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Advocates of hope

School staff supporting LGBTQ+ students in
secondary school

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Abstract

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This master's thesis explores staff's role in supporting lgbtq+ students' wellbeing in secondary schools. Domestically lgbtq+ students have been represented in higher numbers of mental health and wellbeing related problems than their peers, and there is also global concern for lgbtq+ youth's mental health. The research question is: In what ways school staff can support the wellbeing of lgbtq+ students in secondary schools?

This study's conceptual framework examines lgbtq+ students' wellbeing through critical and feminist pedagogy, hidden heteronormative curriculum, wellbeing of lgbtq+ population and safer spaces for lgbtq+ people. Methodology of this study comes from qualitative research and critical paradigm including perspectives from arts-based research.

Research material was constructed through creative workshops and semi-structured interviews with four secondary school employees in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Research material was analyzed with qualitative content analysis. The emphasis on the findings was on professional roles and interaction with students when supporting lgbtq+ students from staff's point of view. Safer space was discussed through different aspects, e.g., physical environment, accessibility of information and co-creation with students.

Based on the findings, it would be important to increase lgbtq+ training for school staff to adapt more supportive and safer habits and pedagogical approaches when working with minority students. It is concluded that co-creating school policies and safer space guidelines that address the minority stress and other lgbtq+ specific needs together with students would be crucial for changing school climate to be more hopeful for the future generations of lgbtq+ students.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, curriculum, heteronormativity, lgbtq+ students, school climate, school staff, secondary school

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Tämä opinnäytetyö tarkastelee henkilökunnan roolia sateenkaariopiskelijoiden hyvinvoinnin tukemisessa toisen asteen oppilaitoksissa. Aiempi kansallinen tutkimus osoittaa, että sateenkaariuoret kokevat merkittävästi mielenterveyteen ja hyvinvointiin liittyviä ongelmia, ja sateenkaariuorten mielenterveydestä ollaan huolissaan myös kansainvälisesti. Tutkimuskysymykseni on: Millä tavoin koulun henkilökunta voi tukea LGBTQ+ opiskelijoiden hyvinvointia toisen asteen kouluissa?

Tämän tutkimuksen käsitteellinen viitekehys tarkastelee sateenkaariopiskelijoiden hyvinvointia kriittisen ja feministisen pedagogiikan, piilotetun heteronormatiivisen opetussuunnitelman, sateenkaariyhteisön hyvinvoinnin ja turvallisemman tilan käsitteiden kautta. Tutkimuksen metodologia rakentuu laadullisesta tutkimuksesta, kriittisestä teoriasta ja taidelähtöisen tutkimuksen näkökulmista.

Tutkimusmateriaali muodostettiin luovien työpajojen ja puolistrukturoitujen haastattelujen kautta neljän toisen asteen oppilaitoksessa työskentelevän osallistujan kanssa pääkaupunkiseudulla. Tutkimusmateriaalin analysoimiseen käytettiin laadullista sisällönanalyysia. Tuloksissa henkilökunnan roolit ja vuorovaikutus korostuivat sateenkaariopiskelijoiden hyvinvoinnin tukemisessa. Turvallisemmasta tilasta keskusteltiin monesta eri näkökulmasta, muun muassa fyysisen ympäristön, tiedon saavutettavuuden ja opiskelijoiden kanssa toteutettavan yhteiskehittelyn kautta.

Tutkimustulosten perusteella on tärkeää lisätä sateenkaariopiskelijoihin liittyvää koulutusta koulun henkilökunnalle, jotta vähemmistönuoria tukevat ja turvalliset työtavat ja pedagogiset lähestymistavat saataisiin käyttöön. Koulun käytäntöjen ja turvallisemman tilan periaatteiden yhteiskehittely yhdessä opiskelijoiden kanssa olisi äärimmäisen tärkeää, jotta vähemmistöstressi ja muut sateenkaarierytiset tarpeet saadaan näkyväksi. Kouluympäristöä tulee muokata toiveikkaammaksi tulevien sukupolvien sateenkaariopiskelijoita ajatellen.

Avainsanat: heteronormatiivisuus, kouluhenkilökunta, kriittinen pedagogiikka, opetussuunnitelma, sateenkaariopiskelijat, toisen asteen koulutus

Contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Conceptual framework and literature review	8
2.1	Critical and feminist pedagogy	8
2.2	Heteronormative curricula and policies in schools	12
2.3	Wellbeing and minority stress in LGBTQ+ population	17
2.4	Making schools safer spaces for lgbtq+ students	19
3	Implementation of the study	24
3.1	Research task and question	24
3.2	Methodological starting points	24
3.3	Constructing research material	27
3.4	Analysing research material	33
3.5	Research ethics	35
4	Findings	39
4.1	Power and responsibility: Different roles in making changes	39
4.2	From words to actions: Practices needed to support lgbtq+ students' wellbeing	43
4.3	From invisibility to visibility: Safer spaces in school	47
4.4	School climate: Bringing policies to practice	51
5	Conclusions and discussion	56
	References	64
	Appendices	74
	Appendix 1: Participant information sheet	74
	Appendix 2: Consent form	80
	Appendix 3: Data generation guide	82

1 Introduction

All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions – and society – so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 34.)

Ongoing polarization of the society has reared its head in the lgbtq+ community in Finland. lgbtq+ stands for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, questioning and other members of queer community. In Mikkeli, someone handed out religious homophobic flyers that encouraged to use violence against queer people (Nyyssönen, 2024). In Jyväskylä, city council members made a proposition to forbid Seta's (lgbtq+¹ rights organization in Finland) school visits and to teach children that there are only two genders (Tervonen, 2024). In Turku, a school-aged-child wrote an opinion piece to a newspaper about how racism, homophobia and hate speech is spreading and school staff is not intervening to it, asking adults to take responsibility for safer schools (Turun Sanomat, 2024). At the same time, Finnish School Health Questionnaires from recent years have found out that lgbtq+ students' wellbeing and mental health has been degenerating year by year.

In the Finnish School Health Questionnaire in 2019, it was stated that one in three lgbtq+ students had moderate or severe anxiety whilst it was one in ten among their peers. 40% of the lgbtq+ students had at least two-week-long symptoms of depression whilst only 14-16% of their peers suffered from those. (Jokela, Luopa, Hyvärinen, Ruuska, Martelin, & Klemetti, 2020, p. 19.) Based on the same questionnaire, bullying was experienced at least once a week by 11% of gender minority students and 7% of sexuality minority students. In experiencing physical threat, these numbers were 27% and 20%. Also, numbers on sexual harassment

¹ I use abbreviation lgbtq+ in lower case letters after discussing this with a colleague about stigma. Capitalization of letters have been reduced from use to decrease stigma. I only use they pronoun from other people to avoid assuming anyone's gender.

and sexual violence were higher with lgbtq+ students than cis-gendered and heterosexual students. lgbtq+ students also experience more physical and mental violence from parents and other caregiving adults than their peers (Jokela et al., 2020, p. 24).

These issues are not prevalent only in Finland. Researchers in multiple countries have studied lgbtq+ youths mental health and wellbeing (check Campbell et al., 2022; Herry & Mulvey, 2024; McDermott et al., 2023; Moe et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2022). Global organizations like World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF have made reports about mental health and acknowledged the special features and circumstances around lgbtq+ people's mental health. In WHO's Comprehensive Mental Health Plan, it is stated that lgbtq+ people's mental health needs should be identified and assessed, and addressed the barriers that may prevent them from accessing treatment, care and support (WHO, 2021, p. 26). UNICEF also noted lgbtq+ children and youth in their 2021 report several times, highlighting risks of mental health conditions, self-harm and suicide, which were also related to discrimination and stigma (UNICEF, 2021).

There is a connection in lgbtq+ harassment and poor academic performance (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, p. 329). lgbtq+ students have more frequent unauthorized absences and sick leaves than their peers (Jokela et al., 2020, p. 23), which could affect on their academic performance and could be caused by harassment. It is rare that sexual minority students could converse about their sexuality at home, and fear of rejection can make them alienate more from their surroundings. This is the reason why educational institutions can serve as a place and important resource in their identity development and life as a member of sexual minority. (Castro & Sujak, 2014, pp. 452–453.) Educational institutions tend to have hidden heteronormative curricula which guide the actions, guidelines and policies in schools (Carpenter & Lee, 2010; Castro & Sujak, 2014). Because of hidden heteronormativity, it would be important for educational institutions to develop their policies and practices, so they could answer to their lgbtq+ students' needs for support better.

There is clear evidence on the support needs for LGBTQ+ students in school and increased risk for mental health issues in sexual and gender minorities. For the wellbeing of these people and society as a whole, it is necessary to find ways to make schools safer places for people from LGBTQ+ community, including students and staff. The purpose of this thesis is to use art-based activities and semi-structured interviews to generate new knowledge on how school staff could support LGBTQ+ students in secondary school. I decided to focus on the staff because it is adults' responsibility to make changes and disrupt the structures of injustice that keep minority groups more disadvantaged in this society. My standpoint in this study as an occupational therapist and a member of LGBTQ+ community is to aim to awake hope, meaningfulness and agency in the school community to make their daily environment safer and supportive for everyone.

In this master's thesis, I will explain my conceptual framework and literature review in chapter 2. In chapter 3 I will present my research task and question, methodological starting points and how the research material was generated and analyzed. In chapter 4 I will explain what kind of findings were made by analyzing the empirical material through my conceptual framework and pertaining literature. In chapter 5, I will draw my conclusions based on the findings and discuss the trustworthiness of this study and provide suggestions for future research in this area.

2 Conceptual framework and literature review

The conceptual framework of this study includes concepts of feminist and critical pedagogy (Freire 1970/2014; hooks, 1994), hidden heteronormative curricula (e.g., Carpenter & Lee, 2010; Castro & Sujak, 2014), minority stress (e.g., Meyer, 2003; Tan et al., 2020) and wellbeing of lgbtq+ people (e.g., Campbell et al., 2022; Jokela et al., 2020; Källström et al., 2022; Moe et al., 2023) and safer spaces (e.g., Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019; Owens & Mattheus, 2022) in school. I have used peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, books and other scientific documents when constructing this framework. In this framework I explain these concepts and previous research done about these topics.

2.1 Critical and feminist pedagogy

Critical pedagogy attempts to acknowledge the power relations in teaching and transforming those power relations to more equal and dialogical approach. In Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2014), it is explained that world and action are interlinked, but it is humane only when you do not separate conscious action (praxis) from reflection. Dialogue is needed to change power relations and actions between oppressors and oppressed, not someone coming from outside to explain. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is about giving people a role in their own liberation, and the oppressed people should be collaborating in the development of this pedagogy. (Freire, 1970/2014, pp. 53–54.) A dialogue that is critical and liberating should be continued with the oppressed in every stage of the process, even before action. If there is no reflective participation, the oppressed are attempted to liberate through means of adaptation and treated as objects. (Freire, 1970/2014, p. 65.)

hooks takes Freire's critical pedagogy and feminist theories a bit further with their visions of engaged pedagogy that demands more than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy in its emphasis on wellbeing. Teachers should actively commit to their own wellbeing and self-actualization, if they want to teach in a way that

empowers students. (hooks, 1994, p. 15.) When education is a practice of freedom, the students are not the only ones empowered. When the learning is holistic in a classroom, it also gives space for teachers to learn and empower themselves throughout the process. If teachers are encouraging students to take risks, they also need to be in touch with their own vulnerability for the learning experience to be empowering. (hooks, 1994, p. 21.)

One responsibility that educators have is using and developing their pedagogical sensitivity. In their model on pedagogical sensitivity, Huhtinen-Hildén and Pitt (2018) explain that pedagogical sensitivity is formed with three different dimensions. Area-of-expertise knowledge (in this example, music) and knowledge related to teaching and interaction both include theoretical, practical, experiential and socio-cultural aspects of knowledge. The third element is self-regulative knowledge, which includes metacognitive and reflective skills of a teacher. These different dimensions interact in dynamic ways, depending on context and experiences. Through these aspects, professional knowledge and identity are developing as an ongoing process. (Huhtinen-Hildén & Pitt, 2018, p. 47.) Pedagogical sensitivity needs flexibility from the teacher, not just following instructions but participating in the activities and making them suitable for students (Junttila, Karhunen & Hautala, 2024, p. 15).

Huhtinen-Hildén and Pitt also bring the element of caring into the discussion. Huhtinen-Hildén & Pitt (2018, p. 45) note that “associating education with care may position it with low status and importance” but continue that this act of care and the bond between educator and learner is essential to wellbeing, bringing it to discussion with hooks’ (1994) ideas of engaged pedagogy. In their study, Junttila et al. (2024, p. 14) found that actively sensing students’ emotions and needs faded teachers’ focus on themselves and refocused on students’ wellbeing. Pedagogical love gave room for support and acceptance, making teachers concentrate on students’ accomplishments. (Junttila et al., 2024, p. 14.) When teaching is thought to be interaction and dialogue, and the center of the process is learning, there is a possibility for both pedagogue’s and learner’s potential for growth and change (Huhtinen-Hildén & Pitt, 2018, p. 48), supporting both parties’ wellbeing as hooks (1994) states.

It is important to acknowledge that education is not politically neutral. Schools cannot function outside of society and its norms and politics, but that can also be an opportunity to reflect and emancipate students (Giroux & Penna, 1979, pp. 27, 39). School is a place of socialization, and through hidden curriculum and its reflected values, school environment influences how social relationships are shaped (Giroux, 1978, p. 148; Giroux & Penna, 1979, p. 22). There is a constant denial of the politics of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and their influence on how and what is taught to students. Resisting those politics requires constant work. (hooks, 1994, p. 37.) Hidden curriculum can prevent students from being solidary towards each other and from building a dialogical community who learn together (Giroux, 1978, p. 151). Michael Apple has also written about politics in schools and curriculum. There are rising numbers of censorship and attempts to affect curriculum via book banning and trying to silence critical discussion in the United States of America. For decades, marginalized groups have tried to make education reflect their histories, cultures and needs, with resistance from more conservative groups. (Apple, 2024, p. 549.) When describing the discussion around cultural diversity in academia, hooks (1994) talks about how their colleagues were reluctant to participate in this change at first. Although many teachers tried to respect cultural diversity, they had to confront their limitations in training, knowledge and the possibility of losing their authority. It was also difficult to fully comprehend the idea that there needs to be willingness to see the classroom change and to allow shifts in relations between students when recognizing these differences. (hooks, 1994, p. 30.)

