Do My Teachers Care I'm Gay? Israeli Lesbigay School Students' Experiences at their Schools

Oren Pizmony-Levy
Amit Kama
Guy Shilo
Sari Lavee

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Oren Pizmony-Levy (E-mail: opizmony@indiana.edu) is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at Indiana University Bloomington. His research interests are Sociology of Education, Sociology of Social Movements and Mixed Methods and he has been active in the Israeli Gay Youth organization in recent years.

Amit Kama (E-mail: amit8860@yahoo.com), PhD (Tel Aviv University, 2001), is a media anthropologist and teaches at the Communication Department at the Academic College of Emek Yezreel. He is author of numerous articles and books and has been active in various lesbigay organizations since 1982.

Guy Shilo (shiloguy@post.ac.il) is a PhD student in the school of Social Work at Tel Aviv University. His research interests are sexual orientation development among lesbigay youth and therapy issues concerning lesbigay population. Shilo has been working as a social worker in various lesbigay organizations since 1996.

Sari Lavee (E-mail: dlavee@inter.net.il) is a social worker and a sex therapist. Among her main interest are human sexuality and relations issues. Lavee has been active in the Israeli Gay Youth organization in recent years.

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ABSTRACT. This empirical study explores the subjective experiences of Israeli lesbigay school students and their perceptions of the school climate. It provides descriptive data on different socio-demographic characteristics of Israeli lesbigay youth and presents the participants' experiences of school climate in the context of lesbigay issues. Further, it explores how students' characteristics, school environment, and school resources affect students' sense of belonging to school and sense of respect by peers. In order to delve into Israeli students' experiences, the authors conducted a School Climate Survey that was completed by some 300 participants—mostly online. Nearly half of the sample, which ranged in ages from 11 to 18, reported occasionally hearing homophobic remarks uttered by most of the teachers. One-third reported experiencing some form of harassment or violence by other students.

KEYWORDS. Adolescents, bisexual, gay, harassment, homophobia, Israel, lesbian, school climate

The experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (lesbigay) school students are attracting the attention of public policy makers, education systems, and other professionals. Studies have shown that these adolescents deal with a myriad of tasks and challenges concerning their sexual orientation: invisibility, absence of positive role models, lack of resources for coping with the task of self-acceptance, loneliness, and coming out (Fontaine & Hammond, 1996; Herdt, 1989; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998).

Since schools constitute significant socialization agents, they are sites where lesbigay adolescents' sense of difference and feelings of estrangement may be either intensified or weakened (Durby, 1994). Here one's situated self is particularly fragile and depends on many factors, including climate of tolerance and acceptance versus loathing and ridicule, information availability or scarcity, and teachers' sensitivity towards lesbigay difficulties. Furthermore, since adolescence, in general, is a challenging period of identity formation, during which homosexual identity formation adds additional stress, obstacles within schools, such as peers' harassment, may jeopardize lesbigay individuals' social integration, psychological well-being, and academic achievements (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995).

By and large, Israeli lesbigay youth face similar or even identical problems and issues like their contemporaries in other Western countries

(Ben-Ari, 2001a; Kama, 2005a). Despite a growing body of theoretical and empirical literature concerning gender relations, gender identity formation processes, and violence and bullying behaviors within Israeli schools (Rolider & Ochayon, 2005), Israeli lesbigay school students' experiences have been neither empirically studied nor well-documented; there are only a very few studies conducted on Israeli lesbigay youth, most of which are qualitative (Ben-Ari, 1995, 2001a; Efrat, 1999).

LESBIGAY SCHOOL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

Lesbigay adolescents grow up in a social environment based on heterosexual socialization. Unlike other minority members, these adolescents are socialized within a setting where other lesbigay individuals are absent or unidentified. There are neither beacons of hope nor role models with whom they can share their distress–for instance, in the case of victimization or violence–or emulate proper patterns of conduct against these obstacles (Debord & Perez, 1999). A sense of loneness and helplessness may result due to the lack of unmediated lesbigay or tolerant heterosexuals as social agents (Kegeles, Hayes, & Coates, 1996). Consequently, they often internalize prevalent heterosexist ideology and homophobia disseminated by parents, formal and informal educational institutions, and the media (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). This internalized homophobia manifests itself through anxiety of being identified as gay, bisexual, or lesbian, denial of self, low self esteem, and a sense of shame and loneliness (Sears, 1991). Indeed, lesbigay students address school counselors primarily for assistance with issues concerning poor self esteem and social isolation (Fontaine, 1998).

Notwithstanding these social and personal difficulties, research has shown that the age in which lesbigay adolescents identify their sexual orientation and disclose it to others is decreasing (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 2001). First realization of same sex attraction occurs at the average age of 10; first sexual activity with same sex partners occurs at the average age of 16; and adolescents disclose their sexual tendency to others at the average age of 17 (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Trying to explain the decrease of age in which adolescents disclose their sexual orientation, Savin-Williams (2005) argues that it is linked to the cultural shift in awareness of same-sex desire and the increasing visibility of alternative sexualities in the media, rather than biological-based mechanisms.

Although self-awareness about same-sex feelings and engaging in same-sex experiences are commonly experienced today by many adolescents, the school climate has not significantly changed. Schools are not safe places for lesbigay students. In 1999, Reis reported data from a survey conducted in the United States in which many students reported that they heard homophobic remarks from teachers and faculty members along with anti-gay remarks from other students. A 2001 national longitudinal study of adolescent health revealed that relationships with teachers played a leading role in explaining the school troubles experienced by lesbigay students (Russell, Seif, & Troung, 2001). Students who reported that their teachers were supportive were significantly less likely than their peers to experience school troubles. The 2003 Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004) conducted among 887 lesbigay school students in the United States also found that the majority of lesbigay youth heard homophobic remarks frequently, felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation. A large number of youth reported experiencing physical harassment, physical assault, and sexual harassment. Two years later GLSEN continued to track school climate in a national survey conducted among 1,732 lesbigay students from throughout the United States (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Results indicate no change in American school climate toward sexual minority students. Three-quarters of the participants declared hearing homophobic remarks frequently or often at school. Only 16.5% reported that staff intervened when they heard these remarks. Nearly two-thirds of the sample reported feeling unsafe at school settings due to their sexual orientation. Over a third was physically abused because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

