

Sense of Belonging in Secondary Schools: A Survey of LGB and Heterosexual Students in Flanders

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This study focuses on differences in sense of belonging between lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) and heterosexual students. Data from 1,745 secondary school students were collected with an online survey. Step-wise multiple regression analyses was used to investigate the relationship between sexual orientation and sense of school belonging. The results show that sexual orientation has an impact on sense of belonging for girls, but not for boys. Perceived discrimination and LGB friendliness of the school appeared to be important indicators of sense of belonging for all the respondents, irrespective of their sexual orientation.

KEYWORDS *sense of belonging, secondary schools, LGB*

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth are often discriminated against at school because of their sexual orientation, not only by their peers, but also by some of their teachers (Baczkiewicz, Christensen, & Schoenfeld, 2004; Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, Iaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2009; Buston & Hart, 2001). On top of that overt discrimination,

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many schools are very heteronormative environments. Heteronormativity refers to institutions, practices, and attitudes that make heterosexuality a privileged system in the dominant culture (Salo, 2004). Heterosexuality is proposed as the “normal” sexual orientation and alternative feelings or behaviors are seen as “abnormal,” “wrong,” or “deviant” (Chesir-Teran, 2003; Dewaele, Vincke, Cox, & Dhaenens, 2009; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Gwalla-Ogisi & Sikorski, 1996; Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007). This heteronormativity is visible in textbooks, which only rarely mention homosexuality (Cox, Dewaele, & Vincke, 2010; Dewaele, Vincke, Cox, et al., 2009; Ellis & High, 2004; Pelleriaux, 2003), but also in the pathologizing or silencing of homosexuality by some teachers (Buston & Hart, 2001; Ellis & High, 2004).

This homonegativity in schools can have serious impacts on LGB students’ school experiences and school careers (Mishna et al., 2008; Poteat & Espelage, 2007). We already know that adolescents with non-heterosexual attractions often have greater difficulty engaging in school, for example, they get lower grades, skip classes more often, and have lower educational aspirations (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2006; Pearson et al., 2007; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). In this study, we focus on the impact of sexual orientation on school sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is a frequently used concept in educational studies (for an overview, see Osterman, 2000). It refers to the degree of feeling accepted, respected, integrated, and supported within the school environment (Goodenow, 1993b). International research suggests that LGB students have a lower school sense of belonging than heterosexual students (Bos, Sandfort, de Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008; Galliher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004; Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, & Riggle, 2003). We want to investigate whether this is also the case in secondary schools in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

Belgium is known as a quite LGB-friendly country, a perception that is reflected in the legal equalities of LGBs. Belgium has an antidiscrimination law with specific reference to LGBs, and same-sex couples have the possibility to marry and adopt children (Borghs & Eeckhout, 2009). Research also shows quite positive attitudes among the Flemish population toward LGBs and LGB rights, especially compared with the attitudes in most other European countries (European Commission, 2006; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009). However, these legal equalities and perceived tolerance among the population do not mean that LGBs are fully accepted in Belgian society. Schools in Flanders are still very heteronormative (Cox et al., 2010; Dewaele, Vincke, Cox, et al., 2009; Pelleriaux, 2003), and secondary school students, and especially Muslim students and students from vocational and technical tracks, seem to have rather negative attitudes toward LGBs (Cox et al., 2010; Dewaele, Vincke, Cox, et al., 2009; Hooghe, Quintelier, Claes, Dejaeghere, & Harrell, 2010; Pelleriaux & Van Ouytsel, 2003). In general in Flanders, bullying is not more prevalent than it is in

other countries. Recent data show that 14–15% of the secondary school students in Flanders show bullying behavior (Demagnet, 2008). We find similar results in international studies (e.g., Nansel et al., 2001; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999).

With this research, we want to overcome some of the limitations of other studies on the sense of school belonging of LGB students. Some of these studies do not differentiate between adolescents with only same-sex attractions and those who are attracted to both boys and girls (Pearson et al., 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Rostosky et al., 2003). However, previous research did show that bisexual youth often have greater difficulties at school and more psychosocial problems in comparison to homosexuals and lesbians (Busseri et al., 2006; Galliher et al., 2004; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Russell et al., 2001). Another advantage of this study is that it uses data from both heterosexual and LGB students, what makes it possible to compare both groups. The unavailability of this comparable data is one of the limitations of some of the other studies on the sense of school belonging of LGB students (Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Poteat & Espelage, 2007).

In this article, we use an ecological perspective to investigate the reciprocal relationships between individuals and their environment, in this case between LGB students and their schools. A useful paradigm that links the individual and the environment is the Person-Environment Fit Theory (Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1998), which proposes that stress arises from a misfit between the individual and his or her environment. When we translate this theoretical paradigm to the specific situation of LGB students, we can assume that the sexual orientation of LGB youth does not match with the heteronormativity and even homonegativity that are present in many schools. We expect this misfit to have an effect on the students' sense of school belonging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sense of Belonging and the Educational Career

Goodenow (1993b) defines students' sense of belonging as the psychological membership that students experience in their school or classroom. Sense of belonging refers to the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment. The degree of sense of belonging students experience has an impact on different aspects of their school experience and educational career. Students with a lower sense of belonging are less socially integrated in school (Pearson et al., 2007) and feel less attached to school and teachers. They are likely to be more isolated and alienated from school and peers and to skip classes to avoid interactions with others (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Mouton & Hawkins, 1996; Pearson et al., 2007). This can lead to a lower engagement with academic activities, lower grades, a greater

likelihood of failing courses, choosing a less challenging curriculum, having lower expectations for further education, and various kinds of deviant behaviors (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011; Johnson et al., 2001; Pearson et al., 2007).