When transforming the school environment, there needs to be acceptance of sacrifice and struggle (hooks, 1994, p. 33). It takes acknowledgment that teaching approaches may have to change from elementary to university setting to make pedagogical process reflect, respect, and honor the social reality and experiences of groups who are nonwhite. (hooks, 1994, p. 35.) The central goal for transformative pedagogy is to make the classroom democratic in a way that everyone feels the responsibility to contribute. Absence of feeling safety is often the reason for prolonged silence or lack of engagement from students. (hooks, 1994, p. 39.) Learning environments might not be safe for everyone, but they

need to be safe for learning to happen. In a safe environment, there is room for new perspectives and disagreements. (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 286.) hooks discusses engaged pedagogy from a point of view of racism and ethnical diversity, and while acknowledging nonwhite groups and their specific struggles, I think hooks' examples and ideas are also applicable to sexual and gender minorities in this study.

Safe space as a concept comes from women's and lgbtq+ movement from the 1970s, when it meant a safe physical meeting place for like-minded people. In recent years, safe space has been used in higher education settings to prevent discrimination, harassment, threats and hatred. In classroom setting, safe space has meant that students can speak freely without being afraid of their co-students or teachers. (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 276.) When interviewing seven school administrators in the USA, Steck and Perry (2018, pp. 232–233) studied how to create a safe and inclusive environment for lgbtq+ students in secondary school. Administrators thought that providing safer spaces (e.g., classrooms, administrators' offices) was important, but there also needs to be an effort to make the school environment overall more inclusive. In the interviews, the administrators noted that promoting awareness through addressing discriminatory language and teaching zero tolerance policy in school was essential for setting the tone on school environment. Accepting and celebrating diversity as a school community was done by giving platform for lgbtq+ voices. (Steck & Perry, 2018, p. 234.)

In Carpenter & Lee's (2010) study done in New Zealand, over 50% of surveyed lecturers reported that they were never inclusive of lgbtq+ differences in their teaching (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 106, in this study referred as lgbtt). This goes back to teacher education, where sexuality-related issues are more one-off sessions if included at all in the education (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 107). Teachers may not feel confident teaching certain contents and then start to avoid them (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 105). Providing school staff with possibilities for professional development and working in collaboration with them was critical to raise awareness and enhance staff's skills working with lgbtq+ students. (Steck & Perry, 2018, p. 235.) It was noted that formal policies should also reflect an

inclusive school environment, but the policies and practices were still heteronormative (Steck & Perry, 2015, p. 237).

There is also criticism and alternative concepts presented to challenge safe space (e.g., brave space by Arao & Clemens 2013, communities of disagreement by Iversen 2018). The basic agreement between these different concepts is that there should be some ground rules to ensure proper learning environment and classroom practices for students (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 283). Fear is not an ideal starting point for learning, and students should feel safe to challenge their perspectives and meet new viewpoints. Still, classroom should not be 'intellectually safe' to ensure education's purpose which is learning and developing new ideas and understanding. (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 286.)

2.2 Heteronormative curricula and policies in schools

Hidden curriculum is defined as: [T]he unofficial rules, routines, and structures of schools through which students learn behaviors, values, beliefs, and attitudes. Elements of the hidden curriculum do not appear in the schools' written goals, formal lesson plans, or learning objectives although they may reflect culturally dominant social values and ideas about what schools should teach. (Ritzer, 2007, as cited in Castro & Sujak, 2014, pp. 453–454.)

It is in hidden curriculum's nature to reflect dominant cultural values and therefore cannot be separated from the official curriculum (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 457). Hidden curriculum organizes students' and school staff's lives by norms and values taught in school (Apple, 2024, p. 551). In their study, Carpenter and Lee (2010) found that over half of the LGBTQ+ students and half of the LGBTQ+ staff members were not comfortable enough to be "out" with their peers. Both students and staff were concerned about how their peers would response to their identity. One interviewee puts it into words very pointedly: "we have a 'straight' face which

reflects the education system in general". (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 113.) This hidden curriculum of heteronormativity presented itself in a way that heterosexual students and staff members were more able to be open about their personal relationships, whether as lgbtq+ students and staff members kept their personal relationships more to themselves. Heteronormativity then gives space and permission to homophobia by making lgbtq+ people something "other". There was little to no inclusion of any other sexuality than heterosexuality in this teacher education faculty and the underlying assumption was that the world is heterosexual. Therefore, heteronormativity was dominating the program content in teacher education. (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 114.)

In their study with high school students and faculty, Castro and Sujak researched the hidden curriculums in one high school in major metropolitan area of United States. In addition of academic curriculum affecting in classrooms, they studied campus curriculums (groups) and social curriculums (relationships), and how "hidden" heteronormative curriculums affected lgbtq+ students in various personal and educational levels. (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 450.) Hidden curriculum does not only appear as ignoring sexual minority students within classroom, campus and social aspects of school, but also as negative highlighting through peer exclusion (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 454). Heteronormative or heterosexist attitudes have wider negative implications than only on staff members or students. It can also affect wellbeing of children and their families. (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 115.) Myyry researched in their study how gender equality and gender binary equalities show in curricula. When commenting on the construction of curriculum, one participant stated that there should be discussion about gender and sexuality as a spectrum. Binary gender norms were considered oppressive, putting all individuals to narrow gender roles and preventing equality. (Myyry, 2022, p. 1083.)

Because it is not usually a part of the official academic curriculum, discussions and representations of homosexuality and in what level it is done, falls to teachers and their will to address this (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 458). In the research interviews of Castro and Sujak's (2014, p. 456) study, one student remembered

only one time when sexual minorities were mentioned in classroom. Carpenter and Lee (2010) found out that lecturers gave improvement suggestions, but they were more focused on broader matters of community building instead of addressing LGBTQ+ specific matters. They suggested workshops for staff, LGBTQ+ material inclusion in staff induction and course coordinators' responsibility for appropriate content in program curriculum. (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 115.)

In Castro and Sujak's (2014) study, participating in school's LGBTQ+ clubs were found stigmatized, especially for homosexual male students. There was a possibility for a faculty member to form a support group for sexual minority students, if they self-identify their sexuality and academic struggles to a faculty member, but this required "an outing" from the faculty member to school administrator to be able to form the group. (Castro & Sujak, 2014, pp. 460–461.) The school environment in their research had diversity programs, but not for LGBTQ+ issues, and faculty's attendance was not mandatory and, in that way, easily avoidable. The hidden curriculum of groups comes through with LGBTQ+ invisibility and staff's ability to avoid participation in diversity programs. (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 462.) When teachers are afraid to address and discuss LGBTQ+ matters in classrooms, it could give a message that lives of LGBTQ+ people are problematic and should be ignored (Snapp, Burdge, Licon, Moody & Russell, 2015, p. 255).

In Finnish context, Laiti, Pakarinen, Parisod, Hayter, Sariola and Salanterä (2024) interviewed school health nurses, who considered Finnish school system to be conservative and not comprehensively LGBTQ+ inclusive. If school climate was LGBTQ+ supportive, it was seen as a special effort. Teachers' attitudes varied: some discussed about LGBTQ+ issues and collaborated with school health personnel, but there were also experiences of more conservative teachers who expressed their judgement towards LGBTQ+ people openly. (Laiti et al., 2024, p. 299.) When researching hidden campus curriculum, one teacher expressed that they were surprised how many students had experienced discrimination from their teachers. Some teachers were vocally disapproving to colleagues and

students who participated in school activism for lgbtq+ students. (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 459.)

In study made about lgbtq+ students and Physical Education (PE), all interviewed PE teachers stated that lgbtq+ students do not differ from other students and their sexuality or gender does not influence their attitudes towards them, and that all students should be treated as individuals (in this study referred as lgbtqi+). Half of the teachers stated that their attitudes were tolerant, magnifying the attitude of tolerance, not of equality. Connotations in using the word tolerance (*suvaitsevaisuus*) in Finnish can refer to liberal attitudes but also to endure something, making it also a term used for othering. (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022, p. 373.) Despite stating that students' sexuality or gender does not influence their teaching, many teachers also said that they had been "tiptoeing" when lgbtq+ student joined a PE group. Teachers brought up discriminating actions and words from other students, not including themselves in reflecting on lgbtq+ students' experienced discrimination. Sometimes teachers' statements revealed their own underlying assumption that all students are heterosexuals. (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022, p. 374.)

In Berg & Kokkonen's study, lgbtq+ students paid more attention to power relations and structural discrimination than PE teachers. The students were left to justify and explain their experiences, but also were actively reshaping and resisting existing practices and creating new ways of being and participating in the field of PE. Some of the PE teachers who were interviewed considered heteronormativity, gendered PE practices and how non-binary or transgender students would find their place in them. Still, it was considered challenging to change and queer the status quo and give up male/female distinctions. Only some of the teachers made effort to queer the practices with i.e. giving up gender-segregated groups and names and giving options for locker rooms. (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022, pp. 376–377.) Gender-segregated spaces and practices are problematic, because it excludes gender minorities, which then results to students having to hide their identities. (Myry, 2022, p. 1084.) As in engaged pedagogy, lgbtq+ students should be involved in making the change in PE

classes and have their opinions heard and utilised when developing pedagogical and educational policy decisions (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022, p. 378).

When talking about lgbtq+ inclusive curricula, it is relevant to discuss is the curricula inclusive or also supportive towards lgbtq+ people. In their study made in California, Snapp, McGuire, Sinclair, Gabrion and Russell (2015) studied perceived personal safety and school climate when school curricula included lgbtq+ people and when the curricula were also supportive towards lgbtq+ people. The study showed that at individual level, inclusive and supportive curricula were associated with more safety but also with more frequent bullying. There was more perceived safety and less bullying at the school level when the lgbtq+ supportive curricula were applied. It is important to have inclusive and supportive curricula, but they are only effective when enough effort is made within school in promoting positive school environment and climate. (Snapp, McGuire et al., 2015, p. 590.) When the school climate, curriculum and practices reflect diverse lgbtq+ identities, it helps lgbtq+ students to thrive, contributing to their wellbeing (Mann, Jones, Van Bergen & Burns, 2024, p. 57).

In their study, Mann et al. (2024) found that students, staff and parents all valued lgbtq+ inclusive practices such as representation, curriculum and gender affirmation (Mann et al., 2024, p. 58). Inclusive curricula may help people get more aware about lgbtq+ issues and to report harassment more frequently, when it is in effect. According to this study, safety increases and bullying decreases when lessons are viewed to be more supportive towards lgbtq+ people. (Snapp, McGuire et al., 2015, p. 591.) Even though in individual student level there was also more reports of bullying, the findings on school level safety were stronger. This means that implementing lgbtq+ supportive curricula have more effects on overall school climate that could outweigh negative associations of individual students. (Snapp, McGuire et al., 2015, p. 592.)

2.3 Wellbeing and minority stress in LGBTQ+ population

In their meta-analysis of mental health problems in lgbtq+ population, Meyer (2003) introduces a conceptual framework for minority stress and research evidence to support that (in this study referred as lgb). Social stress expands stress theory to include also social environment as a source of stress that can cause physical or mental ill effects. Minority stress is referred to when social stress is caused by excess stress which comes from being a part of socially stigmatized minority group. (Meyer, 2003, p. 3.) In lgbtq+ population there are different stress processes to cause minority stress: external and objective events and conditions that causes stress, expectations of such events and vigilance that comes with it, internalizing negative societal attitudes and concealing one's sexual orientation. Minority identity is linked to many stress processes simultaneously. (Meyer, 2003, p. 5.) In this conceptualization only lesbian, gay and bi people were researched, but there is also research about minority stress theory that is specific to trans and gender diverse (tgd) people (Tan, Treharne, Ellis, Schmidt & Veale, 2020).

In a study based on Finnish population, it was stated that sexual minority participants reported significantly higher depressive and anxiety symptoms than heterosexual participants. It was also found that age lowered the depressive and anxiety symptoms. (Källström, Nousiainen, Jern, Nickull & Gunst, 2022, pp. 8–9.) Gender minorities had the same results as sexual minorities: they showed significantly higher depressive and anxiety symptoms than cisgender participants (Källström et al., 2022, p. 11). In a study made in Canada with high school and post-secondary students, it was found that transgender and cisgender lgbtq+ students had lower self-esteem which was caused by indirect homophobia and transphobia (in this study referred as lgbt). Transgender students, especially those in high school, were found to be vulnerable to experiences of discrimination. (Taylor, Coulombe, Coleman, Cameron, Davis, Wilson, Woodford & Travers, 2022, pp. 368–369.) When gender minority stress was studied, it was linked to cisnormativity (Tan et al., 2020, p. 1479), calling out to critically evaluate and transform the norms that affect on wellbeing.

In a systematic review done in UK about factors influencing mental health of university and college students, four studies found significantly greater risk of mental health problems for lgbtq+ students (Campbell, Blank, Cantrell, Baxter, Blackmore, Dixon & Goyder, 2022, p. 5). In their mixed method case study, McDermott, Eastham, Hughes, Johnson, Davis, Prymachuk, Mateus, McNulty and Jenzen (2024) produced an early intervention model for supporting lgbtq+ youth's mental health. It was found out that resources and support that allowed lgbtq+ youth to understand their rights was limited, affecting their ability to access mental health services. Intersectional approach was found to be a factor in recognizing different ways of discrimination and marginalization, as well as protective privileges, affecting lgbtq+ youth's mental health. Different factors, e.g., different lgbtq+ identities, disabilities, racism, neurodiversity and poverty were found to be relevant to recognize what kind of support lgbtq+ youth would need. (McDermott et al., 2024, p. 112.)

lgbtq+ youth can feel unsafe or insecure in their daily environments such as home or school because of bullying and harassment they experience. Safety and belonging were found to be important factors in supporting lgbtq+ youth's mental health. There should be no assumption that lgbtq+ youth automatically trust adults, but it should be consciously built. (McDermott et al., 2024, p. 115.) The marginalized position of lgbtq+ youth may prevent them from using mental health services. By improving early mental health interventions, it could help lgbtq+ youth to access and navigate mental health services overall. (McDermott et al., 2024, p. 117.)