These troubling findings are a world-wide phenomenon. A survey conducted in New Zealand in 2001 among 821 high school students and faculty members revealed that students' and teachers' attitudes were homophobic and many of them witnessed violent incidents against lesbigay students (Nairn & Smith, 2003). A recent study conducted in New Zealand among 2,269 participants (Henrickson, 2007), show that 98% of the sample (both males and females) were victims of verbal or physical abuse due to their sexual orientation. Most of the abuse was verbal. Ryan and Rivers (2003), comparing lesbigay students' status in the United States and the United Kingdom, report high levels of homophobia within school settings, as well as a lack of support resources for lesbigay students in the United Kingdom's education system. The authors suggest a resemblance between

victimization levels in the United Kingdom and the United States. In a qualitative study conducted within 25 schools in Scotland (Buston & Hart, 2001), researchers observed school climate and interviewed students and teachers regarding sexual orientation. There were high levels of homophobia within school settings, both among students and faculty members. Researchers report high levels of verbal harassment heard when they observed school activities. In a study conducted in 37 European countries (Takacs, 2006), findings indicate that schools seem to be the most problematic social context for lesbigay youth. Sixty-one percent of the 754 respondents experienced prejudice and/or discrimination in schools, much more than in family (51%) or in their community (38%). When asked whether they had experienced bulling or other forms of violence in school, slightly more than one-half (53%) of the respondents reported bullying, while about four of ten (43%) found prejudice or discriminative elements in the school curriculum. There are no comparable data available on Israeli lesbigay youth.

MENTAL WELL-BEING IN LIGHT OF HOMOPHOBIA AND HARASSMENT

School climate plays a significant role in the lives of lesbigay youth, allowing widespread violence against sexual minorities and conveying the message that lesbigay people do not deserve full protection (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003). Verbal abuse, physical harassment, and violence based on sexual orientation also correlate with psychological distress and have a negative impact on mental health (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). Compromised emotional health may last into adulthood and manifest in depression and suicidality (Rivers, 2001). Experiencing homophobia in school is associated with low self-esteem, increased likelihood of self-destructive behavior, and discipline problems (Murdock & Bloch, 2005).

The physical and psychological effects of severe violence or sexual assault are similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms and effects (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; Rivers & Cowie, 2006). Verbal harassment has a significant impact on individual's mental health as well, especially among lesbigay youth. Words like "faggot," "homo," "dyke," and "queer" are the most common form of victimization (Berrill, 1990). Anti-gay verbal abuse reinforces the sense of being an outsider, a member of a despised and devalued minority, and hence a socially accepted target for violence (Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 2003). Because lesbigay youth are

struggling with their sexual orientation, these homophobic remarks have a significant effect on their mental well-being.

The impact of homophobia and harassment on lesbigay youths' academic achievements has received little attention in the empirical literature. An early study by Remafedi (1987) found that 28% of participants left high school before graduating due to sexual orientation related issues such as verbal abuse and harassment. Kosciw (2004) found that the percentage of lesbigay students who were not planning to pursue post-secondary education was twice as high as the percentage in a national sample, explaining this disparity with the high degree of abuse and harassment lesbigay students experience through elementary and high school. Furthermore, Henrickson (2007) found that although anti-gay violence has shifted throughout the years from physical assault to verbal abuse, there was a connection between high rates of anti-gay harassment and lower levels of school achievement. The author suggests that one of the reasons for not attending school among young lesbigay students is the lack of social and formal support by teachers. Furthermore, students who disclosed sexual orientation earlier were *less* likely to attain similar educational levels and were *more* likely to have had experienced bullying. In sum, the web of challenges faced by lesbigay students impedes not only their academic performance, but also their emotional and social development (Russell & Rankin, 2005).

LESBIGAY YOUTH IN ISRAEL

Israel's judicial, legal, cultural, and health systems often follow the conditions prevalent in many other Western countries for lesbigay citizens. As of the mid-1990's, lesbigay movements and public and institutional awareness have developed markedly (Kama, 2000); among other expressions of the contemporary situation are openly-gay members of the Parliament and city halls, annual pride marches, sympathetic media attention, commercial venues in the big cities, and so on. Accordingly, homosexuality is not viewed as a disorder, sexual acts between two consenting adults (aged 16 and above) are deemed legal, and legislation has been passed to protect lesbigays from discrimination (Gross, 2001; Harel, 2000; Weishut, 2000). Aside from not being able to marry, Israeli lesbigays enjoy various non-discriminatory laws, regulations, and practices at the workplace and the military.[1] Gay bashing is probably the only feature, which characterizes

other countries (Butler et al., 2003; Herek et al., 1999; Holmes & Cahill, 2004, Walton, 2004), but is not common in Israel.

Although Israeli lesbigay youth face less formal restrictions and societal sanctions than previous cohorts thanks to political, judicial, and social developments of the past decade, this does not mean that manifestations of homophobia–such as shaming, violence, and bullying-have disappeared. Further, studies have shown that the experience of lesbigay individuals in Israel generally follows the same stages of development described in other Western societies (Ben-Ari, 1995; 2001a).

As part of the recent developments and in order to overcome heterosexism and external as well as internalized homophobia, several organizations have established groups for lesbigay youth. In 2002, the Israeli Gay Youth Organization was established, providing a home for lesbigay youth groups and helps over 500 teenagers every week. Recently, the Tel Aviv municipality opened a residential shelter for lesbigay youth who had run away or had been thrown out of their homes because of their sexual orientation.

Despite these social and cultural strides, Israel's education system draws little attention to lesbigay students and to issues regarding sexual orientation. In 1995, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport published two handbooks for teachers and school advisors: *Homosexual Orientation* and *AIDS: A Question of Life*. Although both issues are supposed to be integrated within the sexuality education curriculum, a decade later, most schools seem not to do so (Kama, 2005a). Efforts within the schools have come largely from non-governmental groups. In order to change the attitudes and improve the climate in high schools around Israel, HOSHEN (Hebrew acronym for Education and Change), sends a gay man and a lesbian who unfold their life stories and hold question and answer sessions with students in the classroom. According to the organization statistics, in 2002 only 30 schools used HOSHEN's services.

There, too, appears to be little headway in preparing the next generation of teachers. In a research conducted among faculty members of three academic departments in five Israeli universities (departments of psychology, education, and social-work), education faculty members had the highest scores in homophobia and heterosexism (Ben-Ari, 2001b).

