

# “This Isn’t as Bad as I Thought”: Rural QTBIPOC Students’ Narratives of School Counseling

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Rural queer and transgender Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (QTBIPOC) youth navigate layered inequities that shape academic, social/emotional, and mental health outcomes. This narrative inquiry explored how six rural QTBIPOC students perceived and experienced school counseling, with particular attention to help-seeking related to sexual/affectional and/or gender identity. Participants completed a brief written reflection and a semi-structured interview; data were analyzed through iterative narrative and cross-case analysis. Six themes described how counseling became (or failed to become) a viable support: (a) students often interpreted the school counselor role as vague and primarily academic; (b) help-seeking operated as risk management in close-knit rural contexts where disclosure could invite judgment, minimization, or exposure; (c) counselor identity and perceived competence shaped expectations of being understood versus the burden of translation; (d) perceptions shifted over time through direct encounters and peer-shared narratives; (e) positive experiences were anchored in rapport, validation, and active privacy practices; and (f) students framed advocacy as “small but radical” actions that increased safety and visibility under constraint. Implications are offered for rural school counselors and counselor education to strengthen culturally responsive, queer-affirming practice and reduce barriers to support.

**Keywords:** rural; queer; trans; BIPOC: school counseling

Across the United States, queer and transgender youth continue to navigate K–12 settings where queer and trans identities are frequently treated as peripheral, unsafe, or controversial. Although social acceptance of some LGBTQ+ identities has increased (Minkin et al., 2025), students still report discrimination, harassment, and systemic exclusion (Gnan et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022; Savage & Chandling, 2013). For youth who also identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color, these experiences are intensified through overlapping racism, heterosexism, and cisnormativity, contributing to heightened bullying, absenteeism, and mental health distress (Cyrus, 2017; Murphy & Hardaway, 2017).

Rural contexts can further amplify these inequities. Close-knit social networks, community surveillance, and limited access to affirming resources increase the risks associated with visibility and disclosure (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; O’Connell, 2010). Within this ecology, school counselors may be among the most accessible support providers (Kuff et al., 2019) and are ethically charged to serve students

equitably across identity and development (ASCA, 2022). Yet counselors' ability to enact this role may be constrained by role expectations, community pressures, and uneven preparation for LGBTQ+ and intersectional