In a quantitative study made in USA, researchers explored relations between hope, minority stress and suicidal behaviors across diverse lgbtq+ populations. In this study, it was noted that experiencing internalized stigma and/or discrimination were in general correlated with depression, suicidal behavior, less hope and less social support (Moe, Sparkman-Key, Gantt-Howrey, Augustine & Clark, 2023, p. 51). In a study based in the UK, a programme theory was conducted to explain how school-based interventions can prevent or reduce mental health problems that lgbtq+ youth experience. In this study, factors that needed to be in place for interventions to work were school culture, collaborative

leadership, whole school approach, intersectionality and legal, policy, economic and discursive factors. Interventions mentioned were inclusion policies, affirmative displays, curriculum, support groups, standalone input, external signposting, staff training and talking to a trusted adult. (McDermott, Kaley, Kaner, Limmer, McGovern, McNulty, Nelson, Geijer-Simpson & Spencer, 2023, p. 8.)

In School Health Questionnaires mentioned in the introduction, one in three of lgbtq+ students had school-related burnout symptoms, and one quarter did not feel like being a part of the school community. When asked from gender minorities, 44% felt like they have been treated caringly and fairly by the teachers and in sexuality minorities the amount was 50%. (Jokela et al., 2020, p. 22.) From gender minority students, 41% said that they can talk with school staff about things they have in mind and from sexuality minority students, the amount was 45% (Jokela et al., 2020, p. 25). After 2019, the School Health Questionnaire in Finland has been repeated twice (2021 and 2023) and the numbers for mental health and wellbeing related issues have increased. In School Health Questionnaire of 2021, for example in areas of experienced depressive symptoms and anxiety, concerns about mental health and experienced challenges in health were higher than in 2019 (Majlander, Lehtonen, Luopa, Sares-Jäske, Teräsaho, Vihtari, Nenonen, Hyvärinen & Klemetti, 2022, pp. 181–183). It becomes evident that there is a gap between how much support lgbtq+ students get from their teachers and other school staff and how much they would need it.

2.4 Making schools safer spaces for lgbtq+ students

Dougherty, Plenn, Corey, Onufer and Coulter (2023) studied what informal strategies school staff use to support lgbtq+ students. Staff had a supportive role when confronting lgbtq+ students' families, advocated for inclusive policies in school (e.g., gender neutral dress code and forming a gay-straight alliance), creating lgbtq+ inclusive classroom environments and using lgbtq+ inclusive

materials in teaching. (Dougherty et al., 2023, pp. 292–293.) Listening to and affirming lgbtq+ students, being open-minded and empathetic, and collaborating across different school professionals were also used as strategies to support lgbtq+ students (Dougherty et al., 2023, p. 295). In Stargell, Jones, Akers and Parker's (2020) study, they gave lgbtq+ training to pre-service teachers. School-wide support and support from individual teachers has been found to have a positive influence on lgbtq+ students' emotional and physical safety. When school staff had opportunity to reflect on their own attitudes towards lgbtq+ people, they were able to implement inclusive thoughts and behaviors to their work. (Stargell et al., 2020, p. 128.)

Hayes and Buckingham (2024) studied teachers' responses to lgbtq+ students' discrimination in UK through questionnaires. Vast majority of the school staff responded that they worked with lgbtq+ students, but under half reported that they participated in lgbtq+ training. (Hayes & Buckingham, 2024, p. 16.) Participants felt that there was positive norm on intervening on discrimination experienced by lgbtq+ students. Almost third of the participants had some sort of leadership role in their school, which might have affect on wider positive norm in school. Still in this study, the intention to intervene was found stronger than actual behavior to intervene. (Hayes & Buckingham, 2024, pp. 18–19.) In Swanson and Gettinger's (2016) study, over half of the participants reported the following factors as barriers to support lgbtq+ students: lack of training and/or skills on how to support, lack of knowledge in lgbtq+ students' needs and issues, not enough time or resources, lack of available lgbtq+ inclusive educational materials, lack of support groups like GSAs for lgbtq+ students, personal values and/or discomfort surrounding lgbtq+ issues and not knowing how or when to intervene when bullying or harassment happens. Other identified barriers were fear of being labeled lgbtq+, school climate that tolerates lgbtq+ harassment, lack of support from school administration with lgbtq+ issues, lack of enforced antibullying and/or harassment policy and policies that do not include lgbtq+ students. (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, pp. 339–340.)

Indicators found to affect intervening in discrimination were self-efficacy, perceived control and attitudes. It was found that an individual's emotional response could affect their actions more than their behavioral beliefs. (Hayes & Buckingham, 2024, p. 20.) If school staff is supported to develop their skills, knowledge and confidence on intervening to discrimination, they could positively influence in LGBTQ+ students' experiences (Hayes & Buckingham, 2024, p. 23). Supportive teachers can help LGBTQ+ students to feel safer in school, influencing on their academic and socio-emotional outcomes as well (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, p. 347).

Swanson and Gettinger (2016, p. 341) found in their study that teachers' knowledge about LGBTQ+ rights and needs were not as significant in creating a supportive school climate as was their willingness to provide support. When staff had more training on LGBTQ+ matters, they were more likely to act supportively towards LGBTQ+ students. This may affect positively on school climate as well, when teachers become more aware of their various roles. Policies were not found to be related to the importance of supporting LGBTQ+ students, suggesting that policies alone are not enough to make a meaningful and lasting difference (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, p. 342), but unclear policies were found to hinder intervening in discrimination (Dougherty et al., 2023, p. 296; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, p. 342).

When LGBTQ+ students' responses to school climate and discrimination were studied, Herry and Mulvey (2024) found that sexual orientation was a clear indicator for peer discrimination, but that was not linked to experiences of school climate (in this study referred as Lgb+). Instead, experiences of teacher discrimination were found to be related to five school climate variables. (Herry & Mulvey, 2024, pp. 10–11.) In a study made in Hawaii, middle school staff got safe space training and there were surveys pre- and post-training about increased knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues and comfort in supporting LGBTQ+ students. In these surveys, there was a large effect size on self-rated increased knowledge and small effect size on increased comfort to support LGBTQ+ students as short-term outcomes. The staff thought that safe space training would be important to all

staff, and it has potential to improve school climate. (Owens & Mattheus, 2022, p. 1152.)

lgbtq+ students have more negative perceptions of school climate in all areas except perceived exclusion, making it important to work towards a more positive school climate for lgbtq+ students in the future (Herry & Mulvey, 2024, p. 17). It is noted that the ability to increase awareness does not mean that corresponding change is brought into action. In this study, teachers' attitudes were hoped to be supportive, accepting and inclusive, and supportive behaviors were identified to be e.g., advocacy, equal treatment, use of correct pronouns and dedicating a classroom to be safer space. (Owens & Mattheus, 2022, p. 1152.) Even though teachers and other staff would be aware of the benefits of lgbtq+ supportive protocols and practices, heteronormative curricula and policies still affect a lot in how school climate and its everyday practices are developed.

It should be recognized how students could contribute to creating safer spaces in educational institutions. In Ontario, Canada, secondary school lgbtq+ activists made happen The Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13) that includes the directive to support students who want to establish, name, and run gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in all publicly funded schools. This sparked when they were denied forming GSA in Catholic public school. (Iskander & Shabtay, 2018.) In another example from New Zealand, teacher-in-charge and their practices in school's rainbow group opened possibilities to explore and express lgbtq+ students' identities and uncertainties and critically think heteronormativity in school. These meetings also provided a safe space for visibility for different sexual and gender identities. (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 494.)

lgbtq+ students and their struggles are recognized in Finland right now. Seta (lgbtq+ rights organization in Finland) and their local member organizations has done a lot of work for lgbtq+ matters in general, but also focusing on lgbtq+ students. Seta does educational visits to comprehensive schools and secondary schools around Finland. They offer online lectures and different educational workshops, lectures, and educational days for professionals. The educational

content for professionals is chargeable, and school visits for students can be chargeable differing on the member organization providing the service. (Seta, n.d.) Their educational materials only appear in Finnish language. Seta has also done a guidebook called *Sateenkaari oppilaitoksissa* [Rainbow in learning institutions] which is a guide to make learning institutions more equal and safer for lgbtq+ students. This can be found in their website in Finnish and there is a possibility to order physical copies for schools.

Gender Diversity and Intersex Centre of Expertise (Sukupuolen moninaisuuden osaamiskeskus SMOK), Helsinki Pride (Seta's member organization) and Deaconess Foundation started a three-year-project *Sense of Belonging* for 16-29 years old lgbtq+ youths and adults to support them in school and work life. They have individual coaching and group coaching for e.g., supporting plans for future, everyday life and queer culture. They also develop and organize support for guardians and families of these youths and develop educational content for professionals, schools and workplaces. (Deaconess Foundation, n.d.) There has also been recent research interest in Finland on lgbtq+ students in different levels of academia to contribute to lgbtq+ youth's wellbeing.²

² Katri Haapakorva (2023) made their master's thesis about lgbtq+ conscious youth work and Minna Laiti (2024) made their doctoral dissertation about lgbtq+ inclusive high school nursing. Laiti's dissertation was the first nursing science dissertation in Finland that put lgbtq+ youth in the center.

3 Implementation of the study

This chapter presents the research task and question, methodological starting points and research methods used in this study. It also describes the construction of research material and how it was analysed in this study. I will discuss about ethical considerations and what kind of changes happened during the research process.

3.1 Research task and question

The purpose of this study is to generate new knowledge and practices with school staff on how to support their students and make school a safer space for LGBTQ+ students. Through creative activities and semi-structured interviews, I aim to explore with school staff what kind of support LGBTQ+ students may need in school for their wellbeing, especially regarding staff's role and school environment. This study is intended to broaden the understanding of poor wellbeing and mental health of LGBTQ+ students to explore how safe social environment and structural support could benefit this group. One perspective is also what kind of aspects could prevent staff and school environment to be supportive towards LGBTQ+ students. The context of this study is one secondary school in Helsinki metropolitan area in Finland and its staff members.

The research question is: In what ways school staff can support the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students in secondary schools?

3.2 Methodological starting points

This master's thesis is a qualitative research study that uses some principles from Art-Based Research (later ABR). In qualitative research, the focus and value of the research is in meaning-making processes and people's subjective experiences. Qualitative approaches aim to generate meaning and produce descriptive data of the research topic, and the paradigm is extremely diverse in

its methods and theories. (Leavy, 2017, p. 124.) Qualitative research gives a detailed voice to people's experiences and interpretations, highlighting the personal perspective of study participants give to a certain issue. Usually, qualitative research is done in participants' own environment and aims to understand the context they come from. Qualitative research demands flexibility, curiosity, open-mindedness and empathy from the research for them to be able to collect the necessary information from the participants. (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020, p. 10.) Critical paradigm in qualitative research critiques unequal relations of power within society, and it contains theoretical frameworks from feminist, critical race, indigenous and queer fields. These frameworks focus on inequality at all levels, and they explore how dominant ideologies may be reinforced or resisted by interactions between individuals or groups. (Leavy, 2017, pp. 130–131.)

This study is theory-driven research. Theory helps to clarify the focus of the study and identify how it may add new knowledge to wider scientific field. Using theory as a base of the research, it helps to define the research question and conceptual framework and add concepts from previous research. (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 33.) This study was created from the basis of real-life problem (worsened statistics on lgbtq+ students' wellbeing and mental health) but constructed and refined with theoretical concepts and research done around these topics. There is no existing theory about this topic, but the conceptual framework is the basis which this research stands on. Conceptual framework is developed through existing literature and theory (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 36; Leavy, 2017, p. 153), which guided data construction and analysis, making this study theory-driven by nature.

This study uses some principles from Art-Based Research (later ABR), where different creative activities are used to produce new knowledge and support and strengthen the interviews. Visual art is one way of doing ABR. As Holm, Sahlström and Zilliacus (2019, p. 311) phrases it, "arts-based visual research is an umbrella term for research that searches for ways to utilize visual arts in studying the human experience in more complex ways". Visual imagery is a

created perspective to the world, with its creator's point of view and context where they operate from. In this way, visual imagery can be used as a way of journaling. Visual imagery also offers a possibility to create multiple meanings by the creator, the viewer, and the context of the image. (Leavy, 2020, p. 236.)

Visual art could be a tool for transformation. It can challenge or dislodge belief systems and stereotypes. Visual art is shaped by cultural norms and values, and these are changed over time. In research, visual art and imagery is used to chronicle, resist, document and analyze. It also can inspire a person to do reflection on themselves or socially, which could result in seeing things differently. (Leavy, 2020, pp. 237–238; Holm et al., 2018, p. 313.) As this study aimed to create new knowledge and perspectives on how a marginalized group (lgbtq+ students) could be supported by the institution (their school), using visual art activities was appropriate way of collecting material to study this topic and its meanings from various viewpoints.

Visual arts-based participatory methods involve participants creating art (vs. researcher creating it), which serves as research material and represents it. Visual arts are used commonly in multimethod research accompanying interview data to elaborate the research subject more. (Leavy, 2020, pp. 242, 252.) Using creative methods can challenge the traditional subject-object positions when engaging participants in the process (Holm et al., 2018, p. 313). Art can also be used as a starting point for dialogue (Leavy, 2020, p. 242), which is how it was used in this study.

For this study, using qualitative and art-based approaches were suitable to answer the research question and generate new knowledge. The conceptual framework was constructed by doing targeted search and finding additional literature from those searched articles. Search words used were e.g., 'lgbtq students wellbeing' and 'safer space lgbtq'. Conceptual framework guided the research data construction by defining the research question and themes for interview guide, how participants were chosen and how research material was

analyzed. As Hennink et al. (2020, p. 37) states, “conceptual framework summarizes the theoretical assumptions and research questions.”

3.3 Constructing research material

In the context of this thesis, I was conducting one creative workshop and one group discussion a one group of school staff members, which was formed for this thesis. I also conducted one individual research material process to enrich the gathered research material. Research material construction was conducted through creative workshops and semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Interview themes and questions were constructed from themes of this study, conceptual framework and the knowledge needed to have this discussion.

The group was formed from different professionals working in school to ensure wider perspective on lgbtq+ students’ needs for support than what one profession could provide. Even if the aim is to get multifaceted views in a group discussion, it is rarely achieved. The discussion moves on so quickly that it can be hard for the moderator to react if the group suddenly takes a very one-sided and unanimous perspective. (Pietilä, 2017, p. 118.) None of the group members were teaching staff, and that is why I conducted one individual creative and discussion process to get a teacher perspective on this subject.