Research conducted in Israel in the past five years indicates that harassment and bullying are a serious problem among children attending schools (Rolider & Ochayon, 2005). However, there has been no research into homophobic bullying just as there has been a total lack of empirical research regarding lesbigay school students in Israel. Thus, the aim of this empirical study was to explore the subjective experiences of Israeli lesbigay school

students and their perceptions of the school climate. This article provides descriptive data on different socio-demographic characteristics of Israeli lesbigay youth and presents the participants' experiences of school climate in the context of lesbigay issues. Further, it explores how students' characteristics, school environment, and school resources affect students' sense of belonging to school and sense of respect by peers.

METHOD

Procedure

The difficulty gathering empirical data of a representative sample of homosexuals is well documented (Harry, 1986; Savin-Williams, 2001). Socio-psychological characteristics—particularly fear of exposure and being in different stages of identity development and self definition-constitute a methodological difficulty to employ generalizable samples (Friedman et al., 2004; Savin-Williams, 2001).

Following the critiques and recommendations regarding research among lesbigay youth (Friedman et al., 2004), we utilized several strategies in order to recruit a relatively heterogeneous sample that encompasses the spectrum from "out" youth to those who are still questioning their identity, from youth who do not attend any social activities of the lesbigay community to those who are deeply involved. Two versions of the questionnaire were constructed: a paper copy was distributed to youth attending social groups of the Israeli Gay Youth Organization; an on-line version was published on four websites addressing lesbigay youth. We also used the snowball sampling technique, asking youth who attend the social groups and their counselors to refer others to the on-line questionnaire.

Measures

The questionnaire was based on the School Climate Survey employed in the US by GLSEN (Kosciw & Cullen, 2002; Kosciw, 2004). Most of the items of the original questionnaire were translated into Hebrew to which we added some new ones to better reflect local customs. The questionnaire was then pre-tested on a sample of 30 respondents. The final version (available by contacting the lead author) included multiple-answer and Likert-type questions, containing five parts: socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, sexual orientation); school characteristics (e.g., type of school, resource availability and accessibility to lesbigay topics); nature

and frequency of homophobic behavior of students and school staff; nature and frequency of harassment and violent behavior of students and school staff; sense of safety in school.

Based on the last section of the questionnaire, which dealt with students' sense of safety in school), two dependent variables were constructed that included 18 items. Exploratory factor analysis, utilizing Varimax Rotation, revealed two factors, which explained 46% of the total variance of the scores (see Table 1).

The first factor, identified as *Sense of respect from peers,* included six items such as "Other students at my school like me the way I am" and "Other students in my school take my opinions seriously." The internal reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.82. The second factor, identified as *Sense of belonging to school,* also included six items such as "I feel like a real part of my school" and "I feel proud of belonging to my school." The internal reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) also was 0.82. The factors' scores were computed as the mean of the relevant variables where every variable has the same effect on the factor score. The correlation between the two scores was mediocre ($r = 0.65$) but significant.

Table 2 displays definitions and basic descriptive statistics of the independent variables employed in the multivariate analysis. The first cluster of variables (student's characteristics) included gender, age, "outness," and membership in a lesbigay group. The second cluster (school's environment) included five measurements: homophobic remarks, homophobic atmosphere, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and degree of comfort talking about homosexuality. While the variable "homophobic remarks" reflected the general magnitude of homophobic remarks, the variable "homophobic atmosphere" evidenced the dispersing of these remarks in different locations within school. The other three variables reflected specific student's school experiences. Lastly, the third cluster of independent variables consisted of five different school's resources: books and information, access to Internet websites, guest lectures, collaborative school, and supportive teachers.

Questionnaires were distributed among youth attending social groups of the Israeli Gay Youth Organization during November 2004. The Web questionnaire was on-line from November 2004 through February 2005.

Participants

There were 298 valid questionnaires analyzed from the total of 426. Most of the questionnaires (89%) were completed on-line with the remainder

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics and Factor Loadings (Varimax Rotation) for Items concerning Students' Attitudes toward School

Item	Mean	SD	Factor 1 Sense of Respect	Factor 2 Sense of Belonging to School
Other students at my school like me the way I am.	2.85	0.89	0.75	
It is hard for people like me to be accepted at my school.^{R}	2.75	1.04	0.66	
I can really be myself at school.	2.26	1.03	0.64	
Other students in my school take my opinions seriously.	2.92	0.88	0.62	
People at my school are friendly to me.	2.87	0.79	0.61	
I am treated with as much respect as other students.	3.19	0.82	0.52	
I feel like a real part of my school.	2.67	0.91		0.75
I feel proud of belonging to my school.	2.41	1.04		0.74
Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong at my school.^{R}	2.40	1.00		0.66
I wish I were in a different school.^{R}	3.05	1.08		0.61
I am included in lots of activities at my school.	2.56	1.02		0.57
People at my school notice when I'm good at something.	2.75	0.83		0.52
People at my school know I can do good work.	3.16	0.79		
Teachers at my school are not interested in people like me.^{R}	3.13	0.82		
The teachers respect me.	3.04	0.81		
There's at least one teacher or other adult in my school that I can talk to if I have a problem.	2.86	1.05		
Most teachers at my school are interested in me.	2.68	0.94		
I feel very different from most other students.^{R}	2.54	1.06		
Initial Eigen Value			6.93	1.41
Percent of Variance Explained by Factor			38.50	7.86
Reliability (alpha)			0.82	0.82
Mean			2.80	2.63
SD			0.66	0.73

Note: N = 261; R = item was recoded.

by attendants of the youth groups. Two-thirds (67%) of the respondents were male, 31% females, and 2% transsexuals, ages 11 to 18 (M = 16.47; SD = 1.32). Eighty-eight percent of the sample were high school students (10th through 12th grades). Most (86%) were secular Jews[2]; 2% were