Students with a greater sense of belonging, however, show higher academic interest, motivation, and engagement (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Goodenow, 1992, 1993a; Mouton & Hawkins, 1996; Osterman, 2000; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996), and get higher grades (DeWit & Karioja, 2002; Goodenow, 1993b; Roeser et al., 1996). They also have higher academic expectations (Freeman et al., 2007; Goodenow, 1992, 1993b; Roeser et al., 1996), value school activities more (Freeman et al., 2007; Goodenow, 1992, 1993b), and report fewer incidents of in-school victimization (DeWit & Karioja, 2002). The amount of deviant behavior displayed by a student in school can be influenced by his or her sense of belonging as well. Research shows that students with a higher sense of belonging show lower levels of school misconduct, have lower rates of truancy, and get fewer disciplinary referrals for inappropriate behavior (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2011; DeWit & Karioja, 2002; Jenkins, 1997).

Although many studies show a link between sense of belonging on the one hand and academic interest and performance on the other, causal relations between these variables remain open for debate and might be reciprocal (Freeman et al., 2007; Goodenow, 1992). Students' sense of belonging can be influenced by many factors, but one paradigm that is of specific relevance here, is the Person-Environment Fit Theory of Edwards et al. (2008). Edwards et al. state that a misfit between the individual and his or her environment causes stress. This theory originates from organizational research, where it is used to examine the fit between an organization and its employees (for an overview, see Edwards et al., 1998). It is also used in educational research to investigate the effects of a fit between students and their classroom or school on their academic achievement (Fraser & Fisher, 1983; Fraser & Rentoul, 1980; Nielsen & Moos, 1978). In this study we want to apply the Person-Environment Fit Theory to the school experiences of LGB students. Because the sexual orientation of LGB youth does not match with the heteronormativity and homonegativity that are present in many schools, they can experience a misfit. We assume that this misfit can have an influence on their sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging and LGB Students

Research shows that LGB youth have a lower school sense of belonging than heterosexual students (Bos et al., 2008; Galliher et al., 2004; Pearson et al., 2007; Rostosky et al., 2003). This difference between LGB and heterosexual students can be caused by various factors. One important factor is the heteronormativity that is present in most institutions, especially schools. Heteronormativity refers to the ignorance of, or discrimination against LGBs

at the institutional or societal level (Buston & Hart, 2001), and is related to concepts such as heterosexism (Buston & Hart, 2001; Chesir-Teran, 2003; Flowers & Buston, 2001), compulsory heterosexuality (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Rich, 1980; Khayatt, 1995) or institutionalized homophobia (Black & Underwood, 1998; Mishna et al., 2008; Pearson et al., 2007).

There are many examples of the presence of this heteronormativity in schools. Research showed that homosexuality is often not, or only rarely, mentioned in courses at school (Baczkiwicz et al., 2004; Cox et al., 2010; Dewaele, Vincke, Cox, et al., 2009; Ellis & High, 2004; Khayatt, 1995; Pelleriaux, 2003; Schoonacker, Dumon, & Louckx, 2009; Warwick, Chase, Aggleton, & Sanders, 2004). Presenting sexuality and sexual identity in the single form of heterosexuality is a reductive strategy that actively marginalizes students who are beginning to identify as LGB (Ellis & High, 2004). Another practice that is sometimes used by heterosexist teachers is the pathologizing of homosexuality (Buston & Hart, 2001; Cox et al., 2010; Ellis & High, 2004). They classify homosexuality as a mental illness or only refer to it as an indicator of susceptibility to infection with HIV. If LGB issues are raised during class, they are often referred to as “it” or “that issue,” a practice that is called “strategic silence” (Buston & Hart, 2001). A specific discourse on sexuality is often not available to teachers, rendering their language vague, unspecific, and exclusionary. Researchers suggest that the moral values of teachers have an important influence on the way they refer to homosexuality and react to homonegativity (Biddulph, 2006; Buston & Hart, 2001; Ellis & High, 2004; Khayatt, 1995). Some teachers steer clear of tackling homophobia because they believe that education should remain neutral on sexual issues (Buston & Hart, 2001). Teachers sometimes even justify heterosexist education by claiming that pupils are too homonegative for LGB issues to be discussed or acknowledged. Homosexuality is invisible in the curriculum as well as in school policies. Bullying policies, for example, often do not mention homophobic bullying as a distinct form of discrimination and, therefore, do not provide a mechanism for monitoring it (Adams, Cox, & Dunstan, 2004; Baczkiwicz et al., 2004; Khayatt, 1995; Kosciw et al., 2009; Mishna et al., 2008; Warwick et al., 2004).

Institutional heterosexism is not the only form of homonegativity experienced by LGB students. Many LGB students are also verbally or physically discriminated against by peers or even teachers at school (Baczkiwicz et al., 2004; Kosciw et al., 2009; Mishna et al., 2008; Buston & Hart, 2001). This discrimination can impact LGBs’ sense of isolation (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Khayatt, 1995), and can prevent them from making friends because others might fear being mocked for associating with LGBs (Flowers & Buston, 2001). Discrimination against LGBs can also cause educational difficulties such as poor academic performance or even dropping out of school (Mishna et al., 2008). Research shows that, when there is more homophobia at school, boys in general have a lower sense of belonging and girls withdraw

more from school (Poteat & Espelage, 2007). An interesting finding is that the victims of homonegative discrimination are not necessarily LGB-identified individuals (Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Thurlow, 2001; Warwick et al., 2004). Homophobic insults often refer to everything viewed as unmanly, nonnormative or uncool (Thurlow, 2001).