Collaboration with the school started as I called the principal, who referred me to a development manager, and they referred me to one staff member who could help with concrete planning and getting my message across the school. School’s research permit was applied. The planning started with an email exchange with an employee there. I shortly introduced myself and my thesis subject to the staff (about 20 employees were present) online and held creative pop up in the school for two hours where students and staff could come to make poetry and then I introduced my thesis subject. Few students came to this but were not interested in participating in the study. After getting all the permissions, I send a recruitment letter to students and staff via one employee who has access to school’s internal communication channels. They also printed posters to the school. After not

hearing anything from students or staff, I emailed my contacts and planned to visit for 2 hours when there were coffee servings for students and some staff members there to meet and recruit participants, but that was unsuccessful.

At this point I started to use snowballing as a recruitment method. When researcher has some contact person, they can lead the researcher to new informants, and data collection happens when informants lead the researcher from one informant to another (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 99). Some staff members I had met the previous time recommended me to contact two other employees from different locations, so I emailed them. These familiar employees were interested in participating in the study and asked their colleagues to join as well. I also went to introduce myself and my thesis to some employees in their open office and got one person to be interested. I send participant information letter and data protection plan to those who expressed their preliminary interest in participating. One staff member said that their colleague is interested also, but I asked them to send me a message so I could confirm personally that they want to be part of this. I also asked these staff members to remind their students of this study and encourage them to me in touch with me if they are interested.

I got some tentative answers from five staff members about participating in this research after I went to talk to the school. Due to scheduling difficulties, only three of them could attend the workshop and group interview in May 2024. I went through several date options one by one by email and called one employee whose work number was on public website. Then we also agreed on the space we would have the workshop. The staff group consisted of three employees and none of them were teachers. On autumn 2024, I wanted to enrich my research material and emailed again my contact employee to spread word that I would need teaching staff as participants. Only one currently teaching employee answered and after consulting my advisor, I decided to conduct an individual creative workshop and discussion.

For creative workshop, I used collage (Picture 1 and 2) and one writing exercise as creative activities. This approach enabled the participants to explore this

theme more holistically and the creative process was a starting point for discussing these themes further. My plan was to conduct this research with more involvement from the participants, but due to scheduling and recruitment issues, I had to take the lead on how this research went forward. I gave the participants the opportunity to tell me if they would like to do something else creatively, but they accepted my plans.



Picture 1. Collage made by a participant, using pictures and words

I chose collage, because it is a rather low-threshold creative activity to participate that I have used a lot in various contexts. This reasoning is stated in research as well: materials are quite accessible and many people are able to cut, glue and assemble pictures and words (Chilton & Scotti, 2014, p. 163). This was also quite sustainable choice since I could gather most of the materials from recycling centers or from people I knew or use materials I already owned. Research also supports using collage as a data construction method as it “may jar us into new

insights, tear apart and reconfigure ideas, and rework old patterns of thought” (Chilton & Scotti, 2014, p. 170). Collages (Picture 1 and 2) were used for awakening thoughts about the research topic and they were discussed during the group discussion, but not included in the data analysis as such. My other creative activity was collaborative writing assignment I had done in one of my courses during master’s studies. I wanted to have some activity participants could do collaboratively but with low threshold to participate and that they could start to have a dialogue in a creative way as a warm-up for semi-structured group discussion.

Before starting the research material collection, I send forms for informed consents and data protection plans (Appendices 1 and 2) for the participants to read via email. We started the workshop by going through data protection plan, signing informed consents, and going through safer space guidelines from UN association of Finland and my additions to that (confidentiality and right to participate in their own way). I asked if the participants wanted to add something to our guidelines, but participants accepted the guidelines as they were. I also reminded them to take care of themselves (drink water, go to the bathroom if necessary). We started without warming exercise, since the group already knew each other and had met and talked with me before. I asked if they wanted background music, so I put some instrumental music for them since they did not have wishes for the music. I instructed the collage making with introducing the materials and giving the theme (supporting LGBTQ+ students) and reminded them that the collages will be research material, and I will take pictures of them for my thesis.

The materials for collages were colorful paper, 30 different magazines, glue sticks, scissors, crayons, markers and sticker book full of queer-related stickers. There were also some stickers and flyers from Seta in the room and some of the participants used them as well, but they were not provided by me. The participants worked with their individual collages, sometimes discussing something but also focusing on their work. It was reminded that this is creative work, and they could approach it in any way they wanted. I took some notes on

how I instructed things and explained to them that I was doing that and not writing observations about their work. After the collage making, I introduced again the writing assignment. The assignment was to write for about five minutes about what thoughts the collage making and the theme of supporting LGBTQ+ students brought into their minds. After five minutes, they switched papers, underlined a few words or sentences from the text and wrote for five minutes what that text brought into their minds. Then we did one last round with this technique, so everyone had written something on each paper. After that everyone gets to read what others have written in their paper. I asked on several occasions if they have any questions about assignments or anything else. I had informed the participants that these meetings take two to three hours, and we finished the workshop in two hours. One participant said that they needed to leave earlier than planned and that was communicated to two other participants, but then they were quick to work on the assignments and everyone could stay at the end, and we finished an hour earlier than estimated schedule. After that we confirmed the meeting place for next week and I reminded them of the date and time.



Picture 2. Collage made by another participant, using pictures and words

The second meeting consisted of a semi-structured group discussion (Appendix 3, Table 1). One advance of interviewing is its flexibility. The interviewer can repeat the questions, clarify the answers and discuss with the interviewee (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 85). There were some technical challenges with the recording device at first and the introduction round and first answer to first interview question were not recorded, but this was noticed quickly and we repeated the introductions, and I summed up the first answer after the recorder was on.

The participants got the interview guide (Appendix 3) at the beginning of the session so they could follow it. There were also some complementary questions during the discussion that I asked (e.g. asking other participants what they think about one person's answer). Semi-structured interviews' benefit is that it allows the interviewer to specify questions based on interviewees' answers (Tuomi &

Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 88). Interview themes were 1) present situation in school, 2) supporting lgbtq+ students and their wellbeing, 3) making changes and bringing them to everyday practices and 4) importance and meaningfulness (Table 1). Interviews were constructed to be semi-structured interviews with themes and open-ended questions, which could be answered with the knowledge interviewees already had (Flick, 2023, p. 211). There were also theory-driven, hypotheses-directed questions which were created as additional questions based on literature review to see how interviewees correspond to previous research findings (Flick, 2023, p. 212).

Table 1. Examples of interview questions according to theme

Interview theme	Example question
Present situation in school	What kind of practices and guidelines you have in your school for supporting lgbtq+ students at the moment?
Supporting lgbtq+ students and their wellbeing	In what ways school environment (physical and social) creates safer space, agency and wellbeing?
Making changes and bringing them to everyday practices	What kind of barriers and possibilities there are in giving support?
Importance and meaningfulness	What could be most important things to focus on next?

The individual process went very similarly to group process, except the writing assignment was just free writing after making the collage. Discussion was conducted in online environment and recorded via computer instead of microphone and was shorter than group discussion.

3.4 Analysing research material

For analyzing the research material, I used qualitative content analysis. Content analysis fits for every qualitative research paradigm and it can be applied to

different combinations of analysis methods (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 103). I had 85 pages of transcriptions from the interviews and four pages of hand-written notes from the writing assignments in the creative workshops. The themes from collages were discussed in the interviews so collages were not included in the analysis as such. Analyzing process started with transcribing the interview recordings using transcription tool of Microsoft Word software. During the transcription process, I took preliminary notes on themes that were apparent in the discussion. This provides ideas for future analytic considerations as the research progress (Saldaña, 2013, p. 20).

After those preliminary notes, I started to give codes to different passages of the transcription that were slightly linked to the conceptual framework of this study (e.g., lack of LGBTQ+ specific practices). Codes are words or short phrases that summarizes a portion of language-based data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). The analysis was done with theory-guided approach, which means that analysis process can be supported by theory, but it does not directly come from theory. In this approach, it is important to recognize how previous knowledge may affect, but its usage is to broaden the mindset. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 109.)

When coding the research material (Table 2), I tried to find answers to my research question. In addition to that, I coded things that were in some ways related to the research task and topic of this thesis. Through coding, the researcher tries to find repeating patterns from the data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 5). First round of coding was scattered and I came up with almost 60 codes to describe this material. After the first round, I combined different codes together to make more coherent codes to describe the research material and what I wanted to find out from it. In data analysis, all collected data is analyzed in greater detail: codes are created from the interview transcripts and information from the participants is combined with concepts and theories (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 39).

After the second round of coding (Table 2), I counted how many times each code was repeated to see if there were clear emphases on some of the categories. Overall, there were 16 codes. Two codes stood out the most and they were

‘communication’ and ‘professional’s role’. I decided to go through my research material once more to see if the codes fitted and should I specify these two codes in some way to get more specific information out of them. After going through the research material for the third time, I decided to create subcodes to ‘communication’ and ‘professional’s role’ to emphasize the importance of these two codes and still get more nuanced information out of them, which is appropriate in qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2013, p. 78).

Table 2. Example of how the research material was constructed under the category of school climate.

Example phrases (translated in English)	Codes	Category
<p>“now that I talked about these safe space practices I wonder do we even have them in the classrooms on display”</p> <p>“every toilet had gendered signs, I mean pictures of a man and a woman, toilets were categorized as men’s and women’s toilets when though most of them were individual cubicles”</p> <p>“somehow I think about safer space guidelines, that if we would start to create them more with students, and maybe we could make it visible that we also have lgbtq+ students”</p>	<p>Physical environment Social environment Safer space</p>	<p>Safer spaces for lgbtq+ students</p>

3.5 Research ethics

In this research, I followed the guidelines for research integrity by the Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences and the Finnish National Advisory Board for Research Ethics (henceforth, TENK 2019, 2023). Ethics and research

permits were conducted with the Metropolia UAS and the collaborating organization. This thesis has gone through thorough ethical process with The Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the Helsinki Region Universities of Applied Sciences. Permit application was done in February 2024 and accepted after revising the documents in March and April 2024 according to ethical board's comments.

In qualitative research, subjectivity of the research and their participants is part of the research process (Flick, 2023, p. 8). Reflexivity in qualitative research means considering how power and positions come to play in research process (Leavy, 2017, pp. 47–48). Research setting was considered carefully by conducting the meetings on participants' working environment where I as a researcher was a guest. This was also emphasized in interaction with participants by telling them that they are experts in their field and institution.

After getting research permits, informed consents (Appendix 2) were prepared and gathered (TENK, 2023, p. 13) and confidentiality was ensured in the workshops regarding personal matters. Research material was stored appropriately: all digital material was stored in password-protected devices only I had access to, and all physical material (collages, writing assignments and signed consent forms) were stored in locked locker. All research materials will be deleted one year after the research is completed, no later than December 2025.

There was no prior contact with this school or its staff before this research, which gave me an opportunity to be as objective as possible while planning and doing this research. I had small group advising, individual advising and peer support during the whole research process to ensure that my own standpoint and wellbeing was suited to do this type of research and to be able to reflect the research ethics throughout the whole process. Investigator or analyst triangulation means that more than one person is working with the research material to reduce the potential bias of one researcher (Patton 1999, p. 1195). Although there were no other researchers doing the research material construction or analysis, there were an advisor and study colleagues to reflect

with how the research process goes and what decisions should be made, which added to the soundness of this research.

It was carefully considered what kind of participants are applicable for this research. In qualitative research, it is important that informants know as much as possible about the researched phenomenon or have experience about it. It should be aimed to be as considered and fitted for purpose as possible, and the researcher decides what that means in their research. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 98.) Originally, students were also a part of the desired participants, and it was clear that they should be legal adults (18 years or older). It was also considered should they be part of LGBTQ+ community or not to participate, but it was decided that their sexuality was not a criterion. The focus of this research was on the school community and the whole community should be part of making it safer to LGBTQ+ students, not only themselves. It was also considered that maybe feeling of belonging in LGBTQ+ community could have been an excluding criterion for those who are still in the process of questioning their sexuality or gender or for those who might not be comfortable to identify as a part of LGBTQ+ community in their school.

After the first creative workshop and group discussion with the staff, I decided to focus solely on staff members, shifting the focus on their role and thoughts about LGBTQ+ students' needs for support. The recruitment process to get participants was challenging and no students were in contact to show any preliminary interest in participating. After the first sessions in May 2024, I decided with the guidance of my advisor, to focus on the staff perspective. This also ensured that the participants could ponder and decide for themselves if and how they will be participating in the study.

In practice, research ethics included constructing the workshops with safer space guidelines for the participants, going through and signing informed consents and reminding the participants in every meeting that their participation is voluntary, and they could change their mind at any point in the process, but the research material that was already gathered could be used in this thesis. Safer space

guidelines were made to ensure it is as safe as possible to talk about the support needed and the staff's role in it for all participants. This was done at the beginning of the first creative workshop by going through the safer space guidelines and giving the participants the opportunity to add something if they wanted to. It was also explained that the research material was handled in a way that minimizes the possibility of recognizing participants, but full anonymity could not be guaranteed.

When analyzing the research materials and reporting the findings, participants' confidentiality was carefully considered and any potentially identifiable information (e.g., more exact working position or geographical position) in discussions was not reported. Instead, themes were discussed in a broader sense and in general level. Participants' statements were not identified (e.g., participant 1, participant 2) so individual participants' statements could not be connected to each other.

4 Findings

In this chapter, I will present the findings of this study. Subchapters are constructed from the categories created in the data analysis phase. Within these subchapters, I will explicate what aspects affect on supporting LGBTQ+ students through analyzed research material of this study and how that intertwines with the conceptual framework and previous studies made. The categories were different roles in school, practices in school, safer spaces and school climate.

The research question of this study is: In what ways school staff can support the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students in secondary schools?

4.1 Power and responsibility: Different roles in making changes

The data analysis shows that professional's role was one of the key elements in supporting LGBTQ+ students in school. Adults can be leaders and role models on how minority students are listened to (hooks, 1994, pp. 150–151) and how safer space guidelines are practiced in the school environment (Dougherty et al., 2023). The professional roles which were constructed in the data analysis are confidant, supporter, advocate and intervener. I will also describe how students' roles were a part of this role construction.