TABLE 2. Definitions and Descriptive Statistics of Independent Variables

	Description	Range	Mean	SD
Student's Characteristics				
Female	Yes = 1	0 – 1	0.31	0.46
Age	Years	11-18	16.46	1.32
In the Closet	Respondent has not disclosed his/her sexual orientation to anyone. Yes = 1	0–1	0.15	0.35
Member in IGY	Respondent is a member in Israel Gay Youth (IGY) organization. Yes = 1	0–1	0.36	0.48
School's Environment				
Homophobic Remarks	Mean of 5 items describing frequency of exposure to homophobic remarks: Ass Eater, Faggot, Homo, Lesbian and Queer. Scale: 1 = never to 5 = frequently. Reliability (alpha) = 0.81	1–5	3.12	1.01
Homophobic Atmosphere	Mean of 5 items describing frequency of exposure to homophobic remarks by locations: Cafeteria, Classrooms, Empty Classrooms, Hallways, Lavatory, School bus and School grounds. Scale: 1 = never to 5 = frequently. Reliability (alpha) = 0.88	1–5	2.86	0.96
Verbal Abuse	Scale: 1 = never to 5 = frequently	1–5	2.32	1.32
Physical Abuse	Scale: 1 = never to 5 = frequently	1–5	1.39	0.86
Degree of Comfort Talking about lesbigay Issues	Mean of 4 items describing the degree of feeling comfortable talking about lesbigay issues with different school staff: School's Counselor, School's Nurse, School's Principal and Teachers in one X one talk. Scale: 1 = not comfortable to 4 = very uncomfortable. Reliability (alpha) = 0.83	1–4	1.74	0.74
Resources in School				
Books and Information	Yes = 1	0–1	0.13	0.34
Internet Websites	Yes = 1	0–1	0.43	0.49
Guest Lecture in School	Yes = 1	0–1	0.07	0.24
Collaborative School	Yes = 1	0–1	0.09	0.30
Supportive Teachers	Yes = 1	0–1	0.26	0.44

Arabs.[3] The participants were dispersed among 62 cities and settlements around Israel; nearly a fifth lived in the major cities: Tel-Aviv (6.7%), Haifa (5.4%), Beer-Sheva (3.4%), and Jerusalem (2.3%). However, two-thirds (65%) lived in towns and cities that are classified at the higher categories of socio-economic levels (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004a). Sexual identity was distributed as follows: 51% labeled themselves as gay; 14% as lesbian; 21% as bisexuals and 14% as undecided. Out of the bisexuals about 52% were boys and 48% were girls. Girls tended to be self-identified in a wider range of categories as lesbian, bisexual, or undecided; whereas the boys mostly labeled themselves as gay. Approximately one-third were participating in social activities of the lesbigay community.

"Coming out" is not a discrete speech act but a life-long process. Thus, lesbigay individuals cannot be easily categorized into two distinct groups–that is, those who are "out" versus those who are not. Therefore, it was theoretically advisable and methodologically reliable to assess the degree of disclosure to various social circles. When respondents were asked to whom they had disclosed their sexual orientation, 85% reported they had "come out" to at least one person. Most (59%) disclosed their sexual orientation to their best friend, particularly to a female friend. Members of one's immediate biological family were next in turn; mothers were more often informed than other family members. About a fifth (18%) "came out" to one or more school staff. It is interesting to note that about a quarter were "out" to the entire student body.[4]

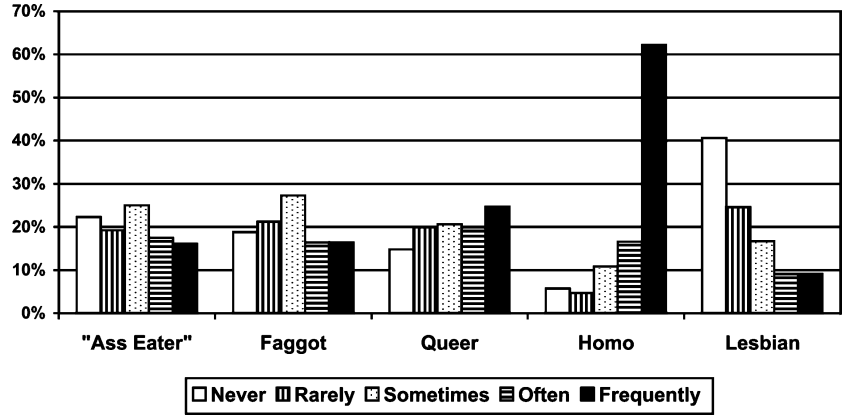
FINDINGS

Our analysis proceeds in two steps: First, we analyzed different facets of the school environment by using simple descriptive statistics. Secondly, we analyzed the correlations between students' characteristics, school environment indicators, and the outcome variables (students' sense of respect and students' sense of belonging). In the second step we used simple correlations as well as a multivariate analysis (Ordinary Least Square regression [OLS]).

Verbal Abuse and Physical Harassment

In order to learn about lesbigay students' exposure to verbal abuse, we asked how frequently they heard manifestly homophobic remarks as

FIGURE 1. Frequency of Exposure to Various Pejorative Utterances



well as the words "homo" or "lesbian" expressed as denigrating, shaming practices.

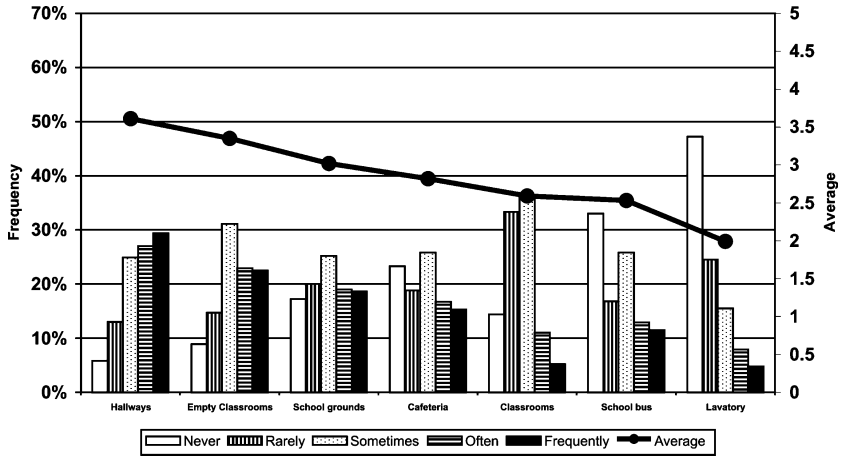
Figure 1 documents the extensiveness of verbal abuse experienced by lesbigay students.[5] A wide array of pejorative expressions were uttered by students in mediocre to high frequencies. In this study, we tried to follow the original American survey in spite of obvious inter-cultural gaps. As it would be rather impractical to translate most of them into English, the only idiom ("ass eater") we found important to leave verbatim.