LGB students are not only discriminated against by peers, but sometimes by their teachers as well. LGBs often report teasing, stigmatizing of homosexuality, misinformation based on stereotyping and myth, pathologizing of homosexuality, and treating it as being simply about sexual behavior or framing it as dangerous (Baczkiwicz et al., 2004; Buston & Hart, 2001; Khayatt, 1995; Kosciw et al., 2009; Mishna et al., 2008). The response of other students as well as teachers to homonegative banter might play an important role in developing and maintaining a climate that is supportive of sexually questioning and LGB youth (Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Mishna et al., 2008; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). Homonegative comments often go unchallenged by other pupils (Buston & Hart, 2001) and teachers (Baczkiwicz et al., 2004; Khayatt, 1995; Mishna et al., 2008; Schoonacker et al., 2009; Warwick et al., 2004). Many adolescents even think that antigay harassment and violence are socially acceptable, particularly in response to inferred sexual innuendos or gender norm violations (Franklin, 2000).

Several researchers suggest that LGB students who choose to out themselves at school could have more negative experiences than LGBs who keep their sexual orientation hidden (Busseri et al., 2006; Mishna et al., 2008; Pearson et al., 2007; Smith, 1998). These suggestions are confirmed by Kosciw et al. (2009), who showed that if students come out to their peers, they experience more victimization. But they also found that LGB students who are out to all the other students and teachers at school have a greater sense of belonging than students who are not. This finding confirms the theory of DiPlacido (1998), who states that coming out leads to more external stressors (e.g., victimization), but less internal stressors (e.g., poor self-image). The absence of internal stressors could moderate the effects of discrimination on the sense of belonging of LGB students.

In the international research field, we find only a few empirical studies that give attention to the sense of belonging of LGBs (Galliher et al., 2004; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Pearson et al., 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Rostosky et al., 2003). The most important conclusions of these studies are that same-sex attracted youth feel less socially integrated in their schools (Pearson et al., 2007), that homophobic victimization predicts a lower sense of school belonging in homosexual students (Poteat & Espelage, 2007), that sexual minority students report a lower sense of school belonging (Galliher et al., 2004; Rostosky et al., 2003), with sexual minority females at particular risk (Galliher et al., 2004), and that the school climate regarding LGBs has a significant influence on the sense of belonging of LGB students (Murdock & Bolch, 2005).

METHODS

Sample

We used data from the Zzzip@Youth project for this study. The Zzzip@Youth project was funded by the Flemish government and the main aim was to investigate differences and resemblances between the educational careers and school experiences of LGB and heterosexual youth (Dewaele, Vincke, Van Houtte, & Cox, 2008). This study focuses on one aspect of the school experiences, that is, sense of belonging.

The data of the Zzzip@Youth project were collected via an online survey. The data-gathering took place from October to December 2007. The respondents were recruited through different organizations and institutions such as secondary schools, youth services, and specific organizations and Web sites for LGB youth. This survey was designed to measure individual experiences and characteristics, and not to investigate school effects.

We only included data of secondary school students in our analyses ($N = 1,745$), omitting those respondents who were enrolled in higher education or at the labor market. Our respondents reported to be 90.4% ($N = 1,517$) heterosexual, 5.2% ($N = 74$) homosexual or lesbian, and 4.4% ($N = 88$) bisexual. The mean age of our respondents was almost 16 (15.97), and 39% ($N = 680$) of our respondents were boys. For an overview of the demographic statistics of the sample, see Table 1.

Design

To get an idea of the relationship between sexual orientation and sense of belonging, we compared the mean scores on the sense of belonging scale for all the different subgroups in the sample, using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Then we performed hierarchical multiple regression analyses to test whether sexual orientation has an impact on the sense of belonging of secondary school students and whether this relationship is influenced by the perceived homonegativity of the school. Because we are interested in gender differences, we performed the analyses separately for the boys and the girls in the sample. To be able to investigate differences between the subgroups of LGB students in greater detail and to test the possible impact of their coming out, we also perform a separate analysis for the LGBs in the sample. We performed additional t tests to assess whether the results for the boys and the girls are significantly different.

The first multiple regression model includes only the dependent variable, that is, sense of belonging, and the main independent variable, that is, sexual orientation. We used dummy variables to integrate the sexual orientation measure, with heterosexual as the reference category for the analyses with the boys and girls, and homosexual as the reference category for the analyses with the LGBs.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics: Frequencies (%) or Means and Standard Deviations (*SD*)