Confidant. One important role that came through in the data analysis was confidant: a safe adult who students can contact if there is a need for that. Participants emphasized that it can be any adult from the school, whether it be teacher, someone from school healthcare or maintenance. The profession does not matter as much as the feeling of being safe with this adult. The relevance of this was also brought up in the context of disapproving family: if a student cannot talk about their LGBTQ+ identity at home, it is even more important that in school they have at least one adult to talk to in confidence. This is supported by School Health Questionnaires in Finland, which stated that LGBTQ+ students experience more mental and physical violence from their parents and other caregivers than their peers (Jokela et al., 2020, p. 24). Participants also acknowledged that

building trust takes time. One participant hoped that every student would have at least one person in their life that they could confide in. Other participant talked about how having a low threshold to book a meeting with a staff member makes it easier to talk about difficult things, even personal matters not regarding to their studies. They thought that it was crucial to make it clear that there is not too small a thing with which to contact personnel. McDermott et al. (2024, p. 113) stated that there needs to be sufficient time to build a trusting relationship with LGBTQ+ youth for them to be able to be open with their thoughts and feelings. Sufficient time also increases the possibility of being autonomous in decision making by having enough time to ask questions and consider different options (McDermott et al., 2024, p. 113).

Supporter. Professionals' role as supporters was discussed through two different lenses: how they could support their students and their colleagues. Participants discussed how they could support teachers by having joint classes and working as a pair when forming student groups. With students, participants could be there to listen, advocate and support, but when their scope of expertise or resources were spent, they also supported students by referring them to different services which would benefit their students. This was supported by Stargell et al.'s (2020, pp. 122–123) study, which stated that school staff could give in-the-moment support and refer to longer-term services, if there is a trusting and respectful relationship between a staff member and student. Participants in this study supported students by helping them to figure out their dreams and strengths and mentioned how they were walking beside the students in that phase of life. Support was also given as encouragement and presenting different options and perspectives on student's life situation. They wanted to emphasize how students were not alone in their situations, and they did not have to figure things out on their own, thus creating hopefulness in their students. Hope has been found to be a therapeutic factor and using it in client work and goal setting addressed in professional training (Moe et al., 2023, p. 53). It was also considered meaningful for the professional to be able to help and support. One aspect that came through in written assignments was professionals' role as supporters of student's growth and development, not only in school but also in identity building and building

relationship skills. Minority identity is linked to many stress processes simultaneously (Meyer, 2003, p. 5), making identity an important aspect to support.

Advocate. One way to advocate was to bring LGBTQ+ matters into discussion within school with colleagues and administrators. Participants acknowledged that there is a Pride event in the school and discussion around that but expressed that there should be ongoing discussion about LGBTQ+ matters. This was brought up in the discussion several times, but there were not that many concrete examples on what forums or situations these discussions would be had. One example was a team which included several different professionals within school that discussed things about students' wellbeing. Participants felt that they have power and influence in how things in their school are developed in individual and communal level. They also felt that they were advocates for the students in matters that needed to be further discussed with teachers or school administrators. These findings were supported by Dougherty et al.'s study (2023) where school staff were supporting their LGBTQ+ students by e.g., advocating for inclusive policies in school and collaborating with different school professionals (Dougherty et al., 2023, pp. 292–293, p. 295).

Intervener. Participants discussed how it is mainly teachers' responsibility to intervene in discriminatory language or situations and bring those matters further if needed, since they are the adults who are more closely interacting with students on daily basis. Still every adult's responsibility to intervene and create safer space was emphasized. Participants discussed how everyone should carry that responsibility but acknowledged that attitudes or sense of discomfort could affect if and how school personnel intervene in discriminatory situations. This was supported by Swanson and Gettinger's (2016, pp. 339–340) study, where personal values and discomfort towards LGBTQ+ matters were found to be barriers in supporting LGBTQ+ students. Participants in this study expressed that they believe that there is a low threshold to intervene and fix situations when needed. They also expressed that the students had given some feedback about teachers, that there had not been intervention when discriminatory language was used, and

students were unhappy about that. This was especially prevalent in situations where there were no other adults present in discriminatory situations. One participant stated that there had been only a few instances during their career that they had had to intervene in discriminatory language that students used, saying that it is quite rare.

Students' roles. In the interviews, there are several notions on how students have been somehow part of changing practices in school, e.g., asking for a changing room as a nonbinary student as a catalyst to change practices in physical education. Some studies have shown that active LGBTQ+ students have made differences in their school (check Iskander & Shabtay, 2018), but participants in this study also noted that it is more unlikely for students to approach school personnel with different needs and demands, and that they would be more likely to drop out of class. Even if students enter a democratic classroom, most students are not comfortable speaking freely, especially if they need to explain thoughts and feelings that go against the mainstream (hooks, 1994, p. 179). Participants were brainstorming how they could use existing practices and questionnaires to gather information and get students more involved in co-creating needed changes in their school. This discusses well with Freire's (1970/2014) and hooks' (1994) thoughts on engaging students to process of changing and developing practices and it being a communal effort instead of changing things from power keeper's perspective.

One aspect of students' activity that participants brought up was students' age. Participants recalled that older/adult students might be surer of themselves and therefore more willing to approach school personnel with different issues. One participant described that students' activity and participation was also more likely when safer space was created at the beginning of a new course. In their study McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2017, p. 494) found out that teacher who implemented critical pedagogical practices and created safer space increased the possibilities for LGBTQ+ students to explore and express themselves. Participant in this study acknowledged that there is still work to engage more students, and especially students who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community, to

participate in changing school climate and e.g., participating in Pride events in school. In their study, McDermott et al. (2023) discovered that whole school approach was needed, meaning that everyone in school community should partake in committed, long-term and embedded interventions for them to be successful and supportive towards LGBTQ+ students' mental health. Just adding some singular 'token' intervention was not successful. (McDermott et al., 2023, p. 8.) Supportive actions should be voluminous enough to create overall positive effect in school climate (Snapp, McGuire et al., 2015, p. 590). One participant wrote in the written assignment that students teach adults and through those encounters, professionals get more experience and skills on LGBTQ+ matters. hooks (1994, pp. 148, 152) discusses how their students influence their learning and role in school, connecting personal narratives to academic information.

To summarize these roles, participants in this study found it important to be safe adults who could listen to, advice and support their students. Intervening in discriminatory language and actions and advocating for more inclusive practices were held necessary. Students had also transformative roles in the school community: through their needs and actions, some practices were developed and professionals also learned new ways to support safer school environment and their students' wellbeing.

4.2 From words to actions: Practices needed to support LGBTQ+ students' wellbeing

After professional's role, communication had the largest number of phrases from all the codes. Wanting to keep this finding and deepening the knowledge coming from it, I created subcodes to describe this in more detail. Subcodes that were created were information sharing, asking as practice and language. Other practices discussed were safer space guidelines and different questionnaires about equity, harassment and bullying.

The language people use creates reality. When the way people use language and how they think changes, it inevitably changes the ways of knowing. It is difficult to recognize that as a society, people affect each other with the language that they use. (hooks, 1994, p. 174.) In discussions with participants, it was brought up several times how using student's chosen name or pronoun was very meaningful to the individual, and quite easy thing to do as a professional. One participant expressed that when there are nonbinary students present, they are observing how other students talk to them. In this way, a staff member protects the safer space by being aware of the language used towards minority students. This mirrors Owens and Mattheus' (2022, p. 1152) study, where equal treatment and use of correct pronouns were found to be important in supporting LGBTQ+ students' wellbeing.

In their study of hidden curriculum and heteronormativity, Carpenter and Lee (2010, pp. 106–107) interviewed teachers and students. One interviewee reported that they were conscious in their usage of language and silent messages, being careful not to exclude anyone by the way they spoke. Similarly to this, participants in this research brought up how they try not to make assumptions about anyone's dating partners or parents, but to use inclusive language instead. Participants brought up how important it is to be accepting and neutral, whatever student tells them. School personnel should not question or undermine students' feelings or problems, and it should be made clear from the start that talking to this adult is safe and students will not be criticized. Stargell et al. (2020, p. 123) studied staff training and in that, using nonjudgemental language and not implying right or wrong answers were encouraged.

One aspect of language that came forth in discussions with the participants was how equity and safer space guidelines were presented with words that give quite negative connotations, such as discipline ('kurinpito'), harassment ('häirintä') and bullying ('kiusaaminen'). One participant discussed how problem-centered discussions and guidelines about equity are, instead of viewing things from a more positive standpoint. Now the practice seemed to focus on intervening to discrimination, not preventing it from happening. Also in research, the focus on

often on negative aspects of lgbtq+ community and their wellbeing, leaving out more comprehensive understanding and perception on lgbtq+ people (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 370). Mann et al. (2024) studied lgbtq+ inclusiveness and euphoria that school environment can bring, shifting the focus from a challenging environment to transforming it to become supportive (Mann et al., 2024, p. 60).

One practice that the participants explained was that every time when new student groups started their studies, teachers go through group rules and guidelines, and in those situations also talked about issues related to equity and inclusion. This practice replicates Dougherty et al.'s (2023, p. 295) study where teachers went through classroom social contract and expectations, also addressing school's zero tolerance policy about bullying. In their study, teachers addressed lgbtq+ matters e.g., trained students to call out anti-lgbtq+ language and created lgbtq+ awareness through discussions (Dougherty et al., 2023, p. 295), whether as in this study, it was left unknown in what ways or to what extent lgbtq+ matters were discussed at the beginning of forming a new student group and ground rules for it. Carpenter and Lee (2010, p. 110) found that students had generally a lack of interest towards lgbtq+ matters and heterosexual students were not as active to intervene in discriminatory situations as lgbtq+ students, which would make it important for school staff to act as an example. Participants noted that sharing this information as general knowledge would be important, since in many cases students would not ask about it and rather just drop out of class.

One practice this school has was different kinds of questionnaires. The school participants work in has anonymous online questionnaires, which map out equity, harassment and bullying. Some questionnaires were repeated annually, some were ongoing through the school year so students could report any discriminatory actions. When discussing about school questionnaires, there was no mentions of lgbtq+ matters in them but participants directed the discussion to bullying in more general level and explained that these questionnaires specify different types of bullying quite well. In their school's questionnaires there is space for open answers in which students could specify their answers. No minority group was

specified in the questionnaire, and participants said that if that was the case, the questionnaire would be excessively long.

Safer space guidelines were discussed from the point of view of accessibility to information. They are on intranet of this institution, but participants wondered how many students would find them there and discussed alternative ways of sharing those guidelines with students. Even after trying with different search words, one participant could not find anything LGBTQ+ specific from their institution's guidelines and policies, replicating Steck and Perry's (2018, p. 236) findings that school administrators did not have or know about LGBTQ+ specific policies. Participants discussed how students may not know all the available services for them, and sharing information was considered important from that aspect as well. It was highlighted that students should have information on who to contact if they were mistreated or discriminated in school. Having access to and sharing information is one aspect of communication that the data analysis emphasizes. Participants discussed how having information about school practices could ease students' stress when e.g., nonbinary students would have the information about what dressing room they could use in physical education classes before the course starts. It has been studied that sexual and gender minorities have more symptoms of anxiety and depression than their heterosexual and cisgendered peers (Källström et al., 2022, p. 13; Majlander et al., 2022, p. 183), endorsing the notion that LGBTQ+ specific practices and acknowledging differences in identities and issues under that umbrella could decrease LGBTQ+ students' stress.

Information and knowledge are not one-sided things. Participants discussed how they would ask about bullying if there were signs of social anxiety or withdrawal from peers. It was brought up that identity building and supporting that would be necessary, and that could be done by asking students about dating and bringing gender identity and sexuality into discussions more often. This was supported by Castro and Sujak's (2014, p. 453) study, in which they stated that for many LGBTQ+ students' educational institutions have an integral role in identity development. Participants in this study noted that professionals should ask the right things from students, otherwise it may be left unsaid. Participants were also self-aware that

they needed to remind themselves to ask more often about these topics. To commit to practice in liberatory way, there needs to be emphasis on making it a habit (hooks, 1994, 147). One participant talked about how they always ask if a student have other people to talk to, if the student brought up some personal difficulties to ensure they were not the only supportive person in that student's life.

Participants discussed how it is important to acknowledge students as a whole person and not only through their lgbtq+ identity and that it was important to discuss about everything else as well with them. It was considered important to create a relaxed and safe environment and to use humor in suitable situations. This was supported by Dougherty et al.'s (2023, p. 295) study, where school staff noted that talking about other things like sports or pop culture and using humor made students feel more comfortable to approach and communicate with staff.

4.3 From invisibility to visibility: Safer spaces in school

The findings show that physical environment and visibility can contribute to making the school environment safer space for lgbtq+ students. One topic that was discussed in group discussion was lgbtq+/rainbow merchandise as a way to signal one's allyship, e.g. stickers or lanyards. One participant said it to be "a visual signal for students that this could be a safe adult". Rainbows can be a way to signal that someone is a homosexual or an ally, providing a minimal guarantee of unlikely negative reaction. This could make it easier for lgbtq+ student to approach a person wearing something with a rainbow symbol. (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 464.) This educational institution also participates in local Pride event and had rainbow flags on flagpoles during that event.

Already in School Health Questionnaire from 2019, it was stated that lgbtq+ students felt that school environment was more unsafe and insufficient than their peers for e.g., how toilets and changing rooms were arranged (Jokela et al., 2020, p. 28). Participants in this study recounted that individual staff members were

responsible for changing toilets to be gender neutral. The school had gendered (women/men) individual toilets and then some staff members took gendered stickers off the doors to make them inclusive to all genders. After that, some other toilets were also made gender neutral. Dougherty et al. (2023, p. 293) found out that school staff were advocating for inclusive policies by recognizing and addressing discriminatory practices e.g., gender-based dress codes. Participants disclosed that in the school they work, they did not have gender neutral changing rooms before. Gendered spaces in schools exclude nonbinary students, resulting them to have to hide their identities (Myry, 2022, p. 1084). Participants described that one active student contacted a staff member about it, and they arranged an alternative changing room very quickly. This was then informed to the student and PE teacher gave positive feedback that the changing room issue was raised, signaling that nonbinary students may not have to hide their identities or needs. Even though it is only some teachers, there have been changes on physical education practices, e.g., abandoning gender-segregated group divisions and giving options to gender-neutral locker rooms (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022, pp. 376–377).

Safer space guidelines were brought up in the context of physical environment as well as communication. Safer space guidelines were not visible in school, and this was one key point in which participants wanted to make a change before next semester. Though making the physical environment safer was considered as good practice with e.g., safe space stickers, it is not enough by itself and should be used with interpersonal support strategies (Dougherty et al., 2023, pp. 293–294). Participants also thought of bringing materials about LGBTQ+ matters to teachers' lounge to share information but also for them to be accessible and visible to school staff.