Two-thirds of the respondents reported that the word "homo" was quite frequently uttered in a derogatory fashion. On the other hand, "lesbian" was not heard at all by 41% of the respondents. In addition, 79% of the students declared hearing many sorts of pejorative expressions such as "ass eater," "fag" (in English), "woman" (addressed to a boy), "sperm swallower," "sissy" and the like. A common denominator for all utterances involved shaming and depreciation of men who assume the receptive part in anal sex uttered by students in moderate to high frequencies.

Although there was a range of frequency in hearing specific epithets, homophobic comments pervade the school climate. In this survey, one-third of the respondents reported hearing homophobic remarks from *all* students in school. Another 41% heard them from most students.

Figure 2 shows the frequency of homophobic expressions uttered by students in an assortment of sites around the school. The findings are presented here as percentages of respondents (Y axis on the left) and as

FIGURE 2. Frequency of Exposure to Homophobic Utterances by Location

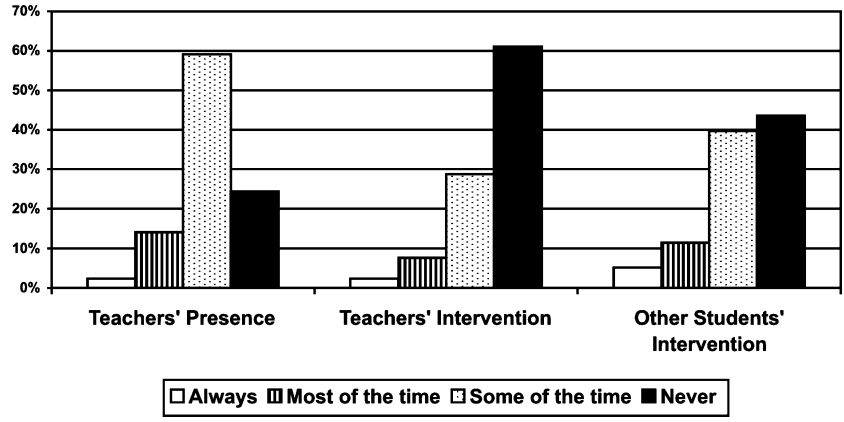


an average of frequency at each site (right-hand Y axis). For these Israeli lesbigay youth, the safest place is the lavatories; hallways are the most likely places where students will hear homophobic remarks (81% heard these comments usually or often). "Empty classrooms" denote the breaks in between classes and it is the second most dangerous place for verbal abuse, where one out of two of the students hear homophobic remarks usually or often.

There was also a significant gender difference in reports about hearing insults at the gym or on the sports field. Boys reported higher frequencies than girls: 42.6% of the boys and 25% of the girls used the "often" and "frequently" options. This difference is probably the outcome of the tradition whereby sports or athletics are commonly considered to be masculine activities. Therefore, boys who don't engage well in these activities are subjected to questions of their masculinity and sexuality in terms of pejorative remarks.

Although lesbigay students can hardly avoid hearing insults anywhere during their school day, this phenomenon is more prominent in places where school staff control is less effective. Relatively speaking, the classroom is a safe space for many lesbigay youth. However, most respondents reported hearing teachers and other school staff articulate homophobic remarks; only a quarter heard them "rarely" (16%) or "never" (8%). Furthermore, there is a positive and significant correlation between the reports:

FIGURE 3. Teachers' and Students' Presence and Intervention



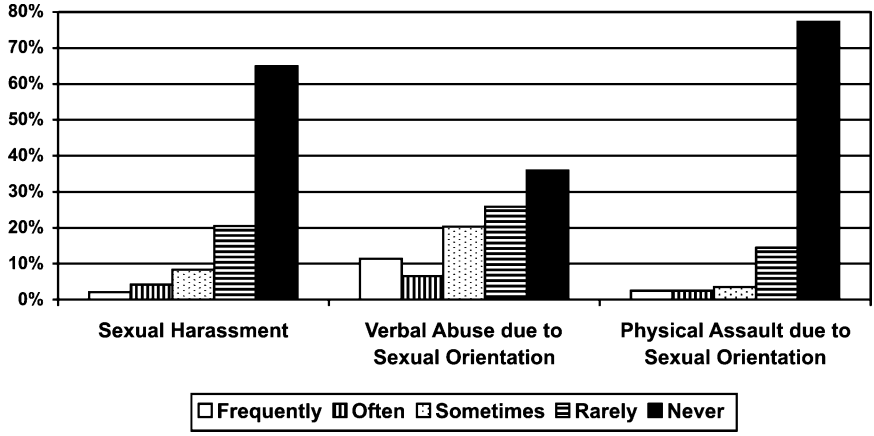
students reporting un-safe classrooms also reported hearing homophobic remarks (from teachers and staff) more frequently (when class is in session, $r = 0.37$ $p < 0.1$; when class is in break, $r = 0.46$ $p < 0.1$).

Following the previous question, we wanted to learn whether teachers' presence has any effect on students' verbal abuse. Figure 3 shows that about three-fourths of the respondents replied that teachers were present while homophobic remarks were uttered. Further, most of the respondents (58%) said teachers *never* intervened. However, when they did so, teachers reprimanded the aggressors (51%) or asked them to stop their assaults (8%). Only a fifth of the respondents reported that teachers used formal school sanctions such as firm reproach or suspension from school.

The "bystander" plays an important role in homophobic bullying and the influence of a student's peers can be more powerful than those of teachers. In this study, when homophobic verbal abuse occurred, about half of the respondents replied that their peers ignored the incident and did not intervene. Some (14%) of the respondents noted that some of their peers collaborated with the instigators. About 15% reported that their peers intervened on behalf of the victimizers all or most of the time. The rate of positive peer intervention, however, is greater than reported for staff.

