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“I’m Going to Live My Life Freely”: Authenticity as an Indicator of Belonging Among Urban Latinx LGBTQ+ Youth

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While there is a growing body of scholarship on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in school and community settings, less is known about Latinx LGBTQ+ youth specifically. In response, this phenomenological study examined the experiences of eight Latinx LGBTQ+ youth relative to school and community belonging, with a specific focus on urban environments, using intersectionality and minority stress frameworks, and Lee and Robbins’ operational definition of belongingness. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: (a) navigating challenges, (b) the importance of an inclusive climate, and (c) thriving through adversity. Further, authenticity was identified as an additional indicator of belonging among Latinx LGBTQ+ youth. This article reviews the study’s findings, explores implications for Extension research and practice, and suggests strategies for educators and youth-serving professionals.

Keywords: belonging, Latinx, LGBTQ+ youth, Extension, school, community

Belongingness, or belonging, is defined as a fundamental human need to feel valued and supported as a member of a group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Lee and Robbins (1995) conceptualized belonging as consisting of three overarching indicators: companionship, which refers to meaningful interpersonal relationships; affiliation, which reflects a human need to socialize with peers, particularly those with similar qualities, and build social networks; and connectedness, which describes the sense of feeling comfortable with and embraced within a larger social context beyond friends and family. The benefits that belonging bring to healthy youth development are well-documented (Newman et al., 2007; Slaten et al., 2016), particularly within school and community contexts, where youth spend most of their time (Haugen et al., 2019). Belonging is especially significant to young people who face harassment and discrimination in relation to one or more of their marginalized social identities, including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or whose gender and/or sexual identity falls outside of heterosexual and/or cisgender designations ([LGBTQ+] Gonzalez et al., 2021; Hatchel et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2021; Murray & Dailey, 2020).

A vast body of research has illustrated that LGBTQ+ youth benefit psychologically, socio-emotionally, and academically when they experience companionship, affiliation, and connectedness, all of which are related to belonging (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Murray & Dailey, 2020). Specifically, supportive adults and peers, access to LGBTQ+ affirming clubs or spaces, and LGBTQ+ representation in programming and curricular materials have been linked to fewer school absences, improved educational outcomes, and higher self-esteem (Barr et al., 2016; Gonzalez, 2017; Johns et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020; Seelman et al., 2015). Authenticity—defined as “the unobstructed operation of one’s true or core self in one’s daily enterprise” (Goldman & Kernis, 2002, p. 18)—has also been linked to psychological well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals (Herek & Garnets, 2007). Indeed, inclusive spaces and high-quality social bonds to adults and peers in schools and communities foster supportive environments for youth to engage in “self-discovery,” (Erikson, 1968, p. 87) allowing space for them to build a positive “sense of inner identity,” confidence, and other coping skills that help buffer against identity-related stress (Waterman, 1982, p. 354). Likewise, within higher education settings, LGBTQ+ resource centers have played a crucial role in cultivating connection and support among LGBTQ+ students and improving the campus climate through education and advocacy (Strayhorn, 2019; Tetreault et al., 2013; Woodford et al., 2018).

Despite their shared challenges, LGBTQ+ youth are not a monolith. As such, one-size-fits-all approaches to supporting LGBTQ+ young people often fall short of meeting the needs of LGBTQ+ youth who are navigating a complex intersection of oppressions beyond heterosexism and transgender oppression (Brockenbrough, 2016; Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020). For example, “safe space” programs, which have historically focused solely on reducing anti-LGBTQ+ bias, cannot sufficiently address the additional barriers faced by LGBTQ+ youth with multiple marginalized positionalities (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Indeed, urban LGBTQ+ youth of color—including those who are Latina/o/x, referred to hereafter by the inclusive term Latinx—face unique challenges that often exacerbate minority stress, described as chronically high levels of stress experienced by members of minoritized groups and often associated with prejudice or discrimination (Shramko, et al., 2018). Research on minority stress underscores the urgency for a more comprehensive understanding of the obstacles faced by LGBTQ+ youth with multiple marginalized identities, including those who are Latinx, and the need for strategies to address those challenges in a culturally responsive manner (Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020). In an effort to inform discourses on how to best support Latinx LGBTQ+ youth and thereby reduce minority stress, this qualitative study used an in-depth phenomenological methodology to explore the experiences of urban Latinx LGBTQ+ youth in school and community settings relative to belonging. For the purposes of this study, we define “school” as encompassing both K-12 and higher education contexts. Our conceptualization of community includes all out-of-school environments within participants’ cities or towns of residence, such as youth-serving organizations, centers, groups, and other establishments. This article reviews the study’s findings and outlines implications for research and practice in school and community contexts, with a specific focus on urban Extension.