Intervening to discriminatory language is important, but participants also brought up that even without direct name calling or other form of bullying, the general tone when discussing about LGBTQ+ matters affects on the atmosphere. Social environment was seen to affect on sense of safety and how comfortable students are to express themselves. Participants explained that every year there is some

sort of bullying between students, usually making some malevolent comments, staring at or laughing at someone. When school has adapted inclusive and supportive curriculum in their practices, it reduced bullying in school-level (Snapp, McGuire et al., 2015, p. 591). Students need to feel safe for them to be able to learn and adapt new knowledge and perspectives (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 286), so for the sake of supporting their academic performance (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, p. 329), it would be beneficial to address all discrimination-based harassment as soon as possible.

Not every professional is a safe adult for LGBTQ+ students. Participants talked about how in school's questionnaires it has come up that staff is not always intervening in discriminatory language or situations. They also revealed that in these questionnaires, participants reported more experiences of bullying from a staff member than another student and heard these experiences also from the students themselves, deviating from Herry and Mulvey's (2024, pp. 10–11) study where discrimination caused by sexual orientation came from other students. Participants' beliefs about staff attitudes were that some staff members think that LGBTQ+ issues do not belong to them and are not interested in these matters. Similarly in their study about hidden curriculum, Castro and Sujak (2014, pp. 457–458) suggest that only one mention of academic discussion about homosexuality in a class could reflect wider attitudes and values of teachers: that it is not teachers' responsibility to provide representations of homosexuality and finding that unimportant. In their study, one staff member expressed that they were surprised how many times students had experienced discrimination from their teachers (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 459). In my research material, participants were not surprised but possibly already witnessed discriminatory attitudes from their colleagues, mirroring Laiti et al.'s (2024) findings where some teachers were described to be openly LGBTQ+ discriminative (Laiti et al., 2024, p. 299).

One participant mentioned that it is not easy or comfortable to intervene and report discriminatory actions by their colleagues, but they felt that is an important responsibility nevertheless. Participants acknowledged that this issue did not concern only certain individuals, but it was being upheld by discriminatory

attitudes and structures, which could be a sign of hidden heteronormative curriculum (Carpenter & Lee, 2010; Castro & Sujak, 2014). Teacher discrimination was found to be related to school climate factors. Teachers were to be found to have a unique role in influencing school climate, and especially student-teacher discriminatory interactions were found to be important factors for it. (Herry & Mulvey, 2024, pp. 12, 16.) Participants themselves confessed that at the beginning of their careers, there was insecurity towards lgbtq+ issues, fear of saying or doing something wrong or hurtful. Being afraid of making mistakes or doing something wrong prevents us from making the academy culturally diverse place where every dimension of differences has been addressed (hooks, 1994, p. 33). Participants discussed how this might have been hindering their ability to support lgbtq+ students. Work experience, self-awareness and encounters with lgbtq+ students were factors that helped these participants overcome those emotional barriers.

One participant described that they started the courses by having a conversation about how everyone could be able to participate in class discussions comfortably and feel good in class. This participant explained that by doing so, it is easier to construct the situation to be less teacher-led. Study by McDermott et al. (2023, p. 9) also supports the collaborative leadership between teachers and students to create more successful interventions for lgbtq+ students. Collective participation and dialogue between teachers and students provide space for mutual respect and recognition (hooks, 1994, p. 186).

Another participant discussed the meaning of being a role model to students. School staff should be examples of social rules by how they speak, act and interact with people from different backgrounds and groups. This goes well with Carpenter and Lee's (2010) findings in their study, where lgbtq+ students were more likely to be proactive when hearing discriminatory comments than their heterosexual peers. In their study, over half of heterosexual students indicated that they would ignore discrimination and do nothing about it. (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 110.) Being a role model to all students creates an example on how to build a safer school environment through communication and actions.

One participant brought up how different ethnicities and cultures are taken into account in school, but other more invisible minority groups like LGBTQ+ students are not. They also brought up how some people could find it conflicting to highlight LGBTQ+ matters if it is in contraction with some other minority group, like some religious group. In McDermott et al.'s (2023, p. 9) study, student participants found it problematic to have LGBTQ+ interventions without acknowledging intersectionality in different identities such as ethnicity, religion or disability. One participant emphasized that there should be discussion with the school faculty about this to approach this matter with sensitivity and respect towards every minority group. In their study, Carpenter and Lee (2010, p. 109) also found out that there is a need for openness and dialogue about different beliefs and values in the faculty to address possible moral tensions and different attitudes that exist in any community.

4.4 School climate: Bringing policies to practice

When representations of LGBTQ+ minorities are not stated in the official curriculum, it is up to every teacher to decide in which level these discussions and representations are in their classrooms. Values and norms in hidden curriculum are reflected on students' and teachers' actions in school and shaping of social relationships (Apple, 2024, p. 551; Giroux, 1978, p. 148). This example makes it clear how hidden curriculum blends with the official curriculum, which causes a lack of visibility, understanding and representation (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 458). Participants in my research discussed their institution's guidelines for equity and safer space but admitted that they do not know how well these are implemented in everyday school life. As Castro and Sujak (2014, p. 471) stated, "equality does not come from concession, it comes from inclusion". To create a space for intervention, there needs to be collaborative discussion that overcomes boundaries (hooks, 1994, p. 129). Reforming of hidden curriculum and socialization in school is needed to build solidarity, responsibility and communal learning between students (Giroux, 1978, p. 148, 151; Giroux & Penna, 1979, p. 22).

In many occurrences, participants discussed the themes of equity and inclusion on broader point of view, displaying how everyone should be treated with care and respect, without pointing out lgbtq+ students and their needs. It was considered as basic practice to treat every student with respect and acceptance. Participants admitted that they did not have any lgbtq+ specific questions or practices, and they waited for the students to bring these matters to the discussion by themselves. This concurs in Carpenter and Lee's (2010) findings, when they asked about suggestions to challenge heteronormativity in teacher education. Their participants gave their suggestions relating community building in more general sense instead of addressing lgbtq+ concerns exclusively. (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 115.)

When discussing about safer space guidelines, participants informed that there is no lgbtq+ specific notions in them, and that guidelines "should be clear to everyone and everyone would follow those guidelines". This gives the impression that there is an assumption that everyone knows and follows safer space guidelines, but there is no certainty of it. There was also a contradictory note on that, participant discussing how this subject still needs a lot of work. When lgbtq+ matters are not addressed, it gives an underlying assumption that world is heterosexual and making hidden curriculum heteronormative. This then gives a permission for homophobia by "othering" lgbtq+ people. (Carpenter & Lee, 2010, p. 114; Snapp, Burdge et al., 2015, p. 255.) Advocating with unclear anti-discrimination policies was found difficult, and school policies should be created and made more clearly defined to include concrete lgbtq+ protections that staff are aware of (Dougherty et al., 2023, p. 296). In schools that had clear antibullying policies, it was found that teachers took supportive roles towards lgbtq+ students more frequently (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, p. 339).

Participants felt that there are quite low threshold and real opportunities to influence and develop school practices on a personal and institutional level, but it was also noted that changes on an institutional level take a lot of time. It could take years of work to implement changes into practice. It was discussed how

administrative actions could help personnel to engage better in furthering LGBTQ+ matters, if administrators would give time and space for developmental work and emphasize that this was important. Time and capacity were found to be a major factor in supporting LGBTQ+ students' mental health. If the inclusion policies do not have comprehensive plan for implementation, monitoring and evaluation, there is a chance that the inclusiveness is going to fail (McDermott et al., 2023, pp. 8–9).

Participants discussed about professional development as a way to change school climate to be more inclusive and supportive towards LGBTQ+ students. They talked about how much staff members' skills and understanding affects on their ability to encounter LGBTQ+ students. As in Steck and Perry's (2018, p. 235) study, it was seen as critical to create possibilities for professional development to increase self-awareness and challenge one's own stereotypical thinking and actions and building professional skills to support LGBTQ+ students. Participants in this study felt that if personnel have training and discussions about LGBTQ+ matters, it would positively influence in a sense of safety in school. Besides professional training and discussions about LGBTQ+ topics, participants thought that reading relevant literature and finding new methods could be beneficial to support their LGBTQ+ students. They started to envision how they can improve their own skills, which was in parallel with Steck and Perry's (2018, p. 237) study. In Hayes and Buckingham's study (2024, p. 23) they suggest that developing knowledge, self-efficacy and attitudes towards intervention could influence on more inclusive and supportive school climate for LGBTQ+ students.

Participants thought that they could propose LGBTQ+ matters as a topic for staff's training days and school's personnel forum where wellbeing topics are being discussed. Professional development does not happen in a vacuum, and reflections with colleagues were seen as important to evaluate their own work performance. Dougherty et al. (2023, p. 295) found in their study that multidisciplinary collegial communication and relationships increased staff's ability to support LGBTQ+ students. It was also discussed how collegial support and taking care of professional's own wellbeing were important to be able to support students. To be able to teach students in an empowering way, the professional

must commit to their own wellbeing (hooks, 1994, p. 15). Other ways to develop school climate were maintaining discussions about lgbtq+ matters around the year, paying attention to physical environment (gender-neutral toilets, visible safer space guidelines, “rainbow merchandise”), supporting colleagues and engaging students by asking them what aspects needs to be changed and starting to develop practices from those answers.

Participants in this thesis discussed several times that actions towards lgbtq+ inclusive and supportive school climate were dependable on staff members’ individual activity and beliefs, and that there should be homogeneous effort in creating and maintaining communal wellbeing. In their study McDermott et al. (2023, p. 9) had a recurring theme of over-reliance on individuals’ activity and passion in lgbtq+ interventions, and how there are risks and limitations by doing that. As Carpenter and Lee (2010, p. 115) state, it seems to be difficult to build a bridge from current situation of hidden heteronormative curriculum to ideal situation where diversity is understood to be complex, and all groups and individuals are met with affirmation and inclusion.

The differences between staff members came up in the participants’ discussion and they reflected that unifying staff’s working habits could be difficult. In their study, Carpenter and Lee (2010, p.113) found that over half of the lgbtq+ students and half of the lgbtq+ staff members were not comfortable to be open about their sexuality in school environment. Even though this study did not gather statistical data of people’s sexuality or gender and their openness in school, it is likely that some part of student and staff body is lgbtq+ and not comfortable to be open about it. One participant mentioned that there is a certification training program in Sweden which was designed to train professionals to reflect their own attitudes and working habits and how to be more inclusive towards lgbtq+ clients. They explained that people who had had this training were reporting that it helped to be more inclusive to other minority groups as well.

One aspect that affects school climate is students’ and personnel’s emotions. Participants recounted that the students had been upset when staff members had

not intervened in discriminatory situations and there was an assumption of stress about students having to be vocal about their needs. If LGBTQ+ students would not have social pressures and stress from their environment, they could be freer to be themselves and participate more openly, which would positively influence to supportive environment and emotional development (Castro & Sujak, 2014, p. 452). Participants themselves brought up feeling insecure and afraid of saying or doing something hurtful accidentally. Feelings of insufficiency, of not doing enough to support and help their students, were brought up as well. When having to intervene in colleagues' actions, participants said that they felt it was uncomfortable and difficult. When school staff were confident about their ability and felt in control over their decision to intervene and had a positive emotional response to it, they had stronger intentions to intervene (Hayes & Buckingham, 2024, p. 21).

One participant also discussed how hearing about students' difficulties probably awakens feelings in every professional, and being able to share that with colleagues or in work counselling is helpful. Being able to help and support were experienced as rewarding and meaningful, and it was seen as a privilege to be there for a student. Using care as a part of professional's repertoire enhances wellbeing (Huhtinen-Hildén & Pitt, 2018, p. 45), which was highlighted here to have affected the student and the professional working with them. Openness and courage were also mentioned when discussing about interacting with LGBTQ+ students. It has been found to benefit LGBTQ+ youth's mental health when adults validate their feelings (McDermott et al., 2024, p. 116).

School climate consists of and is affected by everything from everyday experiences to inclusive and supportive curriculum (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016, p. 346). This makes this essentially important that school climate is considered at every level of practice to make it as supportive as possible. Students found LGBTQ+ inclusive teaching to improve their learning and wellbeing, making their lives and experiences relevant and visible (Snapp, Burdige et al., 2015, p. 259). Developing and maintaining LGBTQ+ supportive school climate can then have lot of positive effects.

5 Conclusions and discussion

In this final chapter, I will go through the main findings of this study and draw conclusions based on those. I will explicate the trustworthiness of this research and give recommendations for future research around this topic. The purpose of this study was to co-create new information and practices with school staff on how to support their students and make school a safer space for LGBTQ+ students. I aimed to explore with school staff about what kind of support LGBTQ+ students may need in school for their wellbeing, especially in regards of staff's and school environment's role through creative activities and semi-structured interviews. This study was intended to broaden the understanding of poor wellbeing and mental health of LGBTQ+ students to explore how safe social environment and structural support could benefit this group. One perspective was also what kind of aspects could prevent staff and school environment to be supportive towards LGBTQ+ students. The context of this study was one secondary school in Helsinki metropolitan area in Finland and its staff members. The research question was: In what ways school staff can support the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students in secondary schools?

The findings emphasized the variety of professionals' roles in school and different ways of communication and interaction with students. The support for LGBTQ+ students was made possible in various ways e.g., trustworthy and supportive adults, changes to make physical environments and language more gender-neutral and improving the accessibility of safer space guidelines were discussed. These findings are supported by previous research (Berg & Kokkonen 2022; Dougherty et al., 2023; Herry & Mulvey 2024; McDermott et al., 2023; McDermott et al., 2024; Steck & Perry, 2018; Swanson & Gettinger 2016), but also gives more nuanced information especially on professionals' role on supporting LGBTQ+ students.

Building together a safe and LGBTQ+ supportive school climate was a common goal to all participants in this study, but they also recognized the limitations and barriers to achieve that goal. Hidden heteronormative curriculum (Carpenter &

Lee, 2010; Castro & Sujak, 2014), which came through in lgbtq+ minority's invisibility in school guidelines and policies, intervening instead of preventing lgbtq+ discrimination and staff's role in that discrimination left a lot of room for improvement in everyday school life and institutional level such as school policies.