Variables (range)	Total	Boys	Girls	LGBs
<i>Sense of belonging (0–4)</i>	2.49 (<i>SD</i> = 0.55)	2.43 (<i>SD</i> = 0.54)	2.53 (<i>SD</i> = 0.56)	2.36 (<i>SD</i> = 0.62)
<i>Sexual orientation</i>				
Heterosexual	90.4% (<i>N</i> = 1517)	90.2% (<i>N</i> = 592)	90.4% (<i>N</i> = 925)	–
Homosexual/lesbian	5.2% (<i>N</i> = 74)	6.6% (<i>N</i> = 21)	4.4% (<i>N</i> = 53)	54.3% (<i>N</i> = 88)
Bisexual	4.4% (<i>N</i> = 88)	3.2% (<i>N</i> = 43)	5.2% (<i>N</i> = 45)	45.7% (<i>N</i> = 74)
<i>Gender</i>				
Boys	39% (<i>N</i> = 680)	–	–	39.5% (<i>N</i> = 64)
Girls	61% (<i>N</i> = 1056)	–	–	60.5% (<i>N</i> = 98)
Age	15.97 (<i>SD</i> = 1.57)	15.99 (<i>SD</i> = 1.65)	15.96 (<i>SD</i> = 1.53)	16.41 (<i>SD</i> = 1.45)
<i>Educational track</i>				
Academic	50% (<i>N</i> = 872)	43.4% (<i>N</i> = 295)	54.2% (<i>N</i> = 577)	46.9% (<i>N</i> = 76)
Arts	2.7% (<i>N</i> = 47)	2.2% (<i>N</i> = 15)	3% (<i>N</i> = 32)	7.4% (<i>N</i> = 12)
Technical	31.3% (<i>N</i> = 546)	39.9% (<i>N</i> = 271)	25.8% (<i>N</i> = 275)	25.9% (<i>N</i> = 42)
Vocational	16% (<i>N</i> = 280)	14.6% (<i>N</i> = 99)	17% (<i>N</i> = 181)	19.8% (<i>N</i> = 32)
<i>Discrimination by teachers (0–4)</i>	1.19 (<i>SD</i> = 0.71)	1.31 (<i>SD</i> = 0.76)	1.11 (<i>SD</i> = 0.68)	1.09 (<i>SD</i> = 0.75)
<i>Discrimination by peers (0–4)</i>	0.6 (<i>SD</i> = 0.58)	1.69 (<i>SD</i> = 0.66)	1.55 (<i>SD</i> = 0.52)	1.79 (<i>SD</i> = 0.67)
<i>LGB-friendliness of the school (1–5)</i>	3.33 (<i>SD</i> = 1.08)	3.14 (<i>SD</i> = 1.15)	3.46 (<i>SD</i> = 1.03)	3.48 (<i>SD</i> = 0.96)
<i>Degree of outness (1–7)</i>				
Teachers	–	–	–	3.53 (<i>SD</i> = 2.23)
Classmates	–	–	–	4.91 (<i>SD</i> = 2.24)
<i>Acceptance of coming-out (1–5)</i>				
Teachers	–	–	–	4.48 (<i>SD</i> = 0.65)
Classmates	–	–	–	4.48 (<i>SD</i> = 0.7)

In the Model 2, we added age as first control variable, because the age of the respondent could have an impact on the school sense of belonging or other variables in the model. Students in the lower grades are often more engaged and have a higher sense of school belonging than students in higher grades (Anderman, 2003; DeWit & Karioja, 2002; Johnson et al., 2001; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). But younger students also appear to be less tolerant toward homosexuality compared to older students (Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Dewaele, Vincke, Van Houtte, et al., 2008), so maybe LGBs in the lower grades perceive more discrimination from their peers and, therefore, have a lower sense of belonging.

In the Model 3, we included dummies for the educational track variable as students in lower tracks often report a lower sense of belonging than students in higher tracks (Smerdon, 2002; Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2011). Research also showed that students in technical and vocational tracks are less tolerant toward LGBs (Pelleriaux & Van Ouytsel, 2003), and this can impact the sense of belonging of LGB students in these tracks. This variable consists of four categories: academic, technical, arts, and vocational education, which correspond with the four educational tracks in the Flemish secondary education system. We added these tracks as dummies and use academic education as the reference category.

In the next models, we included variables that measure the perceived homonegativity in schools, because previous research showed that a homonegative school climate and homophobic victimization in school leads to a lower sense of belonging of LGB students (Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). The variables included to measure homonegativity in schools are a measure for perceived discrimination by teachers (Model 4), a measure for the perceived discrimination by peers (Model 5), and a measure for perceived LGB friendliness of the school (Model 6).

We performed a separate analysis for the LGBs in the sample in which we included two additional models to integrate the possible influence of LGBs' coming out to teachers and classmates and the acceptance of this outing. We included these coming-out variables because previous studies suggested or showed that LGB students who come out in school may experience more negative interactions with peers and teachers (Busseri et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2009; Mishna et al., 2008; Pearson et al., 2007; Smith, 1998), which could influence their sense of school belonging.

Variables

To measure the central determinant, that is, sexual orientation, we use the Kinsey scale (Bell & Weinberg, 1979; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Wardell, Martin, & Gebhard, 1957). The Kinsey scale asks the respondents to indicate how they see or identify themselves on a 7-point scale that ranges from *exclusively heterosexual* (1) to *exclusively homosexual*

(7). We added an eighth category *I do not know*, but excluded the respondents who indicated this category from the analyses ($N = 66$). Because the aim of this study is to compare heterosexuals with homosexuals and bisexuals, we recoded the answers on the Kinsey scale to create three distinct categories, that is, heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian/homosexual. The heterosexual category consists of the first two categories of the Kinsey scale (*exclusively heterosexual* and *much more heterosexual than homosexual*). The bisexual category comprises the three middle categories of the Kinsey scale (*a bit more heterosexual than homosexual*, *equally heterosexual and homosexual*, *a bit more homosexual than heterosexual*). The last category refers to the respondents who see themselves as much more homosexual than heterosexual or exclusively homosexual. This recoding has been used in other studies that worked with the Kinsey scale as well (Busseri et al., 2006; Dewaele, Vincke, Van Houtte, et al., 2008; Vincke, Dewaele, Van den Berghe, & Cox, 2006). Research using both measures of sexual orientation (three dimensional and seven dimensional) has proved that these measures correspond very well (Storms, 1980). In the total sample, 90.4% of the respondents were heterosexual ($N = 1,517$), 5.2% were homosexual or lesbian ($N = 74$) and 4.4% were bisexual ($N = 88$). For an overview of the descriptive statistics, see Table 1.