At the Intersections: Being Latinx and LGBTQ+

Many young people who are both Latinx and LGBTQ+ experience bullying and harassment related to their race/ethnicity and their LGBTQ+ identities (Kosciw et al., 2020). A study conducted by Zongrone and colleagues (2020) of LGBTQ+ students in K-12 settings found that 41.6% of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth participants were victimized due to both their race/ethnicity and their sexual orientation. LGBTQ+ youth who experienced dual victimization reported lower levels of school belonging and higher levels of depression compared to participants who experienced only one form of victimization or neither (Zongrone et al., 2020). Some research has also found that LGBTQ+-affirming clubs, such as Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), may not adequately respond to the needs of LGBTQ+ students of color, including those who are Latinx (McCready, 2004; Poteat & Scheer, 2016). In addition, complex and accurate representation of Latinx LGBTQ+ in popular media is severely lacking (The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2020), which may keep some Latinx LGBTQ+ youth from fully identifying with and embracing their Latinx and LGBTQ+ identities (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Also worth noting are the factors—such as culture, geography, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and gender, among others—that impact how Latinx LGBTQ+ youth navigate or experience their gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and/or queer identities (Gonzalez et al., 2020). For example, Zongrone and colleagues (2020) found that Latinx LGBTQ+ youth born outside of the United States and those for whom English was a second language experienced greater levels of victimization related to their race and ethnicity than those who were born in the United States and for whom English was their first language. In addition, Latinx LGBTQ+ people born in the United States have reported a higher degree of family acceptance than Latinx LGBTQ+ immigrants, which contributes to their overall sense of belonging (Ryan et al., 2010). To better comprehend Latinx LGBTQ+ youth belonging, research must reflect the complex variations of this demographic's social identities and experiences.

Despite the need for additional scholarship, literature specific to Latinx LGBTQ+ youth remains scarce (Brockenbrough, 2016; Kane et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2009); research related to Latinx LGBTQ+ youth belonging is even more limited (Kosciw et al., 2020). To that end, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth as they relate to school and community belonging, with a specific focus on urban environments. The overarching research questions guiding our study were (a) What are the lived experiences of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth in urban settings as they relate to belonging across school and community contexts, and (b) What do urban Latinx LGBTQ+ youth need to feel a sense of belonging in school and community settings?

Method

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical frameworks helped guide the conceptualization of this study, interview protocol development, and data analysis and interpretation: minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), and Lee and Robbins' (1995) indicators of belongingness. Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) postulates that LGBTQ+ individuals experience numerous repeated, lifelong stressors related to their sexual identity: both distal stressors such as prejudice, discrimination, and victimization experienced in their communities, and proximal stressors such as internalized homophobia. These stressors may harm one's safety and self-perception while inhibiting their access to supportive resources and positive coping mechanisms, which may increase their risk of adverse psychosocial and health outcomes.

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the intersectionality framework expands upon the minority stress theory by considering how *multiple* characteristics such as race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation intersect and interact simultaneously to shape one's lived experiences. Individuals holding multiple marginalized identities experience interaction disadvantages, social norms, and expectations. Thus, intersectionality posits that Latinx LGBTQ+ experience unique stigma and excess stressors related to both their sexuality and race and ethnicity, among other characteristics. Our study explores the elements of Latinx identity as related to LGBTQ+ identities that may influence a young person's feelings of belonging and acceptance in their schools and communities.

We used Lee and Robbins' (1995) indicators of belonging—companionship, affiliation, and connectedness—to help us structure our interview protocol and develop our codes. The framework provides a lens and corresponding measurement tools for understanding the subjective, underlying aspects of belonging of a particular community (Lee & Robins, 1995). In the current study, Latinx LGBTQ+ youth participants were asked to reflect how different types or characteristics of social support and climates in their schools and communities may have fostered or diminished their sense of belonging and the impact of these experiences on their psychosocial development and overall well-being. These three frameworks provide empirical support for exploring the unique cultural, social, and lived experiences at the intersection of Latinx and LGBTQ+ identities that may impact a young person's sense of belonging across school and community contexts.