Based on the findings, one essential aspect to improve in the educational field would be educating professionals to reflect their attitudes and working habits to ensure empathetic, safe and understanding encounters with lgbtq+ students. Huhtinen-Hildén and Pitt (2018) and Junttila et al. (2024) studied pedagogical sensitivity and care between teacher and their students, and training in this area could be beneficial. What was alarming in the findings was that instead of peer discrimination (Herry & Mulvey, 2024, pp. 10–11), school staff was found to be more discriminatory towards lgbtq+ students. It remained unknown if there were consequences to this behavior. Nevertheless, this speaks about the hidden heteronormative curriculum (Carpenter & Lee, 2010; Castro & Sujak, 2014) and the lack of safer space (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019), that should be explicitly and clearly addressed in educational institutions. In their working paper based on School Health Questionnaire 2019, Jokela et al. (2020, pp. 30–31) make an extensive list on how school environment could be improved and wellbeing of lgbtq+ students could be supported and Seta has educational materials and training for school staff (Seta, n.d.), so there is a lot of material to start that professional development with.

In the findings of this study, participants noted that it takes time to build trust to students for them to bring forth their lgbtq+ identity. Reciprocal relationship, e.g., both parties talking and listening, could help address the power imbalance between a professional and a young person, making it easier to build trust and safety (McDermott et al., 2024, p. 115).

The problem with different professional roles is that they could also hinder the empowerment and agency of the students. If school professionals take the role of advocate and supporter, are they building practices and platforms for students to be heard on their own, or adapting the situation as where students are objects

for intervention (Freire 1970/2014; hooks 1994)? As a professional, there is the danger of getting attached to one's own role in helping others, when the focus should be on making oneself as unnecessary as possible and supporting the agency of the students. Swanson and Gettinger (2016, p. 340) also found in their study that teachers rate the importance of supportive roles higher than actually implementing these roles. This raises the question whether a certain role or image of oneself as a professional is considered to be enough to be a so called good ally or advocate. One participant ended their discussion by speaking about how important it would be to actively work on supporting LGBTQ+ students' wellbeing and inclusion instead of taking equity and inclusion for granted.

Good research practice demands evaluation of the research project. In qualitative research, studies are evaluated by their trustworthiness or credibility (Leavy, 2017, p.154). Research's credibility is often tied with its transparency. This means making the research process and its steps clear and understandable for the audience. Transparency includes how research question was created and how it guided the process, how and why research was done the way it was, what affected on decisions about participants, methods used and topic selection. (Flick, 2023, p. 498.) I have described this process in as much detail as possible and explained my justifications on different decisions during the process throughout this thesis. Credibility of this research was increased by peer debriefing in the advising meetings and with a student colleague who was not involved in this study, triangulation of different methods (creative methods and interviews) and appropriateness of terms of reference (Flick, 2023, pp. 496–497).

Ethical reasoning in this process was thoroughly done, since I had to apply permits from the collaborating organization and The Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the Helsinki Region Universities of Applied Sciences. I had individual and group advising throughout the research process, adding triangulation to strengthen the soundness of this research (Patton 1999, p. 1195). Regarding methodological starting points in qualitative research and critical theory, my research methods suited to conduct this research through those paradigms. I wanted to get in-depth personal views of this phenomenon (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 98) about minority group's needs and inequality regarding

majority (Leavy, 2017, pp. 130–131), which was done through art-based activities and semi-structured interviews. These methods were suitable to construct the research material for this study and I think these findings are applicable to other minority groups in some form.

When I started to construct this framework, the emphasis was on minority stress and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people in relation to critical and feminist pedagogy. As students were left out of my participant group, the emphasis transformed to be more about heteronormativity in educational institutions and safer spaces for LGBTQ+ students through the work school staff and administrators could do. Critical and feminist pedagogy aims to transform education to be just for all students and encourages changes in all levels of schools, which ties it to challenging heteronormativity on hidden curricula and school policies.

Transforming educational environment and policies would contribute on making schools safer space for LGBTQ+ students, enhancing their mental health and wellbeing. When minority stress is acknowledged and actions taken to support LGBTQ+ students, safer space could be created for everyone. These theoretical and value-based concepts guided how I constructed this research and worked with research material.

The interview guide was carefully crafted to reflect conceptual framework and research question. The concepts reflected the phenomenon through different aspects (LGBTQ+ people's wellbeing, critical and feminist pedagogy, hidden curriculum and safer space). I tried to create interview questions in a way that they are clear and informative to fit the purpose of this study. Semi-structured interviews fit to this research and provided possibilities for additional questions and information from literature to reflect on the discussions, e.g., it is researched how school staff's attitudes affect on their actions with LGBTQ+ students. Individual interview was affected by the fact that during creative workshop, we already discussed some of the topics and because there were no other participants to discuss with, I needed to converse with the participant, making some of the viewpoints not adaptable to the data analysis. Qualitative content analysis was suitable for this study for me to be able to analyze research material in a theory-

driven and creative way. It was my first time conducting research discussions and analyzing the data by coding, so methodological skills have room for improvement.

One limitation of this research was the recruitment process and narrowness of participants. The initial idea was to recruit students and staff members to co-create a community-based participatory research project together with them. Due to delayed schedules, the recruitment time was limited. It was difficult to find interested participants and the timing of this research was not ideal since it was the end of spring, when students were waiting for summer holidays and teachers had their final gradings to do. Having four participants from different professional backgrounds gave some broadened views on the topic of this study, but still was quite limited. The participants were all LGBTQ+ friendly and practicing that in their work already. To get a more nuanced views on the matter, it would have added value if some participants would have been more diverse with their opinions.

The idea of doing community-based participatory research project came from me and not from the community itself and it could have affected on the motivation to participate. The initial responses to this idea were positive and welcomed from the higher level of the educational institution, but on grassroots level it was not shown. As in their study (Carpenter & Lee, 2010), low return rate could indicate heteronormative attitudes of the staff (p. 103). It is a possibility, supported by research discussions with participants, that this topic was not seen as important, and the lack of participants could be related to that.

One aspect that could hinder the motivation to participate could be the use of creative activities as part of research. For some people it may have been easier to come to an interview, if using one's own creativity feels foreign. The use of creative aspects in this study was quite limited, and it would be interesting to research these topics in a more arts-based approach. Spending more time with the school community and showcasing the possibilities of participating could have increased the participation rate and therefore increased the multidisciplinary and nuanced discussion around these research topics. For future research, it could be useful for the researcher to be already a part of school community to get

people to participate and have more time and opportunities to showcase the idea and plan and co-create the project together.

Lastly, I will go through ideas for future research around the topic of LGBTQ+ students' wellbeing, and what kind of aspects to consider when conducting a study. One future consideration when working with LGBTQ+ students could be intersectionality (e.g., McDermott et al., 2024): how belonging to two or more minority groups affects wellbeing, school performance and sense of belonging in the school environment. In critical and feminist pedagogy, there is a focus on how different voices have more authority than others based on race, sex and class privilege (hooks, 1994, p. 185), making it also important to acknowledge the specific issues on belonging to one or more minority groups. One participant mentioned possible clashing interests of different minority groups, and this could be also one aspect to research further: safety for someone could be unsafe to another, and this experience usually depends on power relations and identity issues (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, 283). One topic to research could be how to create a safe, equal and respectful educational environment in a way that everyone is heard and seen, and some minority groups would not have to blend into the background.

The danger in "everyone is equal in my eyes" discourse is that specific experiences and needs of minority groups are not recognized and therefore not in the focus when making changes and decisions. Minority stress has been studied to influence LGBTQ+ people's mental health (e.g., Meyer, 2003; Tan et al., 2020) and mental health of LGBTQ+ students have been reviewed to be poorer than their peers (Campbell et al., 2022; Jokela et al., 2020). In their study, Herry and Mulvey (2023, pp. 12–14) found that student's sexual orientation was the most significant predictive factor on their experiences on school climate, thus proving that minority specific aspects should be taken into account when developing practices to support said minority and its wellbeing.

As for conceptual framework, if and when including LGBTQ+ students themselves as participants or co-creators of the research material, the concept of agency and

how to support LGBTQ+ students' agency in schools could be one topic to research. Finland does not have gay-straight alliances (GSA) in schools (check e.g., Iskander & Shabtay, 2018; McGlashan & Hayley, 2017) so one empirical study could be to pilot a GSA in Finnish school and see in what ways that could contribute to LGBTQ+ students' agency and safety in school.

LGBTQ+ students, their wellbeing and LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula has been researched quite a bit in the past ten years globally, but somehow, things are still in the discussion level of the matter. Pauli Rautiainen discussed in their keynote speech that people tend to make impressive equity and inclusion planning and leaving the matter to that point, without taking any actions to implement those changes (Rautiainen, October 3, 2024). Fish (2020) discusses how there is a critical gap in evidence-based prevention and intervention programs for LGBTQ+ youth's mental health despite the advances in individual, school and state level actions taken (Fish, 2020, p. 951).

One future research topic for the field of cultural wellbeing could be how to implement these good intentions and guidelines to practice using creativity and arts-based activities. It could be beneficial to have a professional with an artist background as a research partner to enhance the role and emphasis of creativity and arts-based methods in this type of research. This could also build and strengthen a multidisciplinary research practice in the field of cultural wellbeing. For this research, I had the initial idea to build creative workshops to include more art-based activities such as forum theatre (e.g., Theatre of the oppressed by August Boal) and the River of Life method (Carmody, 2023). These and other arts-based activities could be applicable in future research on this topic. Arts-based research could be applicable to create a study with LGBTQ+ students, because they are participating in arts and culture hobbies more frequently than their peers (Jokela et al., 2020, p. 16).

When it comes to wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth, there is a global concern on their mental health (UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2021) and domestic research has confirmed that LGBTQ+ students in Finland need more support for their wellbeing

in school (Jokela et al., 2020; Majlander et al., 2022). Even though there are good intentions to support LGBTQ+ students and quite a lot of research and materials around the topic, actions must be brought forth. It is everyone's responsibility to create and participate in making schools and society altogether safer and braver spaces for everyone, but the emphasis should be on adults who are in charge. Power relations cannot be changed without acknowledging them, so now it is time to put those good intentions into action.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant information sheet

TIEDOTE TUTKIMUKSESTA

LGBTQ+ students in secondary school – what support is needed and how it is done?

Pyyntö osallistua tutkimukseen

Teitä pyydetään mukaan tutkimukseen, jossa tutkitaan sitä, miten koulun henkilökunta voisi tukea LGBTQ+ -opiskelijoiden hyvinvointia kouluympäristössä. Aineistoa kerätään luovia menetelmiä ja ryhmähaastattelua hyödyntäen erikseen opiskelijoilta ja koulun henkilökunnalta. Olemme arvioineet, että sovellutte tutkimukseen, koska olette osa koulu yhteisöä joko olemalla täysi-ikäinen LGBTQ+ -yhteisöön kuuluva opiskelija (jokaisen henkilökohtainen arvio siitä, kuuluuko LGBTQ+ -yhteisöön) tai olemalla osa koulun henkilökuntaa. Tämä tiedote kuvaa tutkimusta ja teidän osuuttanne siinä. Pehdyttyänne tähän tiedotteeseen teille järjestetään mahdollisuus esittää kysymyksiä tutkimuksesta, jonka jälkeen teiltä pyydetään suostumus tutkimukseen osallistumisesta.

Vapaaehtoisuus

Tutkimukseen osallistuminen on täysin vapaaehtoista. Kieltäytyminen ei vaikuta oikeuksiinne tai kohteluunne koulu yhteisön jäsenenä. Voitte myös keskeyttää tutkimuksen koska tahansa syytä ilmoittamatta. Mikäli keskeytätte tutkimuksen tai peruutatte suostumuksen, teistä keskeyttämiseen ja suostumuksen peruuttamiseen mennessä kerättyjä tietoja ja näytteitä voidaan käyttää osana tutkimusaineistoa.

Tutkimuksen tarkoitus

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tuottaa tietoa siitä, millä tavalla koulun henkilökunta voi tukea LGBTQ+ -opiskelijoiden hyvinvointia koulu ympäristössä. Aineiston tuottamiseen käytetään luovia menetelmiä työpajoissa sekä ryhmähaastatteluja. Tutkimus tehdään osallistavan toimintatutkimuksen periaattein.

Tutkimuksen toteuttajat

Tutkimus on YAMK-opinnäytetyö, jonka toteuttaa toimintaterapeutti Katri Liimatainen ja jonka tekemistä ohjaa tohtori Sanna Kivijärvi. Yhteistyökumppanina on Keski-Uudenmaan Koulutuskuntayhtymä Keuda, sen henkilökunta ja opiskelijat yhdessä sovitulta toimipisteeltä. Metropolia Ammattikorkeakoulu vastaa tutkimuksen eettisestä valvonnasta ja julkaisemisesta.

Tutkimusmenetelmät ja toimenpiteet

Tutkittava osallistuu luoviin työpajoihin, ryhmähaastatteluihin sekä tutkimustulosten analysointiin. Osallistavan tutkimuksen periaattein tutkimuksen sisällöt suunnitellaan yhdessä osallistujien kanssa. Tapaamisaika on 1-3h/kerta ja tämä sovitaan aina etukäteen. Tapaamiskertoja on yhdessä sovittu määrä ja ne sijoittuvat maaliskoukokuulle 2024 sekä tarvittaessa syksylle 2024.

Tutkimus toteutetaan siten, että opiskelijoiden kanssa kartoitetaan luovin menetelmin ja ryhmähaastattelun avulla, millaista tukea he kaipaivat koulun henkilökunnalta hyvinvointinsa tueksi. Työskentelyssä ei kysytä tai käsitellä kenenkään henkilökohtaista historiaa tai terveyttä. Henkilötietoja kerätään vain suostumusten allekirjoittamiseksi sekä haastatteluiden äänittämiseksi, tästä lisää Henkilötietojen käsittely tutkimuksessa -osiossa. Näiden tulosten analysoinnin jälkeen koulun henkilökunnalle järjestetään oma luova työpaja ja ryhmähaastattelu, jonka tarkoituksena on käydä läpi opiskelijoilta saatuja ideoita, kerätä ideoita henkilökunnalta sekä käydä läpi sitä, miten näitä ideoita voisi viedä käytäntöön. Tulosten analysointia tehdään yhdessä opiskelijoiden ja henkilökunnan kanssa.