The dependent variable in this study is *sense of belonging*, measured with the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale of Goodenow (1993b). This scale consists of 18 items. Examples of these items are “I feel like a real part of this school”, “Sometimes I feel as if I do not belong here” and “I wish I was in a different school.” The respondents had to rate each item on a 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from *totally not agree* (0) to *totally agree* (4). The total score on the scale was computed using the mean method. A low score on the scale corresponds with a low sense of belonging, a high score with a high sense of belonging. The reliability of the scale in the total sample ($N = 1,667$) is 0.88 (Chronbach’s alpha) and the mean score is 2.49 ($SD = .56$, range = 0–4).

Age was measured by asking respondents to indicate their year of birth. We then recoded this variable to get the age of the respondents in 2007, the year when the data was gathered ($N = 1,745$; mean = 15.97; $SD = 1.57$). Educational track was measured by asking which educational track or level they were enrolled in at the time the data was gathered. Respondents could choose between primary school, academic secondary education, arts secondary education, technical secondary education, vocational secondary education, higher education at a college, or higher education at university. For this research, we only included respondents from secondary education ($N = 1,745$; academic = 50%; technical = 31.3%; arts = 2.7%; vocational = 16%).

To measure the misfit LGB students experience between their sexual orientation and the homonegativity in their schools, we asked the respondents about the amount of discrimination they perceive in their schools and how LGB friendly they would rate their school. To measure perceived discrimination by teachers, we used a general discrimination scale based on a subscale of Al-Methen and Wilkinson (1998). This scale consists of 6 items, for example, “Teachers do not help me when I need help” and “Teachers punish me without a reason.” The respondents had to rate each item on a 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from *totally not agree* (0) to *totally agree* (4). The total score on this scale was computed using the mean method. A low score on the scale corresponds with low perceived discrimination, a high score with high perceived discrimination. Perceived discrimination by peers was measured with a scale based on measures of Utsey (1998) and Krieger, Smith, Naishadham, Hartman, and Barbeau (2005). These scales were designed for measuring racist discrimination, but we adapted them so they could be used for homophobic discrimination. Our scale consisted of three items: ‘How many times in the last 6 months are you insulted or ridiculed’, “. . . are you spat on or hit”, “. . . threatened.” For each of these items we asked whether this was because of their sexual orientation. The respondents could choose between *never* (0), *seldom*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *very often* (4). The total score on this scale was computed using the mean method. A low score on the scale corresponds with low perceived discrimination, a high score with high perceived discrimination. Perceived LGB friendliness of the school was measured with one question, “Can you tell us how LGB friendly you perceive your school to be?”, which the respondents had to answer by rating a 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from *totally not LGB friendly* to *very LGB friendly*. The mean score on the scale measuring perceived discrimination by teachers was 1.19 ($N = 1,662$; $SD = 0.71$; range = 0–4; Chronbach’s $\alpha = 0.84$), the mean score on the scale measuring perceived discrimination by peers was .61 ($N = 1,556$; $SD = 0.58$; range = 0–4; Chronbach’s $\alpha = 0.65$), and the respondents perceived their school as a rather LGB-friendly environment ($N = 1,556$; mean = 3.33; $SD = 1.08$; range = 1–5). To compare results of LGBs with the total sample or to compare results of boys and girls in the sample, see Table 1.

For the sample of LGB youth, we also included measures for the degree of coming out to classmates and teachers and for the acceptance of their outing by classmates and teachers. The degree of coming out to classmates and teachers and the perceived acceptance of this outing are measured with a scale based on a measure of Mohr and Fassinger (2000). For the degree of coming out, the respondents had to rate to what degree they think their classmates and teachers know there are LGB on a 7-point Likert-scale, ranging from *do not know it at all* (1) to *I am sure they know and we have talked about it openly* (7). The acceptance of this outing was measured in a similar way, asking to what degree classmates and teachers accepted their

coming out with a 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from *they completely accept me* (1) to *they absolutely do not accept me* (5). When we take a look at the mean scores, we see that the LGB students are a little more out toward their classmates ($N = 132$; mean = 4.86; $SD = 2.24$; range = 1–7) than toward their teachers ($N = 125$; mean = 3.47; $SD = 2.22$; range = 1–7), but when they have come out, we see no significant differences in acceptance among classmates ($N = 89$; mean = 4.45; $SD = 0.71$; range = 1–5) and teachers ($N = 49$; mean = 4.47; $SD = 0.65$; range = 1–5).

RESULTS

We used one-way ANOVA to compare the means of sense of belonging for all the different subgroups in the sample. The results show that heterosexual girls clearly have the highest sense of belonging (2.56; range = 0–4), and a post hoc Bonferroni test confirms that their mean score on sense of belonging differs significantly from the mean scores of bisexual girls (2.2; $p < .001$) and heterosexual boys (2.42; $p < .001$).