Data Collection and Methodology

To add to the nascent literature on the lived experiences of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth within their schools and communities, we applied a phenomenological methodology for data collection and analysis. A phenomenological research approach is used to explore and document cultural phenomena, experiences, and consciousness from the first-person perspective of members of the

target population (Moustakas, 1994). Though we also assessed belongingness in the familial context, the current study presents results of themes related to belonging in school and community domains only.

Eight self-identified Latinx LGBTQ+ youth were interviewed using a two-interview alternative to Seidman's (2006) three-interview phenomenological approach. The first in-depth, semi-structured interview asked participants to describe their life history and present-day experiences related to belonging. This interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The second interview took place about a week after the first and allowed the participant to reflect upon the meaning of these experiences. The second interviews were conducted remotely and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants also completed a paper or electronic demographic questionnaire prior to beginning the first interview. Two of the eight participants completed their first interview in person. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the study, the remaining six participants completed both interviews via Zoom, using only the audio option. All remote interviews were conducted in the secure settings of any of the members of the research team's home or work office, and the participant was asked to also be in a location where privacy and concentration could be maintained. Participants were given the option to have the interview conducted in Spanish or English during the recruitment process; however, all participants opted to conduct the interviews in English. All study materials were approved by the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University and updated to reflect COVID-19 restrictions for research activities.

Sample

Participants were eligible for the study if they identified as (a) Latinx; (b) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or held an identity that does not conform to dominant social norms related to sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBTQ+); and (c) were between the ages of 18 and 24. This study asked youth aged 18-24 to reflect on their experiences growing up and present day. The term "youth" is used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations (UN) to refer to young people 15-24 (United Nations, 2013). To better understand the impact of place and community on belonging, our goal was to recruit participants who grew up and/or lived in North Carolina at a point in time, but this was not a criterion for inclusion.

The research team emailed a recruitment message and flyers with information related to the study to LGBTQ+ youth-serving organizations, LGBTQ+ university centers, and Latinx-serving organizations throughout North Carolina. These organizations were identified through the authors' existing contacts and knowledge plus internet searches. Participants were also identified and recruited using snowball sampling. Participants who expressed interest as a response to the flyer and/or the recruitment email completed a secure online form with their contact information, accessible only to the research team. Participants were then contacted by phone to review the

consent process, the overall aims of the study, the risks and benefits of participation, eligibility criteria, and how interview content would be used. Two interviews were scheduled with eligible participants who remained interested in the study. Participants received a gift valued at \$40-\$50 after completing both interviews.

In all, 14 individuals signed up for the study. Four participants never responded to follow-up communication to confirm qualifications. One participant did not schedule interviews. One person was interested but was unable to secure a private location to participate. Ultimately, eight participants qualified and completed both interviews.

The final sample consisted of eight participants, ages 18-24 (see Table 1). All participants identified their race/ethnicity as Latinx/Hispanic, and three also indicated their race as White. Seven participants identified as cisgender and one as unsure, with three identifying their gender identity as man, four as woman, and one as non-binary. Participants identified as bisexual ($n = 4$), lesbian ($n = 1$), gay ($n = 1$), and queer ($n = 2$). Five participants were born in the United States. Participants identified their caregivers' country of origin as Mexico ($n = 4$), Colombia ($n = 2$), Venezuela ($n = 1$), and Cuba ($n = 1$). All eight participants reported growing up in a community described as urban or suburban.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and reviewed to ensure accurate transcription. Participant codes and pseudonyms (including for third-party individuals) were used in all transcripts and reports to ensure that participant identities were kept separate from the data. We also used vague language when describing localities in written reports.

We performed a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts in multiple steps (Moustakas, 1994). First, we read the transcripts numerous times to familiarize ourselves with the data, documenting our initial thoughts about potential codes and themes. We inductively reviewed transcripts line-by-line using horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) to identify excerpts that captured the essence of participants' experiences related to belonging. Preliminary codes— informed by the research question, the theoretical framework, and existing literature—were then assigned to the data to describe the emerging themes. Recurrent codes were grouped and defined by overarching patterns and themes to capture both *what* Latinx LGBTQ+ youth experienced within the phenomenon of belongingness to school and community as well as *how* these participants experienced belongingness (Moustakas, 1994).