The last questions in this section dealt with the recurrence of verbal abuse and physical assaults during the past year.[6] Figure 4 shows that verbal abuse related to sexual orientation was the most common recurring expression experienced by lesbigay students in Israeli schools. Physical assaults and sexual harassment were encountered, but by fewer respondents. More than

FIGURE 4. Recurrence of Verbal and Physical Abuse during the Past Year



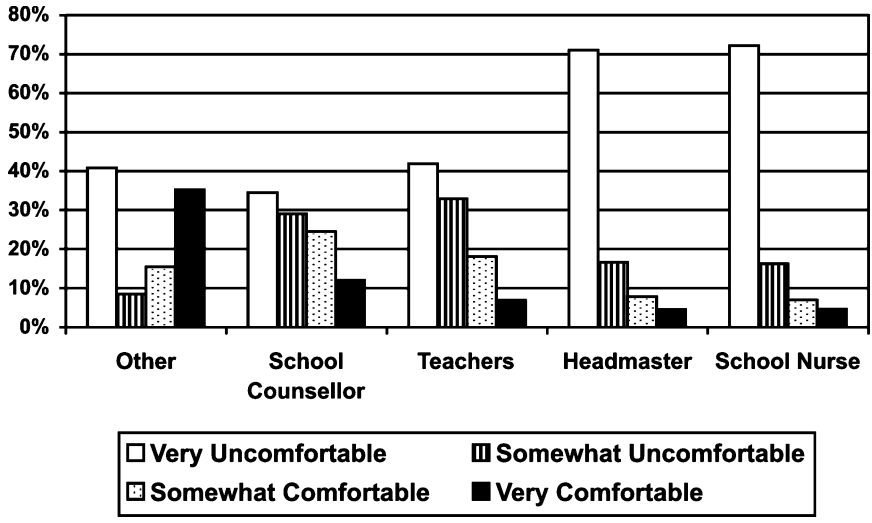
a third of the sample (38%) were exposed to verbal abuse frequently, often, or sometimes; whereas one-in-twelve lesbigay students were exposed to physical assaults frequently, often, or sometimes.

School Resources and Support System

To what degree are lesbigay students comfortable talking with their teachers and other school staff and faculty about issues concerning sexual orientation?

Findings, depicted in Figure 5, show that lesbigay students do not feel comfortable addressing teachers, counselors, or other educational staff about lesbigay issues. Three-quarters of the students felt somewhat or very uncomfortable addressing their teachers, and two-thirds felt very or somewhat uncomfortable addressing the school counselor. On the other hand, about one-half of the respondents felt somewhat or very comfortable addressing lesbigay issues with drivers and other similar personnel grouped together as "other." However, nearly as many were very uncomfortable discussing such issues with such persons. The latter differ from other school personnel since they don't have any formal power relations with students and, therefore, less capable in harming openly lesbigay students. No differences were found between males and females or between different socio-economic status backgrounds.

FIGURE 5. Degree of Comfort in Talking with Various School Staff about Lesbigay Issues



In addition to human actors, symbolic and material resources may contribute positively or negatively to the lesbigay student's sense of belonging and welfare. Lack of relevant literature and readily accessible information constitutes a subtle form of homophobia or heteronormativity. In order to learn about this aspect, we asked our sample about resources provided to them by their school and about their school's associations with lesbigay community resources. Less than a half of the sample reported access to Websites concerning lesbigay issues within school (43.7%). Further, only 13.6% reported that their schools' libraries had *any* material concerning sexual orientation. Slightly less than one in ten lesbigay students recalled attending guest lecture(s) on this subject at their school given by GLBT people. About 6% of the sample reported school collaboration with lesbigay organizations. When comparing between students from varied socio-economic status backgrounds, we found one difference: Students from higher socio-economic status recalled having a lecture on lesbigay subjects more than other students. We believe this difference can be explained by the availability of lectures in geographical districts serving students from higher socio-economic status families and a relatively higher general tolerance in these areas.

In sum, although Internet accessibility seems to be somewhat satisfying according to the students in this sample, schools, they believe, do not provide other means to combat homophobia via cooperation with outside organizations and by not offering satisfactory library holdings. In other words, from the perceptions of these lesbigay students, schools do not enable attitude change agents—be they human or mediated—to combat what these students view as the overall dominant homophobic atmosphere. The findings imply that most schools don't have an active policy addressing lesbigay students. This could be interpreted by students as exclusion or by exposure to unreliable and biased information.

Inter-Correlations

We began the second step of the analysis with the estimation of the correlations among all variables (see Appendix). As one would expect, the various dimensions of lesbigay students' experiences are related, in varying degrees, to each other. These interrelationships (or lack of) help us obtain a more complex picture of the issue and provide evidence of the validity of the measures used in the current study.

Notice first that students reporting about high levels of "homophobic remarks" in school tended to report on high levels of "homophobic atmosphere" ($r = 0.65$). Also, students experiencing verbal abuse tended to experience physical abuse ($r = 0.52$). Furthermore, having "books or other information in library" as well as having "supportive teacher(s)" were accompanied with other resources: access to Internet Websites ($r = 0.19$, $r = 0.13$, respectively), guest lecture ($r = 0.18$; $r = 0.22$), and collaboration with lesbigay organizations ($r = 0.20$; $r = 0.22$).

Regarding outcome variables, students' sense of respect had negative correlations with homophobic atmosphere ($r = -0.41$), verbal abuse ($r = -0.37$), and physical abuse ($r = -0.42$). In contrast, students' sense of respect was positively correlated with all those variables relating to school resources. Students' sense of belonging had smaller correlations with homophobic atmosphere ($r = -0.33$) and verbal abuse ($r = -0.30$) but was positively correlated with having supportive teacher(s) as a resource ($r = -0.24$).

To better examine the effects of students' characteristics and schools' environment on the outcome variables, we conducted OLS regression analyses (see Table 3). In the basic model we estimated the effects of students' characteristics. Because this model (for both outcome variables) was not significant, results are not shown here (for "Sense of respect" $F = 2.38$ and

TABLE 3. OLS Regression Coefficients in Models Explaining Sense of Respect by Peers and Sense of Belonging to School

	Sense of Respect by Peers		Sense of Belonging to School	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Female	−0.15*	−0.14*	−0.27**	−0.27**
Age	0.00	0.00	−0.02	−0.02
In the Closet	−0.26*	−0.20	−0.13	−0.09
Member in IGY	−0.01	−0.03	−0.06	−0.09
Homophobic Remarks	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.06
Homophobic Atmosphere	−0.19**	−0.19**	−0.20**	−0.18**
Verbal Abuse	−0.10**	−0.09**	−0.13**	−0.13**
Physical Abuse	−0.18**	−0.17**	−0.03	−0.03
Degree of Comfort	0.22**	0.17**	0.21**	0.18**
Resources in School				
Books and Information		0.03		−0.10
Internet Websites		0.13		0.07
Guest Lecture in School		−0.04		0.13
Collaborative School		0.08		−0.04
Supportive Teachers		0.18**		0.19
Constant	3.22**	3.24**	3.35**	3.38**
R^2	0.34	0.37	0.20	0.22

Note: N = 298; * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$ (two tailed test).

