduado de un centro educativo en República Dominicana en la última década. El diploma no será publicado ni discutido en ningún lugar en la disertación. La entrevista tomará lugar en un lugar u oficina privada para asegurar la confidencialidad y para proteger tu identidad como participante. Este lugar puede ser la oficina del investigador o un salón de conferencia en el centro donde trabaja el mismo, o algún lugar público como una biblioteca. Si reunirte con el investigador en alguno de esos lugares no resulta conveniente, pudieras participar en la entrevista vía Skype. Te pedirán que contestes un listado de preguntas preparado por el investigador, pero eres libre de declinar contestar cualquier de las preguntas en cualquier momento durante la entrevista. Las preguntas serán sobre tu tiempo en el bachillerato como estudiante LGBTQ+.

¿Qué información se medirá en este estudio?

El investigador recopilará información sobre tus experiencias como estudiante LGBTQ+ en el sistema educativo dominicano. El investigador te preguntará sobre los desafíos que experimentaste, el apoyo recibido (o falta de apoyo), y sobre cualquier experiencia significativa que elijas describir relacionado a tu identidad de género u orientación sexual. A través de tus respuestas y las de los demás participantes, el investigador espera poder producir una imagen auténtica de lo que conlleva ser un estudiante LGBTQ+ en estos tiempos en centros educativos dominicanos.

¿Cuáles son los riesgos de participar en este estudio y cómo se minimizarán los mismos?

Los riesgos son los siguientes:

- Podrías experimentar la pérdida del anonimato; sin embargo, el investigador tomará todas las precauciones necesarias para proteger tu anonimato y será el único que sabrá tu identidad. Para protegerte, se te asignará un seudónimo utilizado en toda la data para el estudio.
- Es posible también que experimentes aflicciones emocionales o algún nivel de emotividad, incomodidad e incluso trauma mientras participes en la entrevista. Si esto ocurre, puedes declinar responder cualquier pregunta y detener la entrevista si tu nivel de incomodidad es tal que no desees responder o continuar con la entrevista.

¿Cuáles son los beneficios de participar en este estudio?

No hay ningún beneficio directo excepto que compartiremos los resultados contigo. Los hallazgos de este estudio podrían proporcionar una visión para los centros educativos interesados en cambiar su cultura a una más inclusiva para estudiantes LGBTQ+. Este estudio podría ser de utilidad para líderes de centros que en relación a entender las experiencias de estudiantes LGBTQ+ y cómo estas experiencias impactan y dan forma a su experiencia educativa. Además, este estudio podría ofrecer un entendimiento profundo sobre las situaciones que estudiantes LGBTI experimenten durante su paso por el sistema educativo dominicano.

¿Hay algún costo asociado con participar en este estudio?

No hay ningún costo asociado con participar en este estudio además del tiempo que dedicarás a la entrevista.

¿Hay alguna compensación por participar en este estudio?

No hay ninguna compensación por participar en este estudio.

¿Quién tendrá acceso a la información recopilada durante este estudio?

1. El investigador asesor y el investigador principal serán las únicas dos personas con acceso a la información recopilada.
2. El investigador principal protegerá tu anonimato asignándole un seudónimo a tu data y obviando cualquier información personal que pueda identificarte de la entrevista al momento de transcribirla. Luego de transcribirla, el investigador principal destruirá la grabación y colocará la transcripción en un documento con clave y encriptado en una memoria electrónica a los que solo el investigador principal tendrá acceso.
3. Tu data será guardada en un lugar con llave dentro de la oficina del investigador principal, o en un compartimiento con llave mientras se encuentre en el vehículo del mismo.

¿Y si decides dejar de participar en este estudio?

Puedes decidir dejar de participar en este estudio en cualquier momento y por cualquier razón. No sufrirás ningún prejuicio ni ninguna penalidad si decides dejar de participar. No experimentarás ninguna consecuencia personal si decides retirarte de este estudio. El investigador también puede decidir no continuar con tu participación en este estudio sin tu consentimiento.

Si tienes alguna pregunta antes o durante el estudio, puedes contactar al estudiante investigador, Rossina Matos (809)966-6462 o por correo electrónico a rossinaamelia.matosescoto@wmich.edu o también puedes contactar al investigador principal, la Dr. Patricia Reeves (269)387-3527 o por correo electrónico a patricia.reeves@wmich.edu También puedes contactar al Presidente del Human Subjects Institutional Review Board al 269-387-8293 o al Vicepresidente de Investigación al 269-387-8298 si surgen preguntas durante el curso del estudio.

Este documento de consentimiento ha sido aprobado para ser utilizado por un año por el Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) como indica la fecha estampada y la firma del presidente del consejo en la esquina superior derecha. No participes en el estudio si fecha fue estampada hace más de un año.

He leído este formulario de consentimiento. Los riesgos y beneficios me fueron explicados.
Acepto ser parte de este estudio.

Nombre del participante

Firma del participante

Fecha

Appendix E

Demographic Profile

1. Sex

Female
Male

Intersex

2. Sexual or Gender Identity

Lesbian
Gay
Bisexual
Trans* Man

Trans* Woman
Queer
Other _____

3. Preferred pronouns

She/her/her
He/him/his
They/them/theirs

4. Year of High School Graduation 20_____

5. Education sector

Private

Public

6. Type of education

Monolingual

Bilingual

7. School denomination

Religious

Non-religious

8. Highest Obtained Degree

High school diploma
Bachelor's

Master's
Doctorate

9. Name of city in which you graduated from high school

10. Do you consider yourself to be out of the closet?

Yes

No

11. If not, why?**12. Circle the items that best describes you in this moment of your life**

Happy

Confused

Sad

With things to figure out

Clear about my future

Scared

Sure of myself

Supported by my family

Supported by my friends

Safe

Perfil Demográfico del Participante

1. Sexo

Femenino
Masculino

Intersex

2. Identidad sexual o de género

Lesbiana
Gay
Bisexual
Hombre Trans*

Mujer Trans*
Queer
Otro _____

3. Pronombres preferidos

Ella/a ella/de ella
Él/a él/de él
Ellos/a ellos/de ellos

4. Año de graduación del bachillerato 20_____

5. Sector educativo

Privado

Público

6. Tipo de educación

Monolingüe

Bilingüe

7. Denominación del centro

Religiosa

No religiosa

8. Más alto título obtenido

Bachiller
Licenciatura

Maestría
Doctorado

9. Ciudad de ubicación del centro educativo del que te graduaste

10. ¿Te consideras una persona fuera del closet?

Sí

No

11. Si no te consideras una persona fuera del closet, ¿por qué?

12. Circula los ítems que mejor te definan en este momento de tu vida

Feliz

Confundida/o/os

Triste

Con cosas por resolver

Clara/o/os sobre mi futuro

Asustada/o/os

Segura/o/os de mí misma

Apoyada/o/os por mi familia

Apoyada/o/os por mis amigos

Segura/o/os

Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Description of the Study:

As stated in the consent form, this study aims to find out how recent (2008-2018) LGBTQ+ graduates portray the essence of their experience as students in the K-12 Dominican education system. Additionally, this study aims to explore how these students derived meaning from their experiences and how said experiences have shaped who they are today and how they are living their lives. Through your responses and those of other participants, the researcher hopes to produce an authentic picture of what it is like to be an LGBTQ+ student in Dominican K-12 schools. Please think back to your school experiences. I will ask you a few open-ended questions about those experiences. Some of my questions may raise uncomfortable memories and feelings, so feel free to decline to answer if any question causes you too much discomfort.

1. Tell me about your experience as an LGBTQ+ K-12 student in the Dominican Republic.
2. Tell me about situations in school that arose because of your (perceived) LGBTQ+ identity. Why do you think these situations impacted you?
3. Tell me about situations that took place while in school that have impacted you and how you live your life today.
4. Tell me how identifying as LGBTQ+ impacted your social, academic, and emotional development while in school.

Protocolo de Entrevista

Hora de entrevista:

Fecha:

Lugar:

Entrevistador:

Entrevistado:

Descripción del Estudio:

Como confirma el formulario de consentimiento, el propósito de este estudio fenomenológico es explorar cómo personas LGBTQ+ graduadas recientemente (2008-2018) en la República Dominicana describen la esencia de su experiencia como estudiantes del sistema educativo dominicano. Adicionalmente, este estudio busca explorar cómo estas personas extraen significado de estas experiencias y cómo dichas experiencias han impactado quiénes son y cómo viven sus vidas hoy. A través de tus respuestas y las de los demás participantes, el investigador espera poder producir una imagen auténtica de lo que conlleva ser un estudiante LGBTQ+ en estos tiempos en centros educativos dominicanos. Por favor piensa en tu experiencia en el bachillerato. Te haré una serie de preguntas sobre la misma. Puede que alguna pregunta cause te surjan memorias y sentimientos incómodos, así que siéntete en libertad de no responder si alguna te causa mucha incomodidad.

1. Cuéntame de tu experiencia en la escuela como estudiante LGBTQ+ en la República Dominicana.
2. Cuéntame de algunas situaciones que ocurrieron mientras estabas en la escuela que nunca olvidarás.
3. Cuéntame de algunas situaciones que ocurrieron mientras estabas en la escuela que han tenido algún impacto en ti y han impactado cómo vives tu vida hoy.
4. Cuéntame cómo identificarte como LGBTQ+ impactó tu desarrollo social, académico y emocional mientras estabas en la escuela.