The research team took efforts to reduce bias and improve the trustworthiness of the data analysis process, including prolonged engagement with the data and the use of reflective memoing; providing detailed notes about the development and hierarchies of codes and themes; and debriefing with other research team members to reach an agreed-upon set of themes and exemplar quotes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 1. Self-Reported Demographic Characteristics of Eight Study Participants

Pseudo- nym	Age	U.S. Born?	Caregiver Country of Origin	Faith	Race/ Ethnicity	Sex Assigned at Birth	Gender Identity	Transgender	Sexual Orientation	Out to parents? When?	Out to friends? When?
Camila	21	No	Colombia	Catholic	Latinx/ Hispanic and White	Female	Woman	No	Bisexual	No	Yes/15
Carlos	18	No	Venezuela	Catholic/ Christian	Latinx/ Hispanic	Male	Man	No	Queer (pansexual)	Yes/17 (except Dad)	Yes/17
Isabel	23	Yes	Mexico	Catholic	Latinx/ Hispanic	Female	Woman	No	Bisexual	No	Yes/20
Mateo	24	Yes	Mexico	Catholic	Latinx/ Hispanic	Male	Man	No	Bisexual	Yes/21 (except Dad)	Yes/18
Nina	19	No	Mexico	Catholic	Latinx/ Hispanic	Female	Non- binary	Unsure	Lesbian	Yes/18	Yes/16
Sergio	18	Yes	Mexico	Catholic	Latinx/ Hispanic	Male	Man	No	Gay	No	Yes/15
Sofia	23	Yes	Colombia	Catholic	Latinx/ Hispanic and White	Female	Woman	No	Bisexual	Yes/22 (except Dad)	Yes/21
Sonya	21	Yes	U.S. and Cuba	Catholic	Latinx/ Hispanic and White	Female	Woman	No	Queer	Yes/20	Yes/19

Findings

The study's findings yielded three overarching thematic categories. The first, navigating challenges, refers to coping with adversity in relation to sexual orientation, gender, and multiple marginalized identities. The importance of an inclusive climate is the second thematic category and consists of representation, support by adults, support by peers, and LGBTQ+ affirming spaces. Finally, thriving through adversity includes embracing authenticity, creating community, and taking action.

Navigating Challenges

Navigating challenges refers to the adversity participants faced in relation to their real or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and/or multiple, marginalized identities. Four of the participants disclosed their LGBTQ+ identity(ies) to friends during high school, and four waited until after high school. Nevertheless, six participants described their school climate as indifferent and, at times, unwelcoming to LGBTQ+ students. Camila, who attended a Catholic school, shared that some of her teachers and peers in middle and high school publicly expressed that being gay was a "sin." In addition, even though Sofia did not come out as bisexual until college, she recalled,

I just like never saw, like queerness or the LGBT community even, like, present and I mean, that probably speaks for itself. ... The climate was definitely, I would say, cold. ... Like, they're not gonna welcome you with open arms.

Similarly, Sonya revealed that sexuality and gender identity "wasn't something that was talked about ... no one that I can remember was out and proud." Likewise, Isabel shared that her high school was one in which sexuality and gender identity were never openly discussed, which kept her from embracing her sexuality: "I didn't have the resources or the environment or really necessarily felt supported to even come to terms with [my sexuality] on my own."

Mateo described facing bullying and harassment in response to his perceived sexual orientation and gender expression. Mateo recalled, "Ever since elementary school, I've always been bullied for acting more feminine than other guys." He later added, "In middle school, it was more of the same as, like, you know, you dress weird, you look weird, you act very feminine, like are you gay?" While Sofia, Camila, and Sonya never experienced bullying or harassment because of their sexual orientation, they all recalled hearing anti-LGBTQ+ epithets and the word "gay" used as an insult.