Tutkimuksen mahdolliset hyödyt

Tutkimustieto hyödyttää suoraan koulu yhteisöä, jossa tutkittavat opiskelevat ja työskentelevät, sekä mahdollisesti muita koulu yhteisöjä. Tutkimus tuo esille, millaisiin asioihin LGBTQ+ -opiskelijoiden hyvinvoinnin tukemisessa tulisi kiinnittää huomiota koulu ympäristössä ja millä tavalla koulun henkilökunta voisi tätä tietoa hyödyntää työssään.

Tutkimuksesta mahdollisesti seuraavat haitat ja epämukavuudet

Tutkimuksessa on tarkoitus kartoittaa tukikeinoja yleisellä tasolla, mutta se saattaa herättää muistoja tutkittavien henkilöhistoriassa.

Kustannukset ja niiden korvaaminen

Tutkimukseen osallistuminen ei maksa teille mitään. Osallistumisesta ei myöskään makseta erillistä korvausta.

Tutkittavien vakuutusturva

Tutkimukseen ei liity osioita, joita varten tutkittavia vakuutetaan.

Tutkimustuloksista tiedottaminen

Tutkimuksessa ei synny henkilökohtaisia tuloksia vaan siinä kerätään tietoa tutkimuskysymykseen liittyen. Tutkittavien kanssa sovitaan yhdessä, pidetäänkö tutkimusprosessin loppuun vielä yhteinen tilaisuus tutkimustulosten läpikäymiseksi ja niistä keskustelemiseksi. Kyseessä on opinnäytetyö, joka julkaistaan avoimesti Theseus-tietokannassa englannin kielellä.

Tutkimuksen päätyminen

Myös tutkimuksen suorittaja voi keskeyttää tutkimuksen, mikäli tutkimuksen suorittajan terveydentila tai elämäntilanne sitä vaatii. Tutkimuksen tuloksia käydään yhdessä läpi analysointivaiheessa ja niitä voidaan sovitusti käydä

yhdessä läpi keskustelutilaisuudessa. Tutkimus on vapaasti luettavissa Theseus-järjestelmästä julkaisemisen jälkeen.

Lisätiedot

Pyydämme teitä tarvittaessa esittämään tutkimukseen liittyviä kysymyksiä tutkijalle/tutkimuksesta vastaavalle henkilölle.

Tutkijoiden yhteystiedot

Tutkija / opinnäytetyöntekijä
Nimi: Katri Liimatainen

Tutkimuksesta vastaa / opinnäytetyön ohjaaja
Titteli: Tohtori, lehtori, vastaava tutkija
Nimi: Sanna Kivijärvi
Metropolia Ammattikorkeakoulu

Tutkimuksen tietosuojaseloste: Henkilötietojen käsittely tutkimuksessa

Tässä tutkimuksessa käsitellään teitä koskevia henkilötietoja voimassa olevan tietosuojalainsäädännön (EU:n yleinen tietosuoja-astus, 679/2016, ja voimassa oleva kansallinen lainsäädäntö) mukaisesti. Seuraavassa kuvataan henkilötietojen käsittelyyn liittyvät asiat.

Tutkimuksen rekisterinpitäjä

Rekisterinpitäjällä tarkoitetaan tahoja, joka yksin tai yhdessä toisten kanssa määrittelee henkilötietojen käsittelyn tarkoitukset ja keinot. Rekisterinpitäjä voi olla korkeakoulu, toimeksiantaja, muu yhteistyötaho, opinnäytetyöntekijä tai jotkut edellä mainituista yhdessä (esim. korkeakoulu ja opinnäytetyöntekijä yhdessä).

Tässä tutkimuksessa henkilötietojen rekisterinpitäjä on:

Korkeakoulu	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Toimeksiantaja	<input type="checkbox"/>	Toimeksiantajan nimi:
Muu yhteistyötaho	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yhteistyötahon nimi:
Opinnäytetyöntekijä	X <input type="checkbox"/>	

Voitte kysyä lisätietoja henkilötietojenne käsittelystä rekisterinpitäjän yhteyshenkilöltä

Rekisterinpitäjän yhteyshenkilön nimi: Katri Liimatainen
Organisaatio: Metropolia Ammattikorkeakoulu

Tutkimuksessa teistä kerätään seuraavia henkilötietoja

Henkilötietojen käsittely on oikeutettua ainoastaan silloin, kun se on tutkimukselle välttämätöntä. Kerättävät henkilötiedot on minimoitava, niitä ei saa kerätä tarpeettomasti tai varmuuden vuoksi.

Tutkimuksessa kerätään osallistujien nimet tutkimussuostumuksen allekirjoittamiseksi. Ryhmähaastattelut äänitetään.

Teillä ei ole sopimukseen tai lakisääteiseen tehtävään perustuvaa velvollisuutta toimittaa henkilötietojanne vaan osallistuminen on täysin vapaaehtoista.

Tutkimuksessa kerätään henkilötietojanne myös seuraavista lähteistä

Tutkimuksessa ei kerätä henkilötietojanne muista lähteistä.

Henkilötietojenne suojausperiaatteet

Allekirjoitetut tutkimussuostumukset kerätään fyysisinä kopioina tutkittavilta ja säilytetään lukitussa paikassa, johon vain tutkimuksen tekijällä on pääsy. Tämä koskee myös luovissa työpajoissa tehtäviä mahdollisia fyysisiä tuotoksia (esim. kuvakollaasi, miellekartta).

Haastatteluäänitykset tallennetaan yhdelle laitteelle (ei pilvipalveluun), johon vain tutkimuksen tekijällä on pääsy. Haastatteluiden litteroinnin jälkeen haastatteluäänitykset tuhoetaan. Tutkimusaineistoa käsitellään henkilökohtaisessa käytössä olevilla Microsoft Office -ohjelmilla (Word, Excel).

Henkilötietojenne käsittelyn tarkoitus

Henkilötietojenne käsittelyn tarkoitus on varmistaa kirjallisesti tutkittavien suostumus tutkimukseen osallistumiseksi. Haastatteluäänitysten ja työpajojen mahdollisten fyysisten tuotosten tarkoituksena on kerätä ja analysoida tutkimusmateriaalia siitä, miten koulun henkilökunta voisi tukea LGBTQ+ yhteisöön kuuluvien opiskelijoiden hyvinvointia kouluympäristössä.

Henkilötietojenne käsittelyperuste

Henkilötietojenne käsittelyperusteena on antamanne tutkimussuostumus.

Tutkimuksen kesto aika (henkilötietojenne käsittelyaika)

Tämän hetken arvion mukaan tutkimus kestää marraskuuhun 2024 asti.

Mitä henkilötiedoillenne tapahtuu tutkimuksen päätyttyä?

Vuosi tutkimuksen päättymisen jälkeen henkilötietonne ja tutkimusaineisto hävitetään.

Tietojen luovuttaminen tutkimusrekisteristä

Tietoja ei luovuteta tutkimusryhmän (tutkimuksen tekijä ja tutkimusta ohjaava opettaja) ulkopuolelle.

Henkilötietojenne mahdollinen siirto EU:n tai ETA-alueen ulkopuolelle

Tietojanne ei siirretä/siirretään EU:n tai ETA-alueen ulkopuolelle.

Rekisteröitynä teillä on oikeus

Koska henkilötietojanne käsitellään tässä tutkimuksessa, niin olette rekisteröity tutkimuksen aikana muodostuvassa henkilörekisterissä. Rekisteröitynä teillä on oikeus:

- saada informaatiota henkilötietojen käsittelystä
- tarkastaa itseänne koskevat tiedot
- oikaista tietojanne
- peruuttaa antamanne henkilötietojen käsittelyä koskeva suostumus
- rajoittaa tietojenne käsittelyä
- sallia automaattinen päätöksenteko nimenomaisella suostumuksellanne
- tehdä valitus tietosuojavaltuutetun toimistoon, jos katsotte, että henkilötietojanne on käsitelty tietosuojalainsäädännön vastaisesti

Jos henkilötietojen käsittely tutkimuksessa ei edellytä rekisteröidyn tunnistamista ilman lisätietoja eikä rekisterinpitäjä pysty tunnistamaan rekisteröityä, niin oikeutta tietojen tarkastamiseen, oikaisuun, poistoon, käsittelyn rajoittamiseen, ilmoitusvelvollisuuteen ja siirtämiseen ei sovelleta.

Voitte käyttää oikeuksianne ottamalla yhteyttä rekisterinpitäjään.

Tutkimuksessa kerättyjä henkilötietoja ei käytetä profilointiin tai automaattiseen päätöksentekoon

Henkilötietojen käsittely aineistoa analysoitaessa ja tutkimuksen tuloksia raportoitaessa

Teistä kerättyä tietoa ja tutkimusaineistoa käsitellään luottamuksellisesti lainsäädännön edellyttämällä tavalla. Yksittäisille tutkittavalle annetaan tunnusnumero ja häntä koskevat tiedot säilytetään koodattuina tutkimusaineistossa. Aineisto analysoidaan koodattuna ja tulokset raportoidaan ryhmätasolla, jolloin yksittäinen henkilö ei ole tunnistettavissa ilman koodiavainta. Koodiavainta, jonka avulla yksittäisen tutkittavan tiedot ja tulokset voidaan tunnistaa, säilytetään tutkimuksen tekijä tutkimuksen loppumiseen saakka eikä tietoja anneta tutkimuksen ulkopuolisille henkilöille. Lopulliset tutkimustulokset raportoidaan ryhmätasolla. Yksittäisten tutkittavien tunnistaminen voi olla mahdollista pienen osallistujajoukon vuoksi, mutta se ei ole todennäköistä.

Tutkimusaineistoa ja tutkimuksen yhteydessä kerättyjä näytteitä säilytetään lukitussa asunnossa, johon vain tutkimuksen tekijällä on pääsy tutkimuksen loppumiseen asti, jonka jälkeen ne hävitetään poistamalla digitaalinen aineisto ja tuhoamalla fyysinen aineisto. Tutkimuksessa kerättyä aineistoa ei käytetä muissa yhteyksissä.

Appendix 2: Consent form

Tutkimuksen nimi: LGBTQ+ students in school – what support is needed and how it is done?

Tutkimuksen toteuttaja:

Metropolia Ammattikorkeakoulu

Tutkija / opinnäytetyötekijä

Nimi: Katri Liimatainen

Tutkimuksesta vastaa / opinnäytetyön ohjaaja

Titteli: Tohtori, lehtori, vastaava tutkija

Nimi: Sanna Kivijärvi

Metropolia Ammattikorkeakoulu

Minua _____ on pyydetty osallistumaan yllämainittuun tutkimukseen, jonka tarkoituksena on selvittää, millä tavoin koulun henkilökunta voisi tukea LGBTQ+ opiskelijoiden hyvinvointia kouluympäristössä.

Olen saanut tiedotteen tutkimuksesta ja ymmärtänyt sen. Tiedotteesta olen saanut riittävän selvityksen tutkimuksesta, sen tarkoituksesta ja toteutuksesta, oikeuksistani sekä tutkimuksen mahdollisesti liittyvistä hyödyistä ja riskeistä. Minulla on ollut mahdollisuus esittää kysymyksiä ja olen saanut riittävän vastauksen kaikkiin tutkimusta koskeviin kysymyksiini.

Olen saanut tiedot tutkimukseen mahdollisesti liittyvästä henkilötietojen keräämisestä, käsittelystä ja luovuttamisesta ja minun on ollut mahdollista tutustua tutkimuksen tietosuojaselosteeseen.

Osallistun tutkimukseen vapaaehtoisesti. Minua ei ole painostettu eikä houkuteltu osallistumaan tutkimukseen.

Minulla on ollut riittävästi aikaa harkita osallistumistani tutkimukseen.

Ymmärrän, että osallistumiseni on vapaaehtoista ja että voin peruuttaa tämän suostumukseni koska tahansa syytä ilmoittamatta. Olen tietoinen siitä, että mikäli keskeytän (voin jatkaa sitä myöhemmin) tutkimuksen, keskeyttämiseen asti kerättyjä tietoja voidaan käyttää tutkimuksessa.

Allekirjoituksellani vahvistan osallistumiseni tähän tutkimukseen.

Jos tutkimukseen liittyvien henkilötietojen käsittelyperusteena on suostumus, vahvistan allekirjoituksellani suostumukseni myös henkilötietojeni käsittelyyn. Minulla on oikeus peruuttaa suostumukseni tietosuojaselosteessa kuvatulla tavalla.

Allekirjoitus:

Nimenselvennys:

Alkuperäinen allekirjoitettu tutkittavan suostumus sekä kopio tutkimustiedotteesta liitteineen jäävät tutkijan arkistoon. Tutkimustiedote liitteineen ja kopio allekirjoitetusta suostumuksesta annetaan tutkittavalle

Appendix 3: Data generation guide

TEEMARUNKO: HENKILÖKUNTA

LÄMMITTELYKYSYMYKSET:

- kuka olet, mitä teet
- kauan olet työskennellyt tässä oppilaitoksessa?

TEEMA 1: koulun nykytilanne

- millaisia käytäntöjä ja ohjeita koulussanne on sateenkaariopiskelijoiden tukemiseksi tällä hetkellä?
- millä tavalla ne näkyvät koulun arjessa opiskelijoille ja työntekijöille, esim. millä tavalla syrjivään puheeseen/toimintaan puututaan?

TEEMA 2: sateenkaariopiskelijoiden tukeminen ja hyvinvointi

- millaista sanastoa ja millaisia toimintatapoja käytät itse työssäsi?
- millä tavalla kouluympäristö (fyysinen ja sosiaalinen) luo turvallisempaa tilaa ja toimijuutta/hyvinvointia sateenkaariopiskelijoille?

TEEMA 3: muutosten tarve ja niiden vieminen käytäntöön

- millaisia toimia koulussanne tarvitsisi lisätä sateenkaariopiskelijoiden tukemiseksi?
- miten voisit toteuttaa näitä asioita omassa työssä ja koulu yhteisössä?
- millaisia esteitä ja mahdollisuuksia tuen antamiseksi on?

TEEMA 4: tärkeys ja merkityksellisyys

- mitkä voisivat olla tärkeimpiä asioita, joihin keskittyä seuraavaksi?
- mitä voisit itse tehdä muuttaaksesi asiaa?

LOPETUS

- onko vielä jotain lisättävää?
- kiitokset