To test the relationship between sexual orientation and sense of belonging, we did three multiple regression analyses: one for the boys, one for the girls, and one for the LGBs in the sample. For the boys, we did not find a significant effect of sexual orientation on sense of belonging (final model: homosexual $\beta = 0.002$; $p > .05$ – bisexual $\beta = -0.032$; $p > .05$). The only significant effects on sense of belonging in the final model are educational track, with boys from technical ($\beta = -0.086$; $p < .05$) and vocational tracks ($\beta = -0.127$; $p < .001$) experiencing less sense of belonging compared to boys in academic tracks; discrimination by teachers ($\beta = -0.419$; $p < .001$) or peers ($\beta = -0.180$; $p < .001$), with boys who perceive more discrimination experiencing a lower sense of belonging; and perceived LGB friendliness of the school ($\beta = 0.238$; $p < .001$), with boys perceiving their school as an LGB-friendly environment having a higher sense of belonging. The total multivariate model for the boys explains 35.5 % of the variance in sense of belonging (see Table 2).

In contrast to the results for the boys, sexual orientation does have a significant effect on sense of belonging for the girls in the sample. In the first model, we see that bisexual girls ($\beta = -0.147$; $p < .001$) have a significantly lower sense of belonging than heterosexual girls and this effect remains significant and only slightly gets smaller in the last model ($\beta = -0.121$; $p < .001$). In Model 4, where we introduced the measure for discrimination by teachers, lesbians ($\beta = -0.083$; $p < .01$) also appear to have a slightly lower sense of belonging compared to heterosexual girls. This effect remains significant when we control for discrimination by peers and perceived LGB friendliness of the school in Model 5 ($\beta = -0.073$; $p < .05$) and

TABLE 2 Multivariate Models for Boys: Beta Coefficients and Explained Variance

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Sexual orientation</i> (hetero = 0)						
Homosexual	0.020	0.021	0.006	-0.014	0.006	0.002
Bisexual	0.023	0.024	0.020	-0.037	-0.034	-0.032
Age		-0.011	0.037	0.034	0.017	0.006
<i>Educational track</i> (academic = 0)						
Arts			-0.004	-0.017	-0.006	-0.009
Technical			-0.164***	-0.136***	-0.115**	-0.086*
Vocational			-0.186***	-0.174***	-0.150***	-0.127***
<i>Discrimination by teachers</i>				-0.490***	-0.461***	-0.419***
<i>Discrimination by peers</i>					-0.194***	-0.180***
<i>LGB-friendliness of the school</i>						0.238***
Adjusted R ²	-0.003	-0.004	0.031***	0.267***	0.302***	0.355***

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

6 ($\beta = -0.078$; $p < .01$). To explain why being lesbian only became a significant predictor of sense of belonging when we introduced a measure for perceived discrimination by teachers, we looked at the bivariate correlation between sexual orientation and perceived discrimination by teachers. This showed a small (but nonsignificant) negative relation between sexual orientation and perceived discrimination ($r = -0.03$; $p > .05$). This implies that (ignoring the nonsignificance of the result) the more girls identify themselves as exclusively lesbian, the less they perceive discrimination by teachers. Other significant effects in the final model for the girls are educational tracks, with girls from arts tracks ($\beta = 0.062$; $p < .05$) having a slightly higher sense of belonging, and girls in vocational tracks ($\beta = -0.084$; $p < .01$) having a lower sense of belonging than girls in academic tracks; discrimination by teachers ($\beta = -0.389$; $p < .001$) or peers ($\beta = -0.157$; $p < .001$), with girls who perceive more discrimination having a lower sense of belonging; and perceived LGB friendliness of the school ($\beta = 0.106$; $p < .001$), with girls perceiving their school as an LGB-friendly environment having a higher sense of belonging. The final model for the girls explains 25.6% of the variance in sense of belonging (see Table 3).

A t test comparison of the unstandardized coefficient for homosexual boys with the coefficient of lesbian girls shows a significant difference ($t = 2.078$; $p < .05$), meaning that the effect of sexual orientation on sense of belonging significantly differs for boys and girls. The t value for the comparison of bisexual boys and girls however, is nonsignificant ($t = 1.603$; $p > .05$).

TABLE 3 Multivariate Models for Girls: Beta Coefficients and Explained Variance

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Sexual orientation</i> (hetero = 0)						
Lesbian	-0.055	-0.054	-0.055	-0.083**	-0.073*	-0.078**
Bisexual	-0.147***	-0.147***	-0.154***	-0.141***	-0.121***	-0.121***
Age		-0.010	0.036	0.011	-0.001	-0.010
<i>Educational track</i> (academic = 0)						
Arts			0.065*	0.067*	0.070*	0.062*
Technical			-0.091**	-0.093**	-0.067*	-0.060
Vocational			-0.124***	-0.104**	-0.092**	-0.084**
<i>Discrimination by teachers</i>						
<i>Discrimination by peers</i>						
					-0.157***	-0.157***
<i>LGB friendliness of the school</i>						0.106***
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	0.022***	0.021***	0.040***	0.224***	0.246***	0.256***

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

We performed another multiple regression analysis for the LGBs in the sample, which revealed that the sexual orientation of LGB youth (whether they are homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual) does not have an impact on their sense of belonging (final model: lesbian $\beta = -0.076$; $p > .05$ – bisexual $\beta = -0.067$; $p > .05$). The only significant effects on sense of belonging in the final model for LGBs are perceived discrimination by teachers ($\beta = -0.406$; $p < .01$), with LGBs who perceive more discrimination having a lower sense of belonging; and perceived LGB friendliness of the school ($\beta = 0.367$; $p < .001$), with LGBs who perceive their school as an LGB-friendly environment having a higher school sense of belonging. The total multivariate model for LGB students explains 39.6% of the variance in sense of belonging (see Table 4).