All participants discussed the added challenges of navigating multiple, marginalized identities. For instance, Nina admitted that being LGBTQ+, Latina, and an immigrant made it more difficult to find spaces where she experienced a sense of belonging because "there's a feeling of displacement." For example, when describing her experience at a local Pride festival, Nina

admitted, “It was just so white. ... I know there’s a community there, but I also didn’t feel like I belonged in that one.” In part, Sergio was initially reluctant to embrace his LGBTQ+ identity because he didn’t see Latinxs represented in the LGBTQ+ community, which he perceived as “mostly like these rich white kids.” Mateo revealed that the bullying he experienced because of his perceived sexual orientation and gender expression was exacerbated by “being poor and looking different and acting different from the rest.” Further, Carlos recounted a specific activity, facilitated by his Gender and Sexuality Alliance advisor, which prompted him to reflect on his own positionality:

I remember one time we did the ... the privilege game, where you get in the line, and you walk. I remember doing it and I ended up, I was literally the only person like, all the way in the back. ... I’m this queer, brown immigrant dude and like, I’m on the bottom of like, everyone. ... That’s literally how the world sees me.

Three participants specifically expressed that a lack of belonging in the communities where they lived was exacerbated when they left their urban centers and traveled to more rural areas. For example, Carlos recalled, “I’m like this brown immigrant queer person in like the middle of the country. It feels scary for sure ... it does feel like I’m the odd one out.” Sonya recounted feeling a sense of isolation when “visible signs of it being a more conservative community” became more frequent, such as Confederate flags and “very conservative traditional Baptist Methodist” churches.

The Importance of an Inclusive Climate

The importance of an inclusive climate describes the value participants placed on aspects of school and community environments that facilitated belonging, including representation, support, and LGBTQ+ affirming spaces. For the participants who experienced fears of rejection or actual rejection from family, having a place in school and identifying a community of people where they felt a sense of belonging was of utmost importance. These inclusive and affirming spaces were identified by having openly LGBTQ+ staff and/or welcoming staff, signs, stickers or use of affirming documentation (e.g., forms asking for pronouns), and giving participants the opportunity to talk about their identities openly.

Half of the participants shared experiences of having supportive spaces, especially trusted adults, in high school. These participants were only out to some friends at that point, and it is likely the supportive school environment contributed to self-disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identity. For Camila, who attended a Catholic high school and couldn’t be open about her sexuality at home, having a teacher that acknowledged Latinx and queer history in the classroom gave her “the space to talk about her Latinx identity and queer identity.” For Carlos, attending a school that had a GSA made a significant difference in his life:

I would never, like ever, be where I am without GSA. If I didn’t have the support I had at school, it probably would have been a lot worse than it was. But knowing that I had that

also made it a lot less painful to go through all that I went through and knowing that I had people to talk to about anything, even though I didn't have the support of my parents.

For another participant, Nina, who was aware of her sexual orientation in middle school, a time she described as "A gay crisis ... it was a very difficult time to navigate," eventually found support from teachers that made her feel like she belonged at school:

Just knowing that these people that I looked up to, and that had helped me through school, knowing that they had my back. It did make me feel like I had a place at the school. ... I knew my teachers weren't going to kick me out or act any different towards me if they knew I was gay.

For three participants, inclusive spaces were only identified when they went to college, outside of the community where they grew up. These participants expressed how open and welcoming LGBTQ+ spaces allowed them to accept themselves. Isabel shared that the college she attended had broader LGBTQ+ representation:

Not just students, but you had faculty that reflect what the students kind of wanted to see. I had several non-binary professors. I had several gay professors who were out open about it. ... So because of that climate, it provided me the environment and I guess the safe space, to kind of slowly come into my own sexuality.

Sonya had a similar experience and shared,

The visibility of it [LGBTQ+ identities] and seeing it and, you know, people were talking about it, whether it was other students, you know, on campus like handing out flyers or holding up posters or whatever. I felt like the presence of those things.

For Sonya, seeing the focus and support for and by other LGBTQ+ people helped her feel validated and gave her a sense of belonging: "So I do feel like the community I've built in a college setting has been a lot more, like I have felt more myself and more like a part of something that I like I feel like I belong in than I have in the past."

Programs outside of the school setting were also important. For Sergio, finding a space that was not only LGBTQ+ affirming but also welcoming to youth of color marked an important change in his feelings of belonging:

That was a space [educational summer program] where I met other LGBT Latinx people, which was just something that I really never met before. And so because I saw people who looked like me and were like me and you know we all shared the same ambitions, I felt so comfortable in who I was just because I wasn't different anymore. I was like, there are people like me and it was almost common, so I was no longer like this one of a kind person who stood out like a sore thumb.