$p = 0.07$; for "Sense of belonging" $F = 1.03$ and $p = 0.38$). In Model 1, we included school's environment (in addition to students' characteristics). In Model 2, we included school's resources and tested their direct and indirect effects.

Explaining Sense of Respect by Peers. According to Model 1, girls and "in the closet" students expressed lower levels of respect by peers ($B = -0.15$, $B = -0.26$, respectively). Regarding girls, the finding could be rooted in the fact that they reported greater verbal abuse. A schools' homophobic environment (homophobic atmosphere, verbal abuse, and physical abuse) resulted in lower levels of respect by peers ($B = -0.19$, $B = -0.10$, $B = -0.18$). In contrast, students who felt comfortable talking about lesbigay issues reported higher level of respect by peers ($B = 0.22$).

In Model 2, we included variables describing school's resources that improved the model fit by almost 10% ($R^2 = 0.37$). According to this model, having supportive teachers result in higher levels of respect by peers ($B = 0.18$). After controlling for school's resources, the effects

of the two variables changed considerably: being "in the closet" was no longer significant and "comfort to talk" lost 23% of its power (B = 0.17). Apparently, only "out" students recognized the availability of supportive teachers. These teachers were crucial for students' feeling comfortable talking about lesbigay issues.[7]

Explaining Sense of Belonging to School. The models that explain the outcome variable *Sense of belonging to school* reflected lower levels of model fit (Model 1 $R^2 = 0.20$; Model 1 $R^2 = 0.22$). According to Model 1, girls expressed lower levels of belonging to school (B = -0.27). In addition, students who reported school environments laden with homophobic atmosphere and verbal abuse expressed lower levels of belonging to school (B $= -0.20$ and B $= -0.13$). However, students who felt comfortable talking about lesbigay issues reported a higher level of respect by peers (B = 0.21). According to Model 2, none of the school's resources measured here has any effect on the dependent variable; although after controlling for these variables the variable "comfortable to talk" lost 14% of its power (B = 0.18).

DISCUSSION

The results from this tentative survey reveal that for many Israeli lesbigay students school can be an unsafe and even a dangerous place. The majority of the respondents in the present study reported hearing homophobic remarks frequently, a large number felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and some of them reported being verbally and physically harassed. Since this is the first study of its kind, we cannot possibly say whether the socio-historical changes of the past decade bear any effect on the current situation within schools. Yet, we may assume that one finding is particularly striking. That is to say, in spite of the problematic sampling, a comparatively large number of lesbigay adolescents do indeed internalize the general trend of laxity in social atmosphere in Israel and do come out in substantial proportions. This finding corroborates previous findings that Israeli lesbigay population resembles other Western lesbigay populations (Ben-Ari, 2001a; Kama, 2005b). Furthermore, our findings indicate that students who are "out" within school settings tend to report higher levels of sense of being respected and being helped by teachers, compared to students who do not reveal their sexual orientation within school settings. These findings indicate that schools fail to create a safe environment to lesbigay students in their most stressful periods of

sexual orientation development, and only those students who are "out" can identify the resources they can rely on within school. On the other hand, the overall climate within schools is not quite satisfactory and whether an individual is "out" or not, he or she may encounter hardships of varying degrees and ramifications. The findings suggest that the fact that harassment occurs in any place within school settings influences students' attitudes toward school more than the harassment per se, further indicating the effect of school climate and the school's responsibility for creating a 'safe place' for lesbigay students. Indeed, as long as intolerance reigns and negative school climate is not curbed, invisibility may be reinforced and thus persist (Rivers, 2001).

A comparison of our findings to those of the original survey conducted in the US (Kosciw, 2004) reveals that in both countries verbal harassment is quite prevalent within school settings. Israeli students experience less physical abuse due to their sexual orientation than their US counterparts,[8] and school faculty tend to intervene more in the US than in Israel when attending in homophobic situations. The comparison shows that Israeli lesbigay students have fewer material resources (e.g., books) at school to support them with issues concerning their sexual orientation, and that in Israel lesbigay students find it more difficult to address school faculty regarding sexual orientation issues.

Research conducted elsewhere concerning lesbigay youth populations show its fruitful outcomes in professionals' statements and policy and searching for ways to address lesbigay school students' needs (Just the Facts Coalition, 1999). Although Israeli society had progressed markedly in overcoming heterosexism and homophobia, and as this research shows, visibility of lesbigay youth is quite widespread, the education system fails to meet the needs of its lesbigay students and to provide them with the safe setting they are entitled to.

The objective of our research was to delve into the Israeli school system educational climate from lesbigay students' perspective. The educational climate concept encompasses the mechanism, which regulates and provides the quality of education and learning in a particular institute (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This apparatus consists of human actors—teachers, principals, students and their parents—as well as dynamic processes, such as policies, curricula, values, et cetera. An academic institute can be characterized to have an optimal educational climate when it enables its students to wholly fulfill their potential in a wide array of areas: from scholarly achievements to artistic creativity, and enhance desired values such as tolerance and broadmindedness.

The lion's share of the findings in the present survey corroborate our initial premise that schools are part and parcel of the hegemonic heteronormative ideology, in which lesbigay individuals and communities are relegated to the social periphery and are not and cannot be totally equal to non-homosexuals. Students are subjected to homophobic reactions from peers and simultaneously cannot depend on their superiors for assistance and remedial intervention. Although schools can, and at times do, create safer climates through policy and students' and teachers' instruction, it seems that the Israeli school system is far from providing a safe haven for lesbigay adolescents who consequently feel alienated.

This conclusion is probably even further disconcerting if we take into consideration the phenomenon that lesbigays—be they adults or younger persons—who are willing to take part in surveys are not representative of the entire homosexual population (Savin-Williams, 2001). Indeed, the present survey sample constitutes but the tip of a metaphoric iceberg, whose main body remains undisclosed, unseen, and thus unreachable. Consequently we can surmise that the majority of respondents who took part in our survey were mostly individuals who have already passed some of the well-documented phases of homosexual identity formation (Cass, 1996). This supposition is grounded in the fact that an overwhelming proportion of our sample has "come out" within rather wide social circles. Having said this, we may cautiously hypothesize that for other lesbigay students, who are positioned in the early stages of their homosexual identity formation, the situation is even more severe. They must deal not only with internal hardships but also with external ones as well. They need to construct their sense of self in the face of homophobic surroundings.