DISCUSSION

With this study, we wanted to investigate the differences in school sense of belonging between heterosexual and LGB secondary school students in Flanders. Our results show that there are only few and small effects of sexual orientation on sense of belonging. Lesbian and bisexual girls appear to have a slightly lower sense of belonging than heterosexual girls, but we did not find a significant effect of sexual orientation for the boys in the sample.

TABLE 4 Multivariate Models for LGBs: Beta Coefficients and Explained Variance

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
<i>Sexual identification (homo = 0)</i>								
Lesbian	-0.051	-0.018	0.047	-0.087	-0.091	-0.026	-0.053	-0.076
Bisexual	-0.103	-0.060	0.045	-0.114	-0.118	-0.050	-0.051	-0.067
Age		-0.181	-0.116	0.002	0.000	-0.016	-0.008	-0.069
<i>Educational track (academic = 0)</i>								
Arts			-0.101	-0.140	-0.134	-0.093	-0.181	-0.064
Technical			-0.316	-0.245	-0.246	-0.249	-0.276	-0.094
Vocational			-0.314	-0.343*	-0.338	-0.434*	-0.471*	-0.349
Discrimination by teachers				-0.582***	-0.581***	-0.498**	-0.463**	-0.406**
Discrimination by peers					-0.018	-0.041	0.017	-0.051
<i>Degree of outness</i>								
Classmates						-0.026	-0.089	-0.029
Teachers						0.277	0.232	0.189
<i>Acceptance of coming-out</i>								
Classmates							0.160	-0.023
Teachers							0.132	0.080
LGB friendliness of the school								0.367*
Adjusted R ²	-0.043	-0.038	-0.021	0.308**	0.287*	0.312*	0.325*	0.396**

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

The effect of being lesbian only became significant when we controlled for the perceived discrimination by teachers. The bivariate correlation between sexual orientation and perceived discrimination by teachers showed a small (but nonsignificant) negative relation, which implies that the absence of discrimination could buffer the effect of sexual orientation on sense of belonging for lesbian girls. This is a surprising finding because other research shows that many LGB students are victims of discrimination or have a lower sense of belonging (Galliher et al., 2004; Pearson et al., 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Rostosky et al., 2003).

A comparison of the mean sense of belonging of all the subgroups in the sample reveals significant differences between heterosexual girls and heterosexual boys and between heterosexual girls and bisexual girls. Gender differences in sense of belonging are the subject of many studies (e.g., Brutsaert & Van Houtte, 2002; DeWit & Karioja, 2002; Galliher et al., 2004; Ma, 2003). Explanations for these differences are often found in the fact that typical female characteristics, like discipline, obedience, and structure, are more appreciated in the school context. An interesting new finding here involves the differences between girls with different sexual orientations. Bisexual girls clearly have a lower sense of belonging compared to

heterosexual girls, and in the multivariate models we also find a small significant effect for lesbian girls. It is possible that non-heterosexual girls show more resistance to these typical female characteristics or may even possess less of these typical gender-related traits. As such, lesbian and bisexual girls may not comply as much as heterosexual girls with the demands of typical femininity in school, which may in turn have an effect on their sense of belonging.

Other research in different disciplines focuses on the potential links between gender-related traits and sexual orientation, but never in the educational context (e.g., Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Lakkis, Ricciardelli, & Williams, 1999; Lippa, 2000). The conclusions from these studies differ depending on the measurement of gender-related traits. Lippa (2000) summarizes that when masculinity and femininity are measured as a one-dimensional continuum, gay men on average are more feminine and lesbian women are more masculine than heterosexuals. When it measured as a two-dimensional concept, with masculinity in terms of instrumental personality traits and femininity in terms of expressive traits, gay men score as high as heterosexual men on instrumentality but somewhat higher on expressiveness, and lesbian women score as high as heterosexual women on expressiveness but somewhat higher on instrumentality. A third approach, gender diagnosticity, refers to the probability that an individual is predicted to be male or female based on some set of gender-related indicators, such as occupational or hobby preferences. Gender diagnosticity measures appear to be more strongly associated with sexual orientation than either instrumentality or expressiveness. These findings give some evidence for the probability of differences in gender-related behavior between heterosexual and lesbian girls, but none of these theories refer to bisexual girls. It is possible that lesbian and bisexual girls do not feel they belong in school because they do not conform to these heteronormative gender-related expectations.