Participants shared their recommendations for ensuring that schools and community environments are inclusive and supportive. For example, the physical space should have some type of indication that it is a welcoming environment, such as “a safe space sticker or a gay flag or they [teachers] talk about it [that is a safe space] in class.” Nina also recommended that counselors at schools have information on their desk or the wall that lets students know who they can talk to or where to get more information about sexual orientation and gender identity:

Because I spent a lot of time in the counselor’s office when I was figuring out things like college applications. So, if they would have had like a flyer on their desk or something, just so kids know that that’s an option, right?

Participants also recommended more education for teachers and other school staff about the supports that LGBTQ+ youth need, how to intervene if they see bullying happening and how to let LGBTQ+ students know with whom they can talk. For example, one participant mentioned that at his school, “I didn’t know that they [teachers] would you know, help me for being, because of my sexual orientation. That’s why I don’t know how to approach them with ... I am being bullied because of this.”

Four participants talked about how making LGBTQ history and literature part of the curriculum would also help students see reflections of their experiences. Mateo suggested that teachers prepare “lesson plans about more information ... about LGBT things ... and give more information to students.” Isabel also shared,

I wish I would have had the education or like classes dedicated to the community [the LGBTQ community] that would have helped me a lot, not only coming to my sexuality sooner, but like feel a lot more supported to come into my sexuality.

Regarding out-of-school environments, youth centers that cater to LGBTQ+ youth and Latinx youth were viewed as important. Sonya described that

Spaces where I felt like people were vocal about their own experiences and ... there are people who shared my identity and maybe shared some of my experience, if not exact, but, you know, understood kind of where I was at now, and we’re not necessarily afraid to be vocal about it.

Nina talked about ensuring these centers are accessible to young people without their own transportation:

Obviously, I was not going to ask my mom for a ride, right? And like, my friends are busy and stuff like that. So like, if there was a way for kids to actually be able to access those places, especially in low income areas.

Thriving Through Adversity

Thriving through adversity refers to participants' capacity to develop positive coping strategies for navigating hardship and cultivating a greater sense of belonging, including creating a new community, embracing authenticity, and taking action. When inclusive and affirming spaces and connections were limited in their schools and communities growing up, several participants coped by actively seeking out and cultivating their own support networks elsewhere. For instance, Isabel remarked, "Sometimes home isn't perfect, so you just have to take the opportunity to find and make your own home. ... It's allowed me to really surround myself with people who love and support me."

Four other participants also described their ability to find solace and belonging after purposely creating their own communities to connect with peers who shared similar identities and lived experiences. Sofia recalled,

I finally started building my community my junior year of college. ... [But] my senior year of college [was] my most defining one where I finally had a community that was intentionally built of other Latinas at the same college. ... I graduated a year ago, and some of those women are still my pretty close friends.

Sergio also sought out and discovered a community of other Latinx LGBTQ+ peers where he finally felt accepted: "My friend group is predominantly LGBTQ and it was all okay; it was all accepted. We're all like these Latinx boys who were expressing our identities and because there was no shame, there was no discrimination. We were accepted."

For all participants, their experience of belonging included embracing their Latinx and LGBTQ+ identities and living authentically without fear or shame. For instance, Mateo linked belonging to being "my true self," and Sofia highlighted the importance of finding spaces and people where and with whom she could be "really, truly like, authentically, myself." In addition, Carlos observed he no longer had to "hide [himself] from anybody" after forming his own support community. He felt "normal" around people who shared the same identities and obstacles. Likewise, Isabel felt "alleviated" to find a space where she could be her true self, stating, "I don't have to worry about not ... belonging when it comes to my chosen family. I feel like that was the family that also helped me come to terms with my own sexuality." Isabel then added, "I'm going to live my life freely and either you can be a part of the journey or just simply close the door behind you." By embracing their identities and living authentically, participants described feeling more skilled and confident navigating adversity. Mateo observed,

I don't have to follow what they want me to follow. Like, I could just decide on my own, make my own path so it taught me to not care what others think. Especially in the Latino community, like, if they tell me that's not right, because you know, you're a guy, it doesn't matter.