Appendix G

Reflective Memos

Grace

I had asked a friend I met during the National LGBTI Dialogue in which I was a panelist to share the recruitment flyer on his social media. Within minutes after he shared the flyer, he contacted me and sent me Grace's name and number. He told me she had agreed to be contacted by me for the purpose of participating in this study. Grace had already made up her mind and had decided to participate before I contacted her and it only took a few minutes of conversation via Whatsapp for us to agree on a date and time for the interview. I met Grace on a Saturday morning in July. She arrived a little earlier than our meeting time and texted me letting me know she was already there. When I arrived, I said hello and invited her into the conference room where most of the interviews took place. An office staff offered her coffee and she agreed. She took her coffee patiently and asked me a couple of questions before starting the interview. Grace seemed at ease throughout the interview. She stopped to think about the questions I asked and thought her answers through before speaking. She seemed calm and mature. Grace stated she did not fit into traditional gender roles and expressed she thought this was the reason she was bullied in elementary school. This felt relatable: it was also tough for me to fit into these traditional gender roles growing up.

Boris

I met Boris on an April afternoon. He arrived on time but I was a little late to our appointment. We were scheduled for 3:30 P.M. and ended up starting at 3:45 P.M. Boris seemed a little nervous at first but eased up as time progressed. He would begin talking and then stop in the middle of sentences; he seemed to rethink his answers multiple times. Boris stated he changed his mind about changing careers on his own. As he stated this, I sensed he was trying to convince himself (and me) about this sudden change. Boris and I talked about his family situation. He seemed eager to learn how my family has dealt with this topic surrounding my brother and we shared stories about our childhood. I sensed these stories gave him hope.

Martha

I met Martha last March for our interview. We had set up a previous appointment, but she called in sick and we rescheduled. We were scheduled for 5:00 P.M. but began at 5:45 P.M. because I could not leave the office sooner. I wrote down my impression of her as soon as our meeting was over: "she was preppy, pretty, nice, and happy. Genuinely happy. So happy and sure of herself it sometimes felt fake." She said something that caught my attention: "you can't just squander your life and everything you have, you have to have something good, you can't just look at what is wrong." I sensed she was talking about homosexuality and that deep down she felt homosexuality was wrong. I recently learned Martha and her girlfriend broke up.

Alana

I met Alana many years ago, but we are not really close friends. When she found out about my dissertation topic and saw the flyer on social media, she contacted me and offered to talk about her experience right away. She had that classic wide smile of hers when she first came in. I thought she looked much more mature than I remembered. I had not seen her in over three years. She looked happy, calm, at peace. I remember thinking she had a cool sense of fashion. I was surprised by Alana's eloquence and coherence. I sensed her honesty throughout our time together. As she talked, I admired her resilience and how she manages to come in with a smile, head tall, and proud of who she is. I sensed maturity in her words. She seemed at peace with what she was saying. I felt proud of her growth.

Amelia

When I arrived at the place of the interview, Amelia had already arrived. I said hello and asked her to wait a minute until I organized my things. She smiled and told me not to worry. There was something about her that stood out: she had a beautiful smile and was not afraid to show it. She seemed confident. She currently works at the school she graduated from. When she talked about her job, her passion was visible.

Julia

Julia contacted me and expressed her interest in participating in this study: "I saw a post on Instagram and I am interested." I sent her the recruitment email and the informed consent form; a couple of minutes later received another text from her: "Just read it. I want to participate." Despite her evident interest, it took several tries before she confirmed date and time for our meeting. On the day of the interview, I saw her walking towards the office through the glass door; her sunglasses on her shirt and part of her hair to the side, part to the back. She was wearing a plain white tee and dark gray pants. She carried her cellphone and e-cigarette in her hand, no purse. She came in and was a bit shy; she looked nervous. I explained that the interview would be a conversation and that there was no need to be nervous. We went over the consent form and began the interview. The interview flowed well. My heart broke for her as she narrated how she was pushed off the stairs and how the school psychologist did nothing but worsen the situation for her.

Aaron

Despite his expressed interest in participating, Aaron cancelled the interview a few times. I was excited to meet him; this would be my first encounter face to face with a trans* individual. I confess I searched for him and went through his Instagram profile before we met. Our conversation flowed perfectly. I could feel his pain as he talked. When Aaron talked about his best friend and the opportunities he had had, I sensed these were things that Aaron yearned to have. I sensed it was hard for Aaron to talk about his family situation. I noticed how hard it was on him to not have his mother's support. His pain was palpable. As Aaron cried, I thought about how tough it must be for my participants to openly discuss these intimate moments with a complete stranger. When Aaron talked about his dream of having a family, I could relate. That

was also my dream not too long ago. Although I struggled to have my family, I was not infertile. I can only imagine what this means for people who want to fulfill this dream.

James

An office staff let me know James had arrived. I organized my documents and invited him in. He was wearing cropped navy pants and a white shirt. I admired his style. I felt proud of him; in a culture like ours, men are often ridiculed for having a sense of fashion. I was surprised by how properly he spoke; he pronounced every word correctly and had perfect diction, something I believe is uncommon for Dominicans. I sensed he referred to homosexuality as something “wrong” while he talked. I got a feeling he has overcome many insecurities but at the same time felt he restricts so much of who he is in order to fit in to the DR standards of “normal.” Throughout the interview, I sensed ambiguity in some of James’ statements. I felt James contradicted himself a couple of times during our time together.

Leo

Leo arrived at the interview site a little late. We greeted each other and he apologized. He was wearing tight skinny jeans. I sensed he was a little nervous at first, but the interview flowed perfectly as soon as we began to talk. I felt Leo was open and honest about his school experience and his coming out process to his friends and family. Leo expressed he was not going to be brought down in the year 2019. As he pronounced these words, I felt Leo was still trying to convince himself of this. When Leo talked about his friend’s coming out experience and how it had impacted him, I sensed family support was important to him. When Leo was telling me about how he hated to play with Power Rangers and Max Steel toys, all I could think about in that moment was my brother; he hated these toys and would much rather play with “feminine toys.” Leo talked about his mother sending his pictures at pride to her friends. I could tell how much this meant to Leo. When we finished the interview, Leo thanked me and said our time together had been “therapeutic.” I wondered how many individuals are wanting to share their story, wanting to be seen and heard.

Nathan

Nathan and I have been friends for a while now. Before we met for the interview, I felt nervous to interview a friend. He invited me to his home, a small apartment in a prominent neighborhood in Santo Domingo. The fact that the interview was at his home made the moment even more special and intimate. He showed me around proudly; all of this was a product of his hard work. It is uncommon for twenty-something-year-olds to live on their own in the DR. Usually, Dominicans move out of their parents’ home when they get married. When Nathan was telling me how he isolated himself from his best friends because they began hinting they knew he was gay via their Facebook status, he shared they may have felt as if Nathan betrayed them. I sensed deep down he also felt he had betrayed them. When he told me he apologized many years later to other friends because he isolated himself from them while in school, I got a feeling Nathan apologized a lot for being who he is. When he talked about his strained relationship with his mother, I felt this made him uneasy.

Manuel

I posted the recruitment flyer on social media and Manuel contacted me a few minutes after the post was up. He quickly expressed he wanted to participate and we kept in contact via Whatsapp. He contacted me to confirm our meeting. He arrived at least 10 minutes early. When Manuel told me that pejorative name-calling will always be part of Dominican culture, sadly, I agreed. In the DR, it is common to say these words sometimes without even thinking they are hurtful. When Manuel talked, I sensed somehow he felt he was disrespecting others by being gay. As if him not being heterosexual could somehow harm his classmates. I felt Manuel was somewhat proud of how his classmates were not able to tell he was gay until he formally came out. When he shared he would have wanted his family to be more like his then-boyfriend's family, I saw Manuel's face light up. This was the first and only time Manuel smiled during our time together. I sensed Manuel is not only afraid of being who he is but also of letting people know. When Manuel talked about his father, I could see in his eyes how much this hurt him and how much he yearned to be close to his father. During our conversation, a family member called him and he answered and lied about where he was. I got a feeling this is part of the "behavior" Manuel has learned to deal with the cards he has been handed.

Fabio

I received Fabio's contact information through another participant and I contacted him right away. It took us a couple of days to be able to set a date and time convenient for both of us, but we did. I finally met Fabio on a hot summer Wednesday afternoon. He was wearing jeans and a plaid shirt. I was impacted by his long and beautiful eyelashes as soon as we met. We went over the consent and began the interview. At first, Fabio seemed shy. He seemed much more relaxed as our time together progressed. I noticed it was difficult for him to talk about the bullying he endured in elementary school. I thought Fabio was mature and calm. He thought through his answers before giving them to me.

Appendix H

Complete List of Significant Statements (Horizons) from Study Data

I. Arriving at Self-Acceptance

1.- Realizing I Am “Different”

"I always knew I was different"

1. At the beginning it was confusing. I did not know what was right and what was wrong, and as I grew, I realized I was different. I was not like normal people. – Julia
2. I always knew I was different. Since early on. I was about five years old. - Boris
3. I was four years old when I realized I was different. I have two brothers and they would bathe all of us together, naked. I saw they had a penis and I asked myself where was mine. Because I always thought I was a boy. As I grew older, this doubt also grew within me. I wanted to dress like boys in school, I wore pants instead of skirts. That's the moment when it all started. - Aaron
4. In ninth grade, I began questioning my sexuality. I was like, what was wrong with me? I started feeling weird, because this was something completely different. But I did not talk to anyone about it because I was afraid of being judged. – Alana
5. I played sports, and yes, I was discriminated against, and I felt different, but it is tough. In fourth grade you are a child. What do you do? You play. But I did know I was never like my female friends. - Grace
6. I always knew I was different. I mean, I liked my (female) teacher when I was seven years old. For me that was not like, 'oh! I think I'm attracted to women!' I was always attracted to women. I was never attracted to men. – Martha
7. In fifth grade I knew what it (being gay) was, but I never thought I was (gay). I think that happens when you feel that attraction, because I thought and heard people talking to me about a boyfriend all my life. And then, I never feel attracted to boys but to girls. Some people feel that attraction younger than I did. – Amelia
8. I think, I mean, in my case, somehow, I always knew I was different. But when I gave meaning to it, I named it, I was 11 years old. – Fabio
9. I knew I was different but it was not like 'oh, I'm gay.' I couldn't give a word to it. I just knew I liked boys. That's it. - Nathan
10. I've always known. Since I was five years old. I always knew I was different. I mean, always. I never liked a girl, I never had a girlfriend, and you could think, how do you know if you never tried? I've asked myself too. But no, I never felt an attraction. - James
11. I want to say I've known I was gay since fifth grade, but I don't know. That's when I began discovering things online. Youtube was flourishing, and I was able to see many videos of people coming out. also, I never really thought much about sexuality, whether I was straight or gay. If I liked or felt attracted to someone, I don't know, I would think, 'oh, how pretty.' – Leo