Bisexual girls appear to be an exceptionally vulnerable group, and because theories that link sexual orientation with gender-specific behavior do not mention this group, we looked for other possible explanations that focus on the specific difficulties for bisexuals in society. Bisexuality is often perceived as just a transition period on the way to becoming heterosexual or homosexual (Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy, & Brewer, 2008; Dewaele, 2009; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Schoonacker et al., 2009). Research showed that, for some youngsters, bisexuality can indeed be a kind of transition identity when they doubt about their sexual orientation, but certainly not for all (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). When they do not perceive it as just a phase, this nonacceptance of their sexual identity may have negative impacts on their sense of belonging. Those who do use it as a transition identity often have more fears and difficulties because they are still struggling with their sexual orientation (Rosario et al., 2006), which can

also have an impact on their sense of belonging in school. Another prejudice about bisexuality is that it is a choice (Dewaele, 2009). Many people think that bisexuals just cannot choose between boys or girls, or they do not understand why bisexuals do not choose the easier option, that is, an opposite-sex partner. Bisexuality is often perceived as an identity for people who do not dare to out themselves as a homosexual, or for people who just use it to become popular (Barker et al., 2008; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Schoonacker et al., 2009), which similarly stipulates bisexuality as a rather negative identity. Another possible explanation for their specific difficulties is that bisexuality is not visible in the media and popular culture, where sexuality is mostly presented as something dichotomous (heterosexual or homosexual; Alexander, 2010; Barker et al., 2008; Bryant, 2007; Schoonacker et al., 2009). If bisexual characters are represented in television soaps or movies, they tend to be promiscuous people with insatiable desires. This can make bisexual people feel abnormal, what can create internal stressors which have an impact on their sense of belonging.

One possible explanation as to why we do not find the same effects of sexual orientation for boys and girls might be the fact that girls are more likely to internalize distress (e.g., caused by victimization) than boys (Galliher et al., 2004; Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Blatt, & Hertzog, 1999). Sense of belonging measures the more internal aspects of school experience, thus, discovering that they are not heterosexual can have a more serious impact on school sense of belonging for girls than for boys.

Another interesting finding in this study is that the perceived LGB friendliness of the school and the perceived discrimination by teachers and peers are significant indicators of sense of belonging for all students, irrespective of their sexual orientation. This implies that when schools actively strive for more LGB friendliness in their policies and curricula, and promote LGB-friendly attitudes within their staff and student population, this can have positive results for all the students, not only for the LGBs. However, we have to take into account that we only measured the perception of LGB friendliness. Because we work with cross-sectional data, it is possible that students with a greater sense of belonging also perceive their school as more LGB friendly, so we need to be careful with causal interpretations.

There are a few limitations to this study. First, we did not use a random sample of respondents, which makes our results unrepresentative for the broader population. But this is impossible when investigating a hidden population like LGBs. We do not know the total population of LGBs in society, so it is impossible to select a representative sample. In order to reach enough LGBs to make a valid comparison, other sampling methods are necessary, such as an online survey. Online surveys make it possible to reach a large pool of potential respondents in a small time period. Another advantage of online surveys is their anonymity. We hoped this would increase the chance

that LGBs would participate in the study and that respondents would be willing to give information on sensitive subjects such as (homo)sexuality. Most adolescents are also acquainted with the Internet and use it often, allowing it to be a useful medium to recruit youth. Online surveys, however, also have some disadvantages. They generate an unknown selection effect because the respondents choose whether they participate or not. This increases the odds of a certain type of respondents participating (e.g., people who often use the Internet, motivated respondents, etc.). Another limitation of this study was the relatively small numbers of certain subgroups of the LGB population in the sample (e.g., bisexual boys). This might have influenced our analyses. Further research could focus on these minorities in the LGB population to get a more detailed view of their situation.

We measured sexual orientation with the Kinsey scale. This scale places individuals on a 7-point continuum ranging from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual, with different gradations in between. By recategorizing the respondents into three strict, undifferentiated categories, we nullified the attempt to step away from rigid categorizations of sexual orientation. This is an important limitation of this study, but it was necessary to be able to compare LGBs with heterosexuals. Another limitation of using fixed categorizations such as the Kinsey scale is that it gives the impression of a fixed, static sexual orientation, when in fact people's placement on the scale can vary at different times in their lives. For this research, we were interested in the school experiences of LGB youth who identify as LGB at one point in their life, but further longitudinal research could give interesting insights on the influence of sexual identity fluidity on people's lives.

Another possible focus for further research are the tracking effects, as this research showed that there are significant effects of educational tracks on sense of belonging. This is also shown in other studies (Smerdon, 2002; Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2011), but never specifically for LGB students. A focus on the specific experiences of lesbian and bisexual girls is recommended, because, for this subgroup, we did find an effect of sexual orientation on sense of school belonging. For investigating these specific populations (e.g., LGBs in technical or vocational tracks, lesbian and bisexual girls), qualitative research methods are more appropriate. These methods give the opportunity to investigate relations and experiences more in depth. Another interesting path for further research involves the potential links between gender-related traits and sexual orientation and, in the light of this study, their possible impact on the school experience of LGB youth.

This study demonstrates that sexual orientation has only few and small effects on the sense of belonging of LGB and heterosexual students in Flanders. A possible explanation for these positive results may be the specific Flemish context, as Belgium is known as a quite LGB-friendly country. By highlighting these optimistic results of our research, however, we do

not want to overshadow the continuing difficulties for LGB and heterosexual students in Flemish high schools. Schools in Flanders are still very heteronormative (Cox et al., 2010; Dewaele et al., 2009; Pelleriaux, 2003), and secondary school students, and especially muslim students and students from vocational and technical tracks, seem to have rather negative attitudes toward LGBs (Cox et al., 2010; Dewaele et al., 2009; Hooghe et al., 2010; Pelleriaux & Van Ouytsel, 2003). We also have to keep in mind that, in this study, we only focused on sense of school belonging, not on general mental health or well being. Other studies on the situation of LGBs in Flanders give evidence of significantly more mental health problems and less general well-being compared to heterosexuals (Schoonacker et al., 2009; Vincke et al., 2006).

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