Four participants recalled how their experiences of hardship and lack of belonging growing up heightened their desire to help other Latinx LGBTQ+ youth in similar positions. They hoped to take action by sharing their personal stories and offering direct support to other Latinx LGBTQ+ youth. Mateo described, “Since I went through it, I can understand what they’re going through. So, I could go to them to comfort them and also defend them from the bullies or whoever is doing the crime and give them advice, help.” Isabel detailed her commitment to uplifting her community by educating herself:

I have taken several classes about the community like LGBTQ studies, just because I want to further educate myself on how I can support students that I work with. ... I want to make sure that I’m supporting and serving all types of students, including those in the community.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and understand the needs of urban Latinx LGBTQ+ youth relative to belonging in school and community settings. Guided by intersectionality and minority stress theoretical frameworks and Lee and Robbins’ operational definition of belongingness, our study highlights the unique challenges faced by Latinx LGBTQ+ youth and reveals factors that nurture and inhibit their sense of belonging. Participants’ experiences of belonging are consistent with the three indicators of belonging as defined by Lee and Robbins (1995): companionship, affiliation, and connectedness. In addition, our results extend Lee and Robbins’ conceptualization of belonging to include authenticity, which all participants described as contributing to their overall sense of belonging. Specifically, embracing authenticity emerged as a subtheme of thriving through adversity. Specifically, all participants expressed the importance of embracing their Latinx and LGBTQ+ identities and being part of social groups or communities where they could authentically be themselves, particularly given previous instances of exclusion and rejection.

Participants’ experiences of their school environments ranged from hostile to affirming, with K-12 contexts being substantially less inclusive than higher education settings, a finding that aligns with existing scholarship (Kosciw et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2019; Tetreault, 2013). For example, four participants waited until after high school or until university to disclose their LGBTQ+ identities, where they found it easier to create a community with other LGBTQ+ and/or Latinx youth and more fully embrace themselves. The two participants who attended Catholic schools described instances of religious-based exclusion by both staff and peers. Consistent with literature related to minority stress and intersectionality frameworks (Shramko et al., 2018; Zongrone et al., 2020), the challenges experienced by all participants were exacerbated by their multiple, marginalized positionalities across both school and community contexts.

While findings underscore the unmet needs of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth in their schools and the communities where they lived relative to belonging, they also reveal the value of supportive

adults and inclusive spaces across school and community settings, particularly among youth whose families are not accepting. Further, positive interpersonal relationships and inclusive spaces are reflective of Lee and Robbins' (1995) three indicators of belonging. Indeed, a vast body of scholarship echoes the impact of supportive adults and inclusive spaces on LGBTQ+ youth's physical, socio-emotional, and academic well-being (Barr et al., 2016; Johns et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020) and their overall sense of belonging.

Participants developed positive and effective strategies to navigate and overcome hardships by connecting and creating community with those who share similar positionalities and lived experiences, fully embracing their Latinx and LGBTQ+ identities, and taking action to support other LGBTQ+ youth. Creating community with those who share similar qualities aligns with Lee and Robbins' affiliation indicator (1995). In addition, embracing their Latinx and LGBTQ+ identities is consistent with a sense of authenticity, which we view as key to belonging, particularly for LGBTQ+ people of color who often experience exclusion and rejection because of their multiple, marginalized positionalities.

The study identified several suggestions for increasing school and community belonging among urban Latinx LGBTQ+ youth. Participants shared the value of affirming displays—such as a safe-space sticker, a Pride flag, and LGBTQ+-related resources—to indicate support. Participants also recommended additional professional development to assist school staff and youth-serving professionals in improving their knowledge, skills, and dispositions relative to supporting LGBTQ+ youth. Capacity building to assist professionals in implementing culturally responsive practices to understand and meet the complex needs of LGBTQ+ youth of color has been identified as a need by other scholars (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Brockenbrough, 2016; Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020). Participants also expressed the importance of curriculum and programming that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ people and underscored the value of LGBTQ+ and Latinx representation in school and programmatic content and materials. They also suggested that community centers and youth-related programs be accessible to youth via public transportation. These recommendations align with existing research (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020) and reiterate the importance of an inclusive and affirming climate.

Strengths and Limitations

Our study contributes to the literature by highlighting the experiences of urban Latinx LGBTQ+ youth in schools and community environments, identifying authenticity as an indicator of belonging for LGBTQ+ youth and expanding the literature on minority stress. The participants' experiences in this study emphasize the importance of considering the multiple identities of LGBTQ+ youth when building support systems, such as GSAs so that a youth's full identity is supported.