A recent report compiled by *The National Task Force for Education Enhancement in Israel* (2005), declared that schools should

> provide personal treatment, encourage empathy among all members of the community, provide a safe and secure space while managing violent phenomena and misconduct. . . . Schools should create a climate of acceptance, encouragement, caring, and responsibility. (p. 14)

We can clearly see the avowed responsibility and dedication by the educational system authorities to make the school a beacon of liberalism. Does this declaration indeed mean to embrace lesbigays and their plight, help them to overcome their subjugation to violence and humiliation, and actually combat homophobia? At the present time, many strides are needed

in order to accomplish this vision. Our study suggests that a multi-level transformation is acutely needed. One that will include the various actors involved in the school as well as material and symbolic resources, from curricula to books, from attitude change via various agents to active implementation of sensitivity training. We strongly believe that this vision is necessarily viable. Moreover, by accomplishing a welcoming school climate the entire society will greatly benefit.

In more constructive terms, in order to meet the needs of lesbigay students in the education system in Israel as well as other countries, we follow the recommendations provided by Cook and Pawlowski (1991) and Durby (1994):

1. The education system should break the silence around homosexuality and affirm diversity. Education systems should include lesbigay issues and lesbigay youth in its activities, including research, curriculum, and policy.
2. Schools should make the environment a safe one for lesbigay youth. School staff should act actively against expressions of homophobia within school settings. School libraries should include valid and updated information regarding sexual orientation.
3. Schools should teach and train faculty about human sexuality, specifically about lesbigay issues. Issues concerning sexual orientation should be included within academic training of teachers.
4. Schools should include opportunities for parents of all youth to learn more about the development of sexualities in their myriad forms. Counselors should know and guide parents of lesbigay students about the opportunities for support and help for youth and parents (e.g., Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays [P-FLAG] and youth groups).
5. Schools should include in their curricula truthful information about sexual orientation.

Although our findings should be taken cautiously due to the non-representative sample, the methodology of recruiting participants using an Internet survey did actually enable us to gather a rather heterogeneous sample. Unlike many studies about the lesbigay population that were criticized for using participants through lesbigay community centers, and that were situated in the latter stages of sexual orientation identity formation (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2003; Friedman et al., 2004), our sample consisted of lesbigay youth, of whom only a small portion attended lesbigay

community activities. Studies using means of data collection via anonymous Internet questionnaires found no difference in validity and reliability between data collected via mail compared to data collected through the Internet (Dibb, Rushmer, & Stern, 2001; Mehta & Sivadas, 1995). We believe that using the Internet as a methodological apparatus can be useful especially when dealing with a hidden population such as lesbigay individuals. Researchers should consider using this method in order to minimize the limitations of scientific work regarding sexual minority and meet rigorous standards.

Finally, since the current research is the first one of its kind conducted in Israel, further research is needed in order to confirm the findings and to learn more about Israeli lesbigay youth experiences, needs, and characteristics. To be sure, studies of this kind are also encouraged to be carried out in other cultural arenas and countries, especially outside the English-speaking world.

NOTES

1. Due to this minute number (n = 3) and brevity constraints, this report does not include this group in the analysis or refer to gender non-conformity, which is not sufficiently documented in Israel.

2. Although this figure is somewhat higher than the entire population (Katz et al., 2000), the term "secular" is largely contested and, thus, the distribution of secular people is not conclusive.

3. Arab's actual proportion of the population is 19 percent (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004b).

4. The astoundingly large number of respondents who disclosed their identity to at least one other person is certainly a reflection of who were willing to take part in this survey. They are not representative of the entire Israeli sexual minority population, whose main body remains undisclosed, unseen, and thus empirically unreachable. This sample is mainly composed of the higher echelons of Israeli society, particularly regarding their economic status. Arabs and non-secular Jews, who are generally less privileged, are certainly underrepresented. In the same vein, it should also be taken into account that since this study was mostly carried out via the Internet, computer accessibility or ownership was crucial to participation in the study.

5. The question did not specify any specific period of time. Also respondents determined what constituted terms such as "frequently," "sometimes," etc.

6. In these items we wanted to learn about physical assaults and to get reprots relative to verbal assaults-that is why we've asked again about verbal assaults.

7. We found support for this explanation when we analyzed the same model using all four groups of school's staff: teachers, principal, counselor, and nurse. In this model only teachers' coefficient was significant.

8. Physical abuse was reported to be less common than verbal harassment in South African schools, too (Butler et al., 2003).

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Appendix A: Correlation Matrix

		.1	.2	.3	.4	.5	.6	.7	.8	.9	.10	.11	.12	.13	.14	.15
1	Sense of Respect	–														
2	Sense of Belonging	.65**														
3	Female	–.00	–.09													
4	Age	.03	–.01	–.08												
5	In the Closet	–.14*	–.04	–.14*	–.24**											
6	Member in IGY	–.00	–.05	.01	.12*	–.23**										
7	Homophobic Remarks	–.24**	–.19**	.00	–.01	.06	–.06									
8	Homophobic Atmosphere	–.41**	–.33**	–.04	.05	.06	–.01	.65**								
9	Verbal Abuse	–.37**	–.30**	–.19**	.01	–.07	.12*	.36**	.39**							
10	Physical Abuse	–.42**	–.23**	–.10	–.01	.01	.08	.29**	.36**	.52**						
11	Degree of Comfort	.30**	.23**	.04	.06	–.11	.09	–.08	–.12*	–.03	–.02					
12	Books and Information	.12*	.02	.06	.07	–.05	–.03	.01	.02	–.03	–.09	.22**				
13	Internet Websites	.20**	.11	.04	.03	–.13*	.04	–.12*	–.10	–.05	–.09	.11	.19**			
14	Guest Lecture in School	.12*	.10	.03	.05	–.07	.09	–.03	–.08	.06	–.02	.25**	.18**	.10		
15	Collaborative School	.17**	.11	–.05	.10	–.10	.04	–.02	–.06	–.09	–.11	.17**	.20**	.15*	.52**	
16	Supportive Teachers	.24**	.16**	.05	.15*	–.22**	.18**	–.03	–.09	.05	–.01	.35**	.15**	.13*	.22**	.22**

Note: N = 298; *= $p < 0.05$, **= $p < 0.01$ (two tailed test).