2. Identifying as LGBTQ+

"It took me a long time to say it... to accept who I was"

1. When I was afraid, I was too young. When I began dating, I became more open. I was around 13, 14 years old. Young, but not as young. So that was never really something to worry about. I never spoke to anyone about being scared. I simply wanted to paint my reality, so to speak. I was never overwhelmed by that. - Martha
2. I told my teacher that I was not a girl. I said to her, 'do not comb my hair. I am not a girl. Boys to not comb their hair.' She told me I was wearing a skirt, and I told her my mom made me wear it, that I was not wearing it because I wanted to. - Aaron
3. I sat down in a religion class with the teacher, we were talking, and she told me so many things and I saw how upset they made me. That's when I confirmed I was (a lesbian). It is not the same thing as if someone is judging somebody else, a friend or a family member, but it would not feel as hurtful if you did not identify with what they were saying. - Alana
4. But then I was in that whole. I began watching movies and TV shows and it was like, 'I don't know what's happening to me. I feel weird.' I still can't explain it. If you ask me to write about (how I felt), I will hand in a blank paper. I still do not know what it is. I do not know if it was fear or confusion... whatever it was. - Leo
5. My boom moment was then I was 14. That's when I connected the dots. I realized why I always preferred being with one person, why I wanted to get on her good side, that men were 'whatever,' but I don't have earlier memories than that. No. - Amelia
6. When I started... I mean, I understand there are several stages. The first stage is denial, it's when you say no, I can't like this, this is wrong. That was around eighth, ninth grade. Next is the negotiation stage, because I understand, or I say, that to be gay you first have a period of bisexuality. Its like well, maybe I like this, but I also like that. but by the end of tenth grade I was like ok, I am sure I don't like girls. That's why nobody... nobody knew. Nobody suspected anything. So I was like ok, I don't like girls, I like boys, good, ok. This is my dilemma, I need to learn how to deal with this, to learn by myself, to develop in this, because this is who I am, and I feel comfortable with this. - Manuel
7. When I realized I was different, I spent a lot of time in silence. Because my family is not totally closed-minded, but is very conservative. I mean, I said something when I was 17 or 18. Many years later. But my friends, at least my close friends, female and male, always suspected because it was an obvious behavior, but they never talked to me about it. It was like a ghost. It took me a long time for me to say it... to accept who I was. - James
8. I do remember my first experience I locked myself at home for a week. I felt I had done something wrong. I even threw up. I was too nervous. He even invited me to dinner afterwards, and I couldn't. I needed to go home. I needed to throw up. - Nathan
9. My school experience made me change for good. It forced me to mature before I was supposed to. I have become much stronger; I have defined myself and am able to be who I am. It made me see the life I did not want to live, a life of hiding, of pretending. It made me see it's not what I wanted, I did not want to hide who I was. - Boris

3.- Rock Bottom

"A fleeting thought"

1. There was a time when I felt depressed, I wanted to die. I remember searching for suicide videos and things like that. That was the most catastrophic period, when I wanted to change schools. – Boris
2. I've been thinking about suicide since I was 12 years old. I have this tattoo here to cover up my scars. I have a scar here, and another one here, I cut my legs all the time, I still do it today. That's how I relief stress, I'm no longer smoking, so I needed to find another way. And I do it like that. I cut my leg. Not a lot, but I do cut myself. As soon as I see blood y clean myself up and I regret it. - Aaron
3. I thought about suicide many times. But it was a stupid choice. Yes, I tried to do it, but it was a stupid choice. Think about it. I'm going through this, and then I die, and they will cry for me a couple of days, and that's it. They're not going to cry for me forever, and I'm not going to gain anything from that. - Julia
4. I never contemplated suicide. I want to accomplish many things in life. I know I have a future and I want to fulfill that future. I want to have a family, I want to be successful, I want to have many puppies, things like that... (I want to) enjoy life. You can't just squander your life and everything you have, you have to have something good, you can't just look at what is wrong. – Martha
5. I began having suicidal thoughts at around age 17 or 18. – Grace
6. I thought about suicide once, after the second time my dad beat me. That time he hit me real hard. So my boyfriend broke up with me. It got to a point where my mom simply did not get involved. She said she was not going to get involved. And I thought about it. I thought, if I cannot even be with my family or the person I want to be with (romantically involved), then I am here to make others happy, but I myself cannot be happy. I told the school psychologist and she told my dad, but I obviously now understand why she did. – Manuel
7. It was not like I meditated about how and when I was going to do it. I was so emotionally loaded with work and all that, so I think it was just that, a fleeting thought. - Fabio
8. I thought about suicide. Once. It was just a feeling. And it did not last long. I was like, I can't deal with this anymore. But yes, I thought about it. I didn't tell anyone about it. – James

4.- Coping Mechanism

"Despite being told I couldn't, I found the way."

1. Growing up in system that excludes you and becoming resilient... sometimes I ask my friends how it was that we made it. – Grace
2. I don't think a school experience can shape you. You shape yourself with what you live at home, who you really are, who you want to become, and your projections. I mean, not because I was treated well in school I am happy, and not because I was mistreated in school I am sad. – Martha
3. Music was the only thing that soothed me. I would get home and lock myself in my room. I wouldn't even say hi to my parents. It was an argument where I had no voice. They wouldn't listen. It was as if I talked and there was a mosquito talking. So, I headed straight to my room. And if I insisted on being heard, I would have to leave my house. – Julia

4. After all the beatings, I pulled through. That's the only positive thing I can find from this. Despite being told I couldn't, I found the way. I pulled through. I cried. I cried a lot. I still do today. – Aaron
5. I wasn't going to die. I wasn't going to die. I learned the value of money early on, I learned what taking care of a house meant, I was an adult when I was supposed to be a child. I did take on smoking early. I have been smoking since I was 13 years old. If someone tells me I can't, I find a way to do it. – Aaron
6. There was a song that said 'swimming among sharks you'll definitely get bitten,' that's what my life felt like, that was my life. I was swimming among sharks and I needed to be on the defensive. – Nathan
7. I isolated myself from everyone. I was by myself. When I graduated, I mean, the last three months of school, I stopped hanging out with everyone. I didn't want people to distance themselves from me, so I distanced myself from them. If these are my best friends and they took it this way, what will happen when the rest of the grade finds out? – Nathan
8. I respect to be respected. If you respect me, I'll respect you. And my personality is not one of imposing or disrespecting anyone. I have always been very respectful of other people's privacy. – Manuel
9. My dad taught me that no one had the right to disrespect me, even if they were adults. We're both human beings, completely equal, we can have totally different views, but we're equal, we're both people. So you're going to treat me like a person and I'm going to treat you like a person. We're going to respect each other mutually. – Alana
10. I think I was sad most of the time (in school). I am going to say depressive, to say it like that. It was not because people bothered me, but because I did not feel comfortable with who I was. And I tell you I had a good self-esteem, but at the same time I had my bad moments, which were most of the time. It was more like I wanted to fit in, to belong, I wanted not to have to sit a certain way, talk like I wanted to, without having to force my voice, and be able to be myself. That made me tense. They told me I always had my bookbag on my stomach. I never realized that. I think I was trying to hide myself. This way they would only see my face. – Leo
11. My good friends (helped me through). I love the movies, too. I'm a cinephile. I had many hobbies, I could spend hours watching a movie I liked. – Fabio
12. When the bullying happened, I tried not to pay attention to it. I heard it. They told me I needed to stand up for myself, and I was like no... but it hurt a lot. I mean, I had to think things through to not be misinterpreted. But I think that was my defense mechanism, not talk back. Not answer anything, and let things happen when they were supposed to happen. – James

5. Desire to Be Happy and Whole

"I want to give. I want to do something that makes me feel whole."

1. I don't want to be rich. I want to give. I want to do something that makes me feel whole. – Grace
2. I am doing what I am called to and what I want to do... yes, I am happy. I would say I make decisions with fear but with a fear that pushes me instead of stopping me. And I take risks. I have found a partner that gives me peace. I did not want to have debts and I have them. But, can I pay them? Yes, I can. I am a little overweight, but I do not have a health condition that

stops me from flourishing fully. I have a place to sleep, later today I am meeting with a group of friends to drink a beer, I can go home and watch Netflix or read, and I wake up every day with the satisfaction of knowing I positively impact the life of at least one person, and I feel comfortable with who I am. So yes, I can say I am happy, with all of life's ailments, but totally happy. – Grace

3. It was uncomfortable at the beginning. If we went to a (beach) resort, it was uncomfortable for me. Staying in the same room, those things affect you. They don't anymore, but at the beginning, like I told you, I saw these things as wrong, I was scared. - Boris
4. I had a girlfriend, it was totally different. It was something I felt comfortable with, I talked to people about it, I went out with her, I didn't have a single care. My friends never judged me. – Alana
5. People are happy when do what they want and love themselves. – Martha
6. I need to revalidate my career in the US, I want to have a family. I can't even adopt in DR. I don't know if you get me... it's a lot of things, it's tough. I think about marriage, I think about having a house, a life, about having a basically normal life. A life free from stereotypes. I see myself with a good job, kids, a house, and I don't feel the Dominican society can offer that. I need to run away from this society. Let's be honest. - Boris
7. All I know is I'm going to be happy. Always. Many people have told me that. That despite everything I was going through, I always had a smile on my face in school. And it has always been that way. I like to share good vibes, regardless of what is happening. – Julia
8. I don't know what my profession is going to be when I grow up, because life changes too much and one never knows. But I know I've somehow influenced and will continue to influence many people. - Julia
9. I am the happiest I have ever been. My voice no longer sounds feminine, my body does not look so feminine, yes, I still have big hips, but that will change, God willing... I stopped treatment because I don't want to stay alone. I want to have my children. I'm thinking about opening a "Gofundme" account to see if I can do in vitro fertilization (IVF). I can't conceive naturally, I'm infertile, but that has always been a dream. Some people dream of going to college, I dream of having a family. - Aaron
10. The weirder they are, the more they catch my attention, and the more I want to help. I found out late what freedom of speech meant, what human rights were. How my rights were being violated at school, at the doctor, everywhere. Now that I know what gender identity is, I want to help others know what all of this is too. - Aaron
11. I think I am much more stable than a couple of years ago. I think I now surround myself with people who somehow, I do not need to pretend, I mean, I am completely open with them." I feel extremely comfortable. I feel like, I feel a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders, its like now I can really be me, without fear. - Fabio
12. I work in defense of youth and women. I work with social media campaigns that help spread awareness about sexual harassment. I want to do a master's degree, work in what I like, social work, social politics, that part. I also like research. I mean, social research, I think that's something I'm always going to do. - Fabio
13. I think I'm completely happy. Everybody has problems. But I think that problems have solutions, and if there's no solution, then they stop being problems. - Fabio
14. Sometimes I feel like I'm missing out. But it could be because of what I just said, that I repressed it so much or because I did not experience it then I don't have a way to connect with a group of gay guys now. They are way ahead of me. I still feel uncomfortable, and they are

all happy. I'm not there yet. Sometimes I say, 'shit, I'm missing out.' and then I get together with a group and it's like... I don't want to do that... because I do not feel comfortable. - Nathan

15. I love the 'It gets better' campaign. Because it does, it totally does. I never thought I would be successful, I never even knew what I liked, I did not know myself, I did not know what I was capable of, my abilities... I thought I was nothing. - Nathan
16. I would like to be looser around my sexuality. Not care so much about things. Because I mean, I'm open, I'm not scared to say who I am, I'm gay and I have my preference, but I still have some fears, you get me? I repress a lot. I mean a lot. The James I want to be is much happier, much more dynamic, a James that does not overthink things so much, and with much more family affection. - James
17. Respect is the number one word for me. When a person lives with respect and humility, that person does not lack anything else. - James
18. I'm not a person that tends to support the LGBTQ+ community, I do not believe in supporting the community. I think it's me. I respect everyone's sexuality but I do not believe a lot in that. But I wanted to support somehow, know that my grain of sand will help somehow. - James
19. Let's say I do feel repressed, but one has learned to behave. I know how to manage myself in the environment. - Manuel

II. Adjusting to Home Expectations

1. Suspicions of a "different" identity

"Of course they knew, even if, I don't know if that's a phase, but they simply did not accept it or did not want to see it."

1. Of course they knew, even if, I don't know if that's a phase, but they simply did not accept it or did not want to see it. Just like it happens to us, at first it is hard to accept it, one tries to hide it, one thinks it is wrong. They would ask me since I was young if I liked boys or if I wanted to go to a psychologist. Our parents were also young once. If they noticed feminine mannerisms in me, they tried to change that. Every time I would talk, my dad would tell me I spoke weird and asked me if I wanted to visit a psychologist. I remember my mom telling me as a child that if I liked men she was going to die. You don't tell those things to a child. - Boris
2. I feel I am not so effeminate. Because when you grow up in a conservative family, your parents try to masculinize you. Don't walk like this, don't talk like this, don't wear this. Ever since I can remember my parents would call me out for this. - Boris
3. They imagined it. I imagine they thought I could be (gay), but they already knew when I told them. There was crying involved but it was more like 'oh, it's OK' (that I'm gay). They feared how I was going to be treated it, that's what they said. Yeah, right, they fixed it then but before they did say it (that being LGBTQ+ was wrong). - Amelia
4. They had yet to realize I was, because I still wore the clothes my mother bought for me. But as I grew older, they began to realize I was gay. Things got real for them. - Julia
5. I imagine she did. Listen, parents prefer, at least in my mom's case, not my dad's, because my dad asked, but they rather not ask the question because they do not want to hear the answer. - Grace

6. Growing up I heard homosexuality was wrong, that it was a sin. But I never cared about what other people thought about me. If I'm happy, and this is me, I won't go around pretending to be someone I'm not. – Martha
7. My mother is extremely religious. - Grace
8. My parents used to go to church. They went to church on Sundays, and they haven't gone for several years. Not because of this, they stopped going, but the Lord has always been present in their lives. I live close by to my grandparents, they read you the Bible, they're normal Christians. - Manuel
9. At home... we never discussed (this) at home. It was super taboo. My family is catholic, especially my mom. She goes to church and all that. and although now she is very flexible, she continues to go to church. - Fabio
10. My mom began sensing things. She would not let me go out, she would tell me not to be surprised if I came home and found myself locked out. The day I was outed, I came home and saw my other sister crying in the floor, begging her to not kick me out. But I knew it was going to happen. So I packed up my things. - Nathan
11. I do remember I had a very dark period, I don't know if it was 100% that, because I also had many problems with my dad. During that time my mom and dad were practically at war, I remember it was like... it was dark. But I don't know if it had to do with the fact that I was gay. Maybe it had to do with the relationship with my dad... I do know our relationship would've been totally 100% different had I been straight. I had certain respect, not respect, but I never got 100% close to him because I knew I was gay, so I knew eventually it would be a problem. He's a prominent figure in the country, so I knew eventually it was going to be a big problem. Because of that I always kept my distance. - Nathan
12. They never really let me be who I was meant to be. They did not prohibit me to play with girl toys, but they would tell me it was wrong and that I shouldn't do it. It was not prohibited. It was this fine line between yes and no. - James
13. My siblings heard things from their friends, or the rumors that are always in school, when they begin saying, 'oh, that kid is gay.' And all of us were in the same school. In my previous school they would always tell them (I was gay) too. – Leo
14. I realized I was effeminate since young. Because I saw how my dad will always tell me not to sit that way, stand up straight, don't yell, don't play with this, play with this, do not get together with your (female) cousin. He would not let me see her sometimes. – Leo

2. Seeking Approval at Home

“...everyone wants to have a relationship with their father, even if they have been abandoned.”

1. At the beginning, I was afraid. My biggest fear was that my family would find out from someone else. I wanted them to hear it from me. That was my fear. I did not want them to catch me in a lie. I did not want them to lose their trust in me. That is something I never want to see happening. Ever. - Alana
2. I do not think that what most affected me has been (the lack of support in) school, but my family. When you feel your family is rejecting you, pressuring you, I think that is the most painful of all. – Boris
3. I'm still sometimes depressed, sad, uncomfortable. This situation makes me feel a little bad. Not a little, very bad. – Boris

4. My dad and I have the same career. I'm working with him. I don't want our relationship to suffer. I'm trying to bond with him. I know he knows, but he does not want me to... I mean, he knows, but he does not want to see me with a boyfriend. - Boris
5. I tell my mom every time we get into an argument. I tell her I did not know love in her house. I knew love on the streets, where she put me. The day I have children, they are going to know what parenthood really is. - Aaron
6. I mean, in a family reunion, my family already know, but I many times I can't be the James I really want to be. - James
7. Even my dad, the other day I wore my hair up, and he snapped at home. He told my mom that if she had been awake at that time this would not have happened. I felt... I remember... it had been so long since I felt like that. and that was, I mean I still get the chills, because, that was the other day, a couple of weeks ago. I had my hair up; I did nothing wrong. I wore a ponytail, and he snapped because of that. - Leo
8. He's my dad, even if I resent him or hate him for it. Whatever. I love my dad because he's my dad. I want to have a relationship with him... everyone wants to have a relationship with their father, even if they have been abandoned. - Manuel
9. It took my mom three years to accept my identity. I don't remember how long exactly, but I do know it felt like 10 years. It was horrible. I don't remember clearly but I felt resentment, rage, because I felt alone. And every time I talked to her, she compared me to others or criticized me. - Martha
10. My dad is in denial. He does not want to accept reality. I wanted to modify the company logo, and he told me he did not want me to use gay colors, *colores de pájaro* or *colores de maricon*, but then he would tell me not to feel bad because I wasn't like that. His eyes don't want to see the truth. That makes me feel horrible. With my mother too. I think they're at a time where they still have hope I'm going through a phase. They make certain comments that don't make me feel good, they don't make me feel comfortable. So I'm waiting, I am working to achieve certain independence. - Boris
11. I lacked the support at home. Because that's where you spend your day. I mean, you do so in school, but you know, on weekends, afternoons, and that. At home is where I am. - Leo
12. It was the first time I had heard him say something like that and it hit me hard. At the end of the day, parents should support your decisions because they raised you. - Leo

3. A Tough Time Coming Out

"Let's see how you take this up with your mother..."

1. My mom tells me my lifestyle is against her religion. But my mother has never gone to church, and that's her excuse. That God created man and woman. - Aaron
2. The teacher then told my mom, and then the psychologists and psychiatrists began. I... I have spent more time visiting psychologists and psychiatrists than any other place in my life. My mom insisted on keeping me occupied so I wouldn't think about that. I was enrolled in every possible class in the afternoon. I went from school straight to karate class, then to English class, then homework, then bed. I had no free time. At age 15, she enrolled me in modeling class. She thought that would 'fix' me, but I ended up liking girls even more because I saw them naked. - Aaron

3. My parents found out I was a lesbian because the school called them. – Julia
4. My father told me. You are my daughter, I am going to love you anyway. I am afraid of how society will treat you. Let's see how you take this up with your mother. – Grace
5. My mother did not know how to handle it. I don't blame her. She hit me. My brother had to take her off me. She was frustrated because she understood it was a choice. She felt I was doing it on purpose. She lost control. People lose control a lot with things they do not understand. Sometimes I ask myself what would have been of me had my brother not been there. Because obviously, I never fought back, I was not going to hit my mom. – Grace
6. I began rebelling and she took me to a therapy with a very religious person hoping that person would convert me. – Grace
7. I tried drugs, alcohol, I would go to school drunk. I was not accepted at home so I spent little time there. – Grace
8. When I told my mom, she got depressed, but she's fine now. That was a long time ago. My sister was mad at me because I told other people first, and my brother told me he knew. My dad, he acted normal. – Martha
9. When we broke up, it was a catastrophe in my life, but it was a catastrophe I learned a lot from. I learned who I really was, I got to know myself a lot better, and it resulted in a better relationship with my family members. Because after that, I sat down with my dad. I came out. He said it was OK and asked me if I was happy, and I said yes. He then told me he was not going to ask if I cared what people thought about me because he knew the answer was no. – Alana
10. They took it well and not so well. My mother was a bit sad; she was depressed for some time. My dad, I thought my dad was going to act differently. But he did well. He expressed his support; he saw it more normal. It took my mom a while to adapt. – James
11. They would tell her, and one day we were arguing, and we began talking about the topic, she asked me to dinner. And that was it, we started talking about it. And really, I thought my mom was the one who was going to take it worse, that's why I didn't tell her. It was such a relief, because you know, the comments that they make at home, about people they know, they would always say, 'ah, that kid is *mariconcito*, don't hang out with him.' And I would always tell myself I did not fit in. But she took it very well. The next day I went on a trip and she wrote me every day, 'I'm your mom, I can't reject you, I can't believe you thought I would, but I understand.' She was very understanding, really. – Leo
12. I did not come out of the closet, I was outed. Someone called my dad and told him. Automatically my partner became the bad guy. They thought he "converted" me, that made them even madder, that I had been in a relationship for over half a year. That was summer before college. – Nathan
13. This sister was the one that best took it. She obviously had something to say, she said my world was going to be different. The same thing my dad said... that she was afraid of what people would do to me with so much hate in the world. But she was the one that best took it. I remember she asked my mom if she would rather have a sick son than a gay son, and my mom didn't answer. She said it was not a disease, that there are worse things that can happen, that I could be dying. But my mom didn't care. The next day I finished picking up, a friend lent me her car, and I went to live with my dad. When I was leaving the house, my mom told me: 'good luck with your stepmother!' – Nathan
14. I think my dad took it well. I was sent to a psychologist. They discussed sending me to rehab. Two months later, my mom was still in denial... she told the psychologist it was just a

phase. She told him I never showed interest in anything, and that gays usually do. She said gays are not supposed to be like me, that gays were flowers. And I wasn't a flower. The psychologist would tell her she needed to understand I was gay, and that was that, and she was crying sitting in the sofa chair. The psychologist suggested I should be hospitalized. I was not expecting this at all. – Nathan

15. She (the principal) called my dad. My dad! My dad is not emotionally intelligent. The next day, he yelled at me and hit me hard. He hit me so hard he cut my lips. I was a child, and all I wanted was my dad to accept me, to love me... I mean, I did not know what to say. I guess when you are going to tell your parents you need to be confident and you need to have a good argument. I did not get a chance to do that. – Manuel
16. When my dad hit me, the time I bled, my mom called me and asked what happened. I told her. And she said that I needed to understand how my dad was, that she didn't have to tell me how he was. At certain point she told me that I was doing something wrong. And I told her *she* thought I was, but that I didn't. and that I knew I wasn't going to change her mind. She told me that my dad was emotionally stupid. – Manuel
17. If it were for her (my mother), I would be married to a woman and everything. – Fabio

3. Calm After the Storm

“Everything is fine now, really.”

1. I am privileged. I was not kicked out of home, I went to a private school, a private university, my mother could pay for a psychologist, I have always had health insurance. – Grace
2. My parents don't get involved. They tell me I'm an adult, to make my life outside our house. 'Don't do anything we do not like in the house and do whatever you want outside of it.' - Julia
3. I had to leave home at least three times. Sometimes I would go to my last psychologist and talk to her. She would let me sleep in her office. Other times I would go to my grandma's house. My grandmother would tell me: 'don't listen to your mom. I'm going to try and talk to her.' – Julia
4. My dad would sit with me and tell me I could like whatever I wanted, that I did not have to follow the masses. 'Those who follow the masses are idiots because they do not know what they want. You know what you want,' he would say. 'You don't need to move aside because you know what you want.' – Aaron
5. My brothers are “machistas,” just like my mom. For them, their minds can't grasp the fact that a person was born female but feels male. So I just let them be. They don't get involved in my life, I don't get involved in theirs. They continue to use she/her/hers pronouns, but I don't pay attention to them anymore. – Aaron
6. I like to be with my mom, not my family. I feel identified with my mom. I feel supported by her. My brother lives abroad, he comes and goes, my sister lives with us, but she comes and goes too. My dad is rarely home. – Martha
7. I have grown. I mean, during this period of my life, I have evolved. I have grown and learned to let go. I spoke to my father, with my stepmother, my family, with everyone, and told things as they are. My dad was supportive and told me the world was not going to end, that I was still his daughter and he loved me still, and told me if my mom was alive, she would be celebrating with me. – Alana

8. I talked about the negative things I heard about LGBTQ+ people in my family, but my family accepts it now. It isn't an issue. There are people doing much worse, that will never receive correct information from their family, so school is the only space to do so. – Amelia
9. I can't force my parents to receive my boyfriend in their home every two weeks, that's impossible and it's not correct. It should be slow. Because if you don't like a book and people are forcing you to like it, but you simply don't like it, that's how they are. Things should be done slowly, because every generation is totally different from the previous one. – James
10. I tell her: first, people can't tell... it's not like I'm telling everyone I see. I know what I can and cannot do in this society. And I also know how to stand up for myself. It's not that I'm going to be in the streets doing things like a crazy person. I need you to trust me. And we've been building that confidence. We're practically OK now. – Manuel
11. Maybe if I would've had support I would've been wimpy, I wouldn't be so... I don't know. I would've been more comfortable. – Nathan
12. I do know my dad often told me when I came out, that the moment I chose to come out publicly, my life would be harder. That if I was going to be a doctor, I had to be the best doctor. He told me I would always have to give more than others and work harder than others. So I don't know if because I repressed it so much I'm now at a point where I can't connect with anybody. – Nathan
13. He (my dad) is not a feelings guy. Not a words guy either. I take after him, I think. But he never told me it was wrong. He never asked me to reconsider. He was just indifferent. But for our dad, indifferent is good. Indifference meant 'I accept you, let's move on.' – Nathan

III. Adjusting to School Expectations

1. School culture, beliefs, and environment shaped school experience

"I've always thought schools should be a safe place for students."

1. School was a bit traumatic. It had its advantages and disadvantages. I went through a lot. It was a Christian school, and people were still very closed-minded in 2008. I endured a lot of bullying until around ninth grade. Because it was a Christian school, the psychologist told me they were going to kick me out if I did not change. – Julia
2. It's a school for everybody. Any religion is welcome, you can't judge anyone, they tell you directly, you can't judge anyone because of their religion. If (in class) they were talking about religion you were not obliged to attend. – Martha
3. I always had a positive experience in school, although I didn't come out then, but I felt my school was the only place where I could be myself, where I could be OK. – Amelia
4. All the information I received outside of school was that being gay was wrong, and it was the opposite in school. – Amelia
5. If you were against any school belief, you were wrong. Not only regarding homosexuality, but with everything religion related. Many students disagreed, but not many stood up to the teacher. – Alana
6. I've always thought schools should be a safe place for students. – Alana
7. In a school run by Salesian nuns, where the school psychologist told my teachers to ask me if I was gay and if she could approach me, do you think I am going to feel safe in an environment like that? No. Of course not. – Boris

8. It was a taboo topic, because since no one knew about it, no one talked about it. And if they talked about it, they said it was antinatural, that it was a sin. And that was it. - Aaron
9. High school was a little bit more tedious. When they realized I was attracted to girls, they would send me to Bible class every single day and said I had a demon inside that needed to be pulled out of me. - Aaron
10. I have seen schools call parents and intervene in how they raise their kids. Nobody is born knowing, so they teach them. My own dad tells me my life would have been different if my school experience would have been different. He thinks it would have been easier. But no, it is not easy. For a gay person, or member of the LGBTQ+ community, it is not easy in this country. - Aaron
11. In this new school, we had religion class, but not exactly about the catholic religion. We learned about other religions and cultures. – Fabio
12. I was afraid both at school and at home. – Manuel
13. It was a Christian school, and it was a taboo topic. Taboo topics always get the attention of young people. - Manuel
14. You don't have a safe place in either place (at home or at school). - Grace
15. At the polytechnic, we had sex ed class. It was weird because it was not like God created man and woman class, it wasn't. It was very explicit, they showed us drawings of vaginas and penis, super well-drawn drawings. But no, they didn't talk about homosexuality. I feel it would have been too much, being it a highly conservative school. - Fabio
16. It was a catholic school, religion was full part of our days. At least once a week we would go to mass, we had religion class at least three times a week, taught by priests. In the morning after singing the national anthem, we would say a prayer, maybe not always, but almost always, that was normal. - Nathan
17. Most of the teachers were religious. There was a religion class that was mandatory. I always earned Cs because I did not like the class. I didn't work hard in it. In the last years, the class was about family. But they always had to intervene with Jesus, and its ok... it's not like... to me, religion has many positive aspects, morality, the values they teach, maybe some rules that we need to follow as humans. But it also causes many problems, especially within our community, and I don't want to be a part of that. something that is supposed to be so positive and so spiritual, I don't want to be part of that, I don't want to associate myself with that, to put it that way. – Leo

2. Teachers and Staff Turned a Blind Eye

"They turned a blind eye."

1. 1. My biggest problem at school is that I had nowhere to go. – Grace
2. I begged my mom to change me to another school. The bullying was unbearable, and neither the teachers or school administration did nothing. – Grace
3. I failed a grade. I even had a teacher that insinuated himself to me, he even talked about the color of his penis and what he did to girls in schools, I failed the grade because of that. I grabbed my cellphone and recorded him talking about all of that, and I took the recording to the principal. So, they kicked me out of school. School was almost over. I failed the grade. – Aaron
4. I had no say in anything at school, and they could easily kick me out if I said too much. – Alana

5. The (religion) teacher would say this is a sin, that it was very wrong, that LGBTQ people have attention deficit disorder or are missing a 'figure,' for example, if you're female and you're attracted to girls is because you're missing a maternal figure. I felt very bad when she said that, because yes, my mom passed away. But I always had a maternal figure. Many of them. If it were because of that, I have more maternal figures than anyone I know. It has nothing to do with that. – Alana
6. There was a girl in my school that came out. She told her mom and it was horrible. Her mom's reaction impacted me... it impacted me greatly. She went to the school's rooftop and said she was going to jump, and her mom told her: 'go ahead! Jump!' Her mom then sent her to live to the countryside all by herself. The girl was the principal's daughter. The principal always defended me, but not her daughter. – Martha
7. I tried without success to let school authorities know what was going on. But because more people were complaining about me, the school psychologist would tell me I was lying. That I was saying this to cover up what was really going on. – Julia
8. The other teachers in the school turned a blind eye, that's it. They never let me know they knew, but I knew they knew, they just never let me know. – Julia
9. The psychologist would tell me that I needed to become heterosexual or I would be kicked out of school or sent to prison. Other kids in the school, younger than me, were talking to me about the topic in private. She said I was negatively influencing them and that their families could say I was sexually abusing them. - Julia
10. They managed it terribly. They said it was my fault and responsibility because I kept silent about the situation. I obviously did not say anything because I was afraid. – Fabio
11. They tried to find a solution to the problem, but maybe they did not see what was behind the problem. There was no interest in knowing what was going on with the student nor what was their situation. I did not feel supported at all. - Fabio
12. The teachers turned a blind eye. Maybe to avoid conflict. There were many conflicts and they did not talk about any of them. - Fabio
13. The religion teacher welcomed me, she was a psychologist really... she was youngest one, she was more open-minded. She taught sex ed in school. She even mentioned homosexuality in class. She didn't say it was neither negative or positive. I remember the murmurs and giggles from my classmates when she did. - Fabio
14. The male teachers, for example the math or PE teachers, they're never OK with this kind of behavior in kids. – James
15. They turned a blind eye. I feel that's how it was. There were many teachers that cared about me, but they did not totally defend me... there were different situations. It was more like 'stop it, let's carry on with our class.' It was not like 'hey, come here, let's talk.' - James
16. The principal told me there had been other homosexual couples in the school and that things had gone smoothly with them. She said this type of relationship, if we were alone together, it could not be well seen. – Manuel
17. I wasn't ready physically or mentally to say... like... 'mom, dad, look, I'm gay, and I have a boyfriend and his name is this and that.' they took that away from me. In a few words, I was thrown to deep waters. – Manuel
18. I had a very bad experience. I can tell you I had no support in that school, not from my teachers, the school psychologist, it's a religious school, so they don't like talking about that topic (homosexuality). You can already know they did not share any information about it, they would not support you nor help you if you had a problem. – Leo

19. Every time someone mentioned homosexuality was always with negative comments. Not like what the teacher said, they were always more subtle, but the comments were always there. And I... obviously... there were times when everybody looked at me, when I was in eleventh and twelfth grade. Every time I heard the word "homosexuality" in school, it was followed by a pejorative comment. – Leo
20. I had a teacher who gave me a bad grade once. I mean, I assume it was because I was gay because he would always tell me I was too "*mariconcito*," that I was too feminine in front of everybody. I am, I have never paid much attention to what other people say about me, because I'm very confident. I don't need anyone to belittle me or try to make me feel bad because of how I act. But I didn't like it, because I worked hard in school, and seeing how... I think that could have affected my performance. This was stressful. I found this was very stressful. – Leo
21. They (teachers and staff) simply did not talk about it. – Nathan
22. The one person I came out to told everyone in school. The school psychologist called my parents and referred me to a psychologist saying maybe I was confused. They had taken me to five psychologists already in the last three years. The first two told my dad that I was confused because I was still a young girl, but as I grew older, and I was mentally more mature, the last two told him that I was not confused, that this was simply who I was. What's funny is the first three psychologists were Christian, the last two weren't. Then they stopped taking me to psychologists. We never went back because they did not agree with them. – Julia
23. I didn't feel support from anyone. I basically grew up alone, because my family, my friends, no one was supporting me, and it went viral in school. I mean, it was something new, and I was the center of attention, but in a bad sense. – Julia

3. Teachers and Staff Offered a Helping Hand

"I felt the support from some of them."

1. The teachers already knew me. They never told me they were disappointed of me because they knew how I worked, how I was with them and my classmates. They knew Manuel the person. I never had trouble with any teacher. – Manuel
2. There was a time when my partner did not want anything to do with me. He said we did not need to be close, that we did not need to hang out with the same friends... I was still in love with him, and it was shocking. He was so important to me, he meant so much to me, it was tough. I went to the psychologist... I talked with her a lot. I did feel she talked about her religion, and when she did, I did not pay much attention. But she told me she was going to guide me, but that she was never going to tell me to do this or that, because I had to respect her beliefs. I felt her office was a safe space, I never felt disrespected. – Manuel
3. Because it was such a small school, I felt the support from some of them, I won't say all. The female teachers supported me. – James
4. I had a teacher, whom I love and appreciate a lot, she was always with me in school. She was kind of a mentor. She always supported me. She would tell me 'don't pay attention to that (being gay). Work hard. I do not care who you are, follow your dreams. Do what you love.' And that always stayed in my head. - James
5. The teachers were very open-minded and did not judge anyone. – Martha
6. The first time I remember someone talked about homosexuality in school was in ninth grade. All my teachers would talk about that. For example, they would bring news to the classroom,

there was one female teacher that defended homosexuality vigorously. If someone brought the topic, the teachers would talk about it and all of them would defend homosexuality. – Martha

4. Bullying and Isolation from Peers

"The name-calling was always there"

1. I never fought back. I was hit a lot, but I never fought back. I was not taught to, I was not taught to be violent. – Aaron
2. I remember I only drew things related to blood and death. I wanted to kill the whole school because I was dismissed by everyone. I was called weird. I was called a monster. My dad was my only support. – Aaron
3. It was tough. But when I switched schools it got better. I felt less emotional pressure. I did not have the gay reputation in the new school. I tried, but I was unable to make friends then. I opened up more in high school. – Boris
4. They called me *maricón* and I had this reputation and had to leave that school. I just told her (his mother) I did not want to be there. – Boris
5. I was bullied a lot and I suffered a lot. I barely had male friends in elementary school. I always felt more identified with girls. It cost me a lot. I feel I tried, I tried to be close to my male classmates, I tried to cover up I was gay. But I felt rejected. As soon as I got close to them they would call me *maricón* and tell me to leave. I did not fit in. it was very tough for me to make friends as a teenager, too. – Boris
6. In elementary school, there have always been discussions, always will be. Gossip will always be present. They called me *maricón*, *pájaro*, they said I slept with men. But that was it. Nothing major. – Boris
7. Because of my gender expression, they started bullying me, because I was supposedly a lesbian. – Grace
8. That was my breakdown moment. I told my mom I wanted to switch schools and she did not understand why. We never had the conversation either. – Grace
9. I think this is one of the most emotionally difficult periods in adolescence. – Grace
10. I did hear comments like “*pájaro*,” blah blah blah, but I never saw it as an attack to me. – Amelia
11. I was threatened constantly. But I couldn’t do anything. It wasn’t something I could change. But I had to adapt. The insults, the beating, that was normal for me. – Julia
12. I am not a person that’s easily humiliated. I may feel bad, but I won’t let you notice. I will never tell you that I’m upset if I know your purpose is for me to be upset. Because that will allow room for it to happen again. – Alana
13. When I finished elementary school, I think the bullying decreased, at least with my classmates it did. But I don’t think it decreased because there was more acceptance, but because I was able to adapt to the group more. I needed to adapt and I knew how to play their games now. The bullying was still there, but not as strong as before. They disguised it with jokes and sarcasm. It was not as physical. – Fabio
14. There were days that I would wake up and not want to go to school. I’d say I was sick. I would tell them I had a headache. I remember I missed school a lot, until they told me I always had a headache. – Fabio
15. The name-calling was always there, ‘oh, he’s gay.’ They used the words *niña*, *pájaro* and *maricón*. – Fabio

16. I was made fun of a lot. I was skinny, I had all the flags that I was gay. They mocked me, but not to a point they would say it to my face. I found out because my best friends told me. I think this had to do with them being upset with me... I'm sure they had to stand up for me sometime. I mean, they defend me and I'm not even being honest with them. – Nathan
17. I didn't feel I could tell someone I was gay, not even my best friends. My best friend found out because she hacked my email (laughs). And she shared a conversation she found between me and a guy with two other friends. But I never told anyone. That was soon after high school graduation. – Nathan
18. They would make feminine voices, they called me *pájaro*, they told me I should by bras. At that time I tried not to pay attention, but it was so many derogatory comments... – James
19. I noticed when I screamed, “me partía,” how they say here- in the DR, I would stay quiet for a bit, so no one would notice, or for them to forget about it. – Leo
20. In my previous school they would always tell me I was gay, and I didn't say anything. I stayed silent. Because I was afraid then. I am almost 20 years old. I said to myself I was not going to let this bring me down. It's the year 2019. – Leo
21. My first coming out experience was forced, like many people in this country. Regrettably, I can't tell you how many people have an experience like this. I say regrettably because one would like to go at their own rhythm instead of being forced to do things they don't want to. – Leo

5. A Shoulder to Lean on from Peers

"My friends supported me."

1. My friends never judged me. That was very positive for me. When I sat down with them and told them, they took it well. They were like, ‘oh! That was it?’ I thought that was great of them. It made me feel much better. – Alana
2. I had a lot of support from my school friends. – Grace
3. I had never thought about it, you know, if someone sits on your lap it meant that you were dating, and this experience, but with a woman, in recess... having all that attention, but because my circle (of friends) was so open (minded), they did not care. They began to joke about it, like they would with any heterosexual couple, and it was the first time I felt normal, with my sexual identity. I was 16. This was, for me, a positive and beautiful experience, because I was very scared, but they were joking like with any other person, and I went from being bullied in eighth grade to feeling normal for the first time in eleventh grade. – Grace
4. They just knew. It always flowed. For instance, if there was a get together, I would attend with my girlfriend. – Martha
5. I had my first girlfriend when I was 15 years old. I took her to a get together. No one said anything. Not ever. It depends. People who are bullied, it depends on who they are and how they act. If you allow it, if you allow the name calling, for example, “*pájaro*” or “stupid,” you allowed it. You're the one who decides whether you are going to be bullied or not. – Martha
6. It is very normal for a young person that is seeing a friend go through a process like that not want to get close or involved because they could result adversely affected. – Julia
7. I was the nerd that was always far away. Everybody had a group, everybody shared things, and I ate alone or with my best friend. If my best friend did not come to school, I was alone. It was always him and me everywhere. – Aaron

8. To us, teenagers at last, we stood up to her (the teacher). Technically she was right, if you do not agree with something at least tolerate it. But we did not see it that way, you tolerate a toothache. We asked if she would not let her child socialize with a gay person. This was very positive. – Amelia
9. Most of my classmates reacted well. They said they respected me and expected me to respect them, because this (an openly out gay student) had not happened in our grade yet. I was like ‘OK, don’t worry. I understand.’ – Manuel
10. My best friend has been my best friend since forever. We went to school together and graduated together. She always had me present. She has always been a strong woman, and she always stood up for me. Always. - James
11. My two best friends looked at me and their mouths fell open. At least I have friends who stood up for me. They say I didn’t have a voice and they used theirs to talk, to maybe make, change, argue about what the teacher said. I am very thankful for that, really. I had friends who were supportive, that were always there. They always stood up for me. After I started saying I was gay, if anyone said anything to me, they always defended me. I’m very anti-conflict, very peaceful, I don’t like to argue about something that is mine, not anybody else’s, with people who shouldn’t be saying things like that. so I always decided to stay silent. Sometimes people say that’s the best choice, but to me there are times it isn’t. – Leo
12. The first time I came out without being forced was to a friend who is also gay. I told him in confidence, everything flowed perfectly... I felt great and did not feel burdened at all. – Leo
13. It was also... it was not the fact that I was gay, but that I never trusted them enough to tell them. I feel they felt a bit betrayed. So they left me out. and I felt it. I realized it was because of that. - Nathan
14. Emotionally, I felt much better. I already had a good group of friends, with whom I also went out after school, I felt much more comfortable, I was doing better academically. There was bullying but I felt I could handle it; I was stronger and felt certain support from my friends. It was not as often, and it was only verbal. Maybe because I had certain support from my friends. But yeah, I felt stronger. – Fabio
15. I came out during college; that was where I really opened up. Although in school I knew my friends were going to be there, I personally did not feel comfortable yet. – Amelia
16. My school experience made me a tough person. I learned to deal with every type of person, people that were not raised like you, that do not see life the same way you see it. It impacted me greatly. I was exposed to so much mockery I don’t mind it anymore. I’m not afraid to speak up. I’m very direct. When you’re a member of the LGBTQ community, you live on the defensive. - Boris
17. I took my girlfriend to a school get together, they met her. They were super nice. I felt I could be myself with them. I felt good. Every person I told was a relief. – Alana
18. Some of my closest friends were impacted, they were surprised, they said that they could not tell I was gay, they thought I was lying... My female friends had even labeled me as the only boy who was worth something in my grade... But then it got to a point where we would joke about it (homosexuality). - Manuel

6. Identifying as LGBTQ+ Impacted School Performance

"Nothing interested me, literally."

1. I did not do well in school. But I was because I was lazy and elusive. I consider myself extremely smart. I don't know how I graduated. – Alana
2. My academic performance fell after I came out of the closet at home. - Grace
3. At the beginning I was a very good student, but with all these complications, I mean, psychologically, I didn't do well. I mean, I was not a horrible student, but I was not good either. I don't want to say this was the only reason I was not doing well. But I could no longer concentrate. If there was a difficult homework, a group project, I could not get together with anyone because they were going to treat me poorly. I don't know, it impacted me, it was tough. - Julia
4. Academically, I tried to be good but it did not work out that way. I worked hard sometimes. I never failed a subject. I didn't like any subject in particular. It was all the same to me. I did not like all subjects, but obviously, that's normal. I was good at sports, but not that good. I earned B's. – Martha
5. My sexual identity never affected my school development. I mean, it did impact my grades, but sometimes I did not hand in homework. I earned good grades because I paid attention in class. But during my last two years of high school, that was where, when... I felt it the most. – Amelia
6. I don't want to remember the bullying I was exposed to in elementary school. I did terrible in school then. – Boris
7. I was one of the best in my class academically. I'm not going to tell you I was the best, because I was not a dedicated student, but I was smart. People had certain thing with me... let's say, because I didn't study for a test and I passed with a good grade. I was not in the top three, it never interested me. I mean, I knew that I could do more, but it got to a point where I was comfortable. If I ever wanted to go the extra mile, if it was in me, that I thought I could do better, I would. - Manuel
8. Nothing interested me, literally. I mean, I began showing interest for things in college, because in school everything stunk, I didn't like anything, I didn't even like art, I mean, nothing. Being repressed also affected other areas, I was literally not into anything. I was in a music class, that's all I did. I played an instrument in the afternoons... that's all I did. I was not an A student, but I never failed a subject either. - Nathan
9. I was a very dedicated student. I'm not, to be honest, the smartest person in the world. But I was dedicated, I did my homework, studied for tests, and always held a good average. - James
10. I did... in ninth grade I was really focused on me. Developing personally and discovering myself. I did not do very well (in school). I mean, when I say very well, I mean I had a 3.6 GPA, and for me that was low. Then in tenth grade I did better. – Leo
11. My parents were like flexible regarding my grades. Yes, they were surprised I got bad grades, but it was not so... like they never asked, they told me to work harder. - Fabio
12. I was never chosen for group projects. I did everything by myself. This negatively impacted my academic development. - Aaron

IV. Adjusting to Societal Expectations

1.- The Experience was Different than the Espoused Culture and Religion

"That's part of the Dominican culture."

"The first commandment is love thy neighbor. And that's the first thing they do not do."

1. I don't like anything about this country. Not because of the country but because of its people and their mentality. I love the beaches, it's a beautiful country, but we are way behind in so many things. Our educational system is not good, neither are our politics, we have a high depression rate, and, overall, we're behind. – Alana
2. I realized that the more different you were, to what was standardized in school, at least regarding to gender, the worst you would be bullied. Everyone in the group who did not fit into the heteronormative model was bullied. - Grace
3. Even if I felt safe, I felt I had little to no information about this topic. I get the country we live in. But my school, it can be hippie, open, progressive, but it doesn't want to be labeled. It's not like they were going to have pamphlets that read "are you gay?" Get it? They do this in the US. They also have gay-straight alliances, clubs, not here. No, never. – Amelia
4. I think it's different between men and women because if a man is effeminate, they automatically think he's gay; but if a woman is a tomboy, they just think she likes sports. – Amelia
5. I grew up with all this repression. I criticized a person for being *amanerado*, I critized transsexuals, I could not see a transsexual person, I grew up that way, because my dad would automatically make (negative) comments about them. I grew up with all that, but I have been changing my attitude. It has been an adaptation process. My partner has influenced me a lot. He's completely accepting, so I've had to adapt this last year. Imagine, going from nothing to everything. I went from being a person who basically was repressive to a world of complete acceptance, I've been changing how I see everything. - Boris
6. I was discriminated against in all the schools I went because of my sexual preference and my gender identity. - Aaron
7. No one told me what this was. I learned later that I had the right to an opinion, to express myself, that nobody can tell you what to do or not to do, that this is a country with free speech, that I had rights, human rights, and that they were being violated, in school, at the doctor, everywhere I go my rights are being violated. – Aaron
8. I'm always scared. I'm scared to walk around. I always say when I leave my house, I'm leaving alive, I hope to come back alive. There is too much homophobia and hate in this country, especially towards trans* individuals. Trans* people are being killed, especially trans* woman. There has not been a trans* man killed yet, I hope I'm not the first. - Aaron
9. The point is I don't want to be in DR. Not because I repress myself, but because I think my rights won't be respected in this society. It's unfortunate, of course, I'm even ashamed to say it, but I'm telling you what I think. I mean, I don't think I'm ever going to be able to marry my partner in this country. I don't see same-sex marriage happening in the next 50 years. I hope they prove me wrong. In other countries you have the right to get married, to health insurance, it's a lot. There are many benefits that are not available in this country. - Boris
10. My dad's biggest worry was society and how society was going to treat me. - Grace
11. They mocked others saying "*maricón*" and all that, but that always been there.... It has always been around. Even to this day, I use it to joke around with my friends. But that's part

of the Dominican culture, it's always going to be present. I paid no mind to it, I never thought of it as important. - Manuel

12. I'm blessed to work with many women... I mean, I feel they don't judge as much and do not need me to tell them I am gay. Men are '*machistas*.' I feel like I even have to dress differently if I'm going to be surrounded by them at work. - Nathan
13. Toxic masculinity is still very prevalent here, and if you have a gay friend, they assume you're gay too. I have a couple of friends I consider close who are straight, I can tell you they accept me, I mean, they don't worry about that, that's how I think it should be. My gender or sexuality should not influence friendships, but unfortunately it does. - Leo
14. We live in a totally religious country and the church does not allow this type of orientation. We live in a "*machista*" culture, whether we like it or not our families carry this type of culture and one has to inhibit oneself in some things, I'd say. It's not well seen to go out in public and wear a pink shirt... OK, that's not as weird anymore but they still say it's not correct. That's wrong, but it's the society we live in. What would you rather do? Live in peace with everyone or be in constant conflict with the people you have around you? - James
15. My dad kept asking why I was studying hospitality at the polytechnic. It was considered a feminine area. When it was time to go to college, I wanted to continue with hospitality. As soon as I said that, my dad wasn't happy. He told me he was going to pay all that money for me to study *that*. He told me to find cheaper schools. Until I decided to switch to science, and because he considered it a career for men and not for women, he didn't hesitate. He paid right away. That's how his mind works. - Boris
16. Religious people really believe God is going to punish us. I mean, they really believe this is a sin. At the end, the basis for every religion is love thy neighbor. - Grace
17. Religion here is so part of what people are, there is no separation at all. People who are religious think everyone needs to be like them, that they need to live their lives up to their standards, I think that's wrong. - Amelia
18. My dad, no, I can't say he is religious. You know, all Dominicans think they are Catholic and never go to church, so no, they are not religious. - Boris
19. Religious people, the last thing they do is follow their Bible. The first commandment is love thy neighbor. And that's the first thing they do not do. We're supposedly the ones who are not Christian, and among us, we love each other, we defend each other, we stand up for each other. - Aaron
20. In school I was very close to the church and all that. they invited us to prayer groups and stuff done in school. the field trips we had were retreats and stuff. So it was like very present in our lives. - Nathan
21. My parents are religious, but they don't go to church. I distanced myself from the church because I felt a bit uncomfortable. Not because of the Bible and that... because I went and I felt like someone was going to pour holy water (on me), very dramatic (laughs). - Leo
22. The extremists hate, they hate homosexual people, they hate lesbians, they practically hate everyone that's not like them. When the bible says love thy neighbor. I think it's a verse that's misunderstood, I mean, people misinterpret it. Because when it says love, it is, I understand it means respect each other. Understand each other, understand their pain, understand their life, because that's going to come back to you. So let the other person do their life, and that person is going to let you do yours. That's it, everybody's happy. Respect the right of others—that's peace. - Manuel

2. Adjusting Personal Expectations

“I think that would’ve been nice and would have made my life easier.”

1. I understand it would have been good to say, I mean, to have a mediator between my parents and me. I mean, I now have one between my mother and me, and that’s why our relationship has improved. Someone to mediate between my parents and me, his parents and me, him and my parents, both of our parents... they were the ones who created this mess. – Manuel
2. I would have wanted my family to be like my boyfriend’s family. They’re from the US, so they’re more, not all of them, but they’re more liberal, they let him live his life, and that they believe their children are capable of making their own decisions. – Manuel
3. I would have wanted the non-religious class to talk more about respect and diversity. And of course, I understand that maybe teachers do not have the tools or knowledge, so, that too, they need to educate themselves about these topics, because they talked from their prejudice and heteronormativity. – Fabio
4. I would have liked for the religious school to be more open, to discuss homosexuality in sex education class, to promote respect of male and female classmates, to respect diversity, to be less strict academically, and not disregard a student if they did not do well academically... maybe more concern as to why the student was not doing well. I spent a long time without doing well and it occurred to nobody to ask me if I was ok, if I felt comfortable, or if things at home were ok. I felt there was no psychosocial support for students. – Fabio
5. I would have wanted someone to ask me what I thought about it. Someone to help me, to tell me something. The school psychologist would ask me questions, but to me, I’m not a person who likes questions, I want you to help me understand what’s going on, because sometimes I don’t know what’s going on with me. I would have wanted to talk to my mom, my dad, even my siblings. – Leo
6. I do not feel I lacked support in school, but it would have been beneficial. Having someone to talk to, that’s the best. Being able vent about what is happening at home and in your personal life. Having an adult let you know you can count on them if anything, that they’re going to be there for you no matter what happens at home or with friends, I think that would’ve been nice and would have made my life easier. – Leo
7. I think schools should talk about it. It’s important, especially when it comes to sexual orientation. It’s something schools need to talk about, because the world is open to it. It’s something that exists, and schools can’t just close their eyes to it. Schools should address it, should educate about it, not make fun of it or talk about it in a derogatory way. But address it normally, that’s all. – James
8. I would tell school authorities: talk to your students. Don’t be indifferent to who they are. We need substantial sex education, I did not even know how AIDS was spread when I graduated from high school, to name an example. – Nathan
9. I would have wanted someone to talk to me, at least a school psychologist. That’s what they’re there for, to say this kid has issues, let me help him. They never did it. Never. A psychologist that guides you, not one that says you’re wrong, that you can’t like boys, one that says it’s ok to be who you are, because just like I like blue, you can like green. This does not make you less of a person. I felt like the biggest scumbag simply because I was different. – Aaron
10. I would have wanted clear rules, a conduct code that would have led to a healthy school environment. I would have wanted counseling. I had nowhere to go at school. – Grace

11. I think if the school would have included LGBTQ topics as something normal instead of saying it was a sin or something taboo, it would have been much better. If they read about it, talked about it. I don't consider it OK for someone to feel scared or restricted anywhere. You spend more time in school than at home. You need a safe place to be, where you don't feel judged or like a freak, or wrong, or that you're living in sin because of your beliefs, or doing something wrong because you have a different point of view. That safe place should be school. – Alana
12. My school experience would've been different if the psychologist and principal wouldn't have focused so much in the fact the school was a Christian school. I mean, they did not have to support me, or talk about it, because if they don't want to talk about it its up to them, but if they wouldn't have been so closed-minded, they wouldn't have caused me so much suffering. – Julia
13. I think my life may have been different had I continued to go to therapy. I mean, it would've been different if someone who would have stopped and listened. Not just listen to what benefited them but try and understand the other person (me). - Julia

3. Denying of Self as a Survival Tool

"I needed to try to fit in"

1. I dated a girl. It was the most uncomfortable moment of my life. We went to the movies. That was it. I never tried it again. No. I felt like a hypocrite. I felt bad. – Boris
2. I no longer feel I live on the defensive, but in high school I did. I had to sit down a certain way, stand up a certain way, talk a certain way. If they said something to me, I was prepared to answer. - Boris
3. It still happens sometimes. When I go to a new place, that I don't want to abruptly say that I am gay. But I remember, I can tell you I've been with this feeling since second or first grade. It was in ninth grade when I told my friend that I felt I could let go. And despite I'm not very grateful for my forced coming out with all of my friends, I feel very good because I could... everyone tells me 'Wow! You changed drastically, because you're no longer scared to talk. I faked my voice, I spoke super... differently... I'm very dramatic, It was my perfect role, horrible, but perfect. – Leo
4. I would think, wow! I'm going to have to go through this again in school. I would go to school in a bad mood, get home thinking about things I did not have to think about, and I would get upset. I had to calculate exactly where I was going to sit in school, where we could eat lunch without being seen, tried to behave in front of people, not talk too much. I suffered. I was stressed out. - James
5. (In my last two years of high school) I was pressured because I already knew I was not attracted to boys. I mean, I tried, dating a guy, but I remember I was afraid others would find out. – Amelia
6. From my perspective, I needed to try to fit in, of course, because being in a heteronormative system, I needed to try to fit in. I needed to be like my other classmates, repress certain things, I mean, repress that part of me that I understood did not go well with others. It was a constant repress and a struggle to be who I am not. - Fabio
7. My cousins taught me how to put make up on, they bought me dresses, they even found me a boyfriend from our *barrio*, but evidently I never felt comfortable. - Grace

8. I was not open about my sexual identity in high school. Not at all. I mean, on the contrary, totally. I mean, I had girlfriends and stuff. But I knew I did it to cover up. I mean, that's why I told you my experience is different, because I've always been meticulous. I calculated every step I needed to take so that would not happen. I mean, I was aware of that, but I did every possible thing to not be discovered, to not be talked about. - Nathan
9. I led a normal life, with normal relationships. But when I began dating a girl, I realized what love really was and what it feels like to actually have your heartbroken. When I saw it was a completely different experience this time around, I questioned myself. I was doing it wrong all along (when I dated men). Now that I look back, I realize I was doing it because it was what society expected of me, what my friends expected, it was peer pressure. – Alana
10. I would think: wow! Yes, I'm (a) "*maricón*," but I'm a good student, I'm a good person, I'm responsible. Who I'm attracted to does not define who I am. This is a part of me but not all of me. After that, I've learned to be whatever he wants me to be when I'm around him. – Manuel