Despite its strengths, this study is not without its limitations. First, our sample size consisted of eight Latinx LGBTQ+ youth residing in urban locations across North Carolina; as such, findings

are not generalizable to Latinx LGBTQ+ youth in other regions of the country, including and especially those living in rural areas. In addition, our findings do not fully capture the experiences of Latinx transgender youth, as only one of the participants indicated a non-binary identity; in contrast, seven of the eight participants identified as LGB. Further, we relied heavily on LGBTQ+ university resource centers and LGBTQ+ youth-serving organizations for participant recruitment. Participants associated with these organizations may have different experiences relative to belonging than those with no association. In addition, the majority of participants attended college or were planning to attend college. The belonging experiences of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth with different post-secondary trajectories may be distinct from this study's participants.

Finally, due to limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, six of the eight participants were interviewed virtually using only audio. The lack of in-person contact may have impacted rapport building and comfort level between the facilitator and the participant, thereby limiting the extent to which participants disclosed details of their personal experiences. Moreover, challenges accessing a private space or reliable internet may have limited some young people's ability to participate. For example, at least one prospective participant cited a lack of private space as their reason for not participating.

Implications for Extension Research and Practice

This study's findings have significant implications for Extension research and practice. First, while this study's broad focus on school and community contexts is relevant to Extension, future research is needed to more fully comprehend Latinx LGBTQ+ youth belonging within Extension-specific environments, as well as other community contexts outside of school. In addition, our study was limited to participants in North Carolina. Research in this area should be expanded to include the experiences of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth across all regions of the United States and in both urban/suburban and rural areas. Further, seven of the eight participants identified as cisgender. The overwhelming majority of scholarship on Latinx LGBTQ+ youth focuses on the experiences of those who are LGB (Kosciw, 2020; Ryan et al., 2009). Future studies on Latinx LGBTQ+ youth must intentionally recruit and include transgender and gender-expansive participants. Though we did not explicitly recruit participants from private schools, two of the eight participants had attended private schools throughout all or some of their K-12 careers. Further research is needed to explore the differences between private and public school experiences for LGBTQ+ youth in general and Latinx LGBTQ+ youth specifically. Finally, more research is needed to examine authenticity as an indicator of belonging among LGBTQ+ youth, including those who are Latinx.

With regard to practice, our findings demonstrate that Latinx LGBTQ+ youth benefit substantially from adult and peer support across school and community contexts. Ensuring Latinx LGBTQ+ youth are listened to and engaged in decision-making processes—including as

participants in Extension-sponsored programs—is one way to demonstrate that their voices and lived experiences are valued. Given the complex challenges faced by many Latinx LGBTQ+ youths, professional development is needed to ensure Extension professionals have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively implement practices that both actively support Latinx LGBTQ+ youth and are culturally responsive. In addition, Extension professionals should be aware of behaviors that may inadvertently make Latinx LGBTQ+ youth feel a lack of support or affirmation. Further, professionals must take steps to consider how and the extent to which Latinx LGBTQ+ youth's intersecting positionalities impact and inform their experience of being LGBTQ+. To that end, being intentional about representing Latinx and LGBTQ+ youth in curricular, marketing, and programming materials may increase participation among this population. Part of cultivating a supportive and affirming environment also includes having a physical space where Latinx LGBTQ+ youth may gather and not only feel like they can show up as their authentic selves but that they have an actual community of peers and trusted adults to turn to for support. Even if all Latinx LGBTQ+ youth does not utilize such a space, the knowledge that it exists and can be accessed when and if needed may contribute to a greater sense of belonging.

Learning how to best support LGBTQ+ youth in general and Latinx LGBTQ+ youth specifically is new territory for many Extension professionals. As such, continuously examining and addressing personal and institutional biases about LGBTQ+ and Latinx people is paramount. Seeking guidance and collaboration on best practices, non-discrimination policies, and recommended protocol relative to LGBTQ+ youth—including privacy and confidentiality, pronouns, bathrooms, and overnight lodging—is also recommended. For those working in 4-H, reviewing the Access, Equity, and Belonging Committee on LGBTQ+ Youth's Practices for Inclusion of Individuals of All Genders and Sexual Orientations (Program Leaders Working Group, 2020) is a worthwhile place to start. Resources and training opportunities for supporting LGBTQ+ youth are also included on the group's website at <https://access-equity-belonging.extension.org/about/lgbtq-youth-community>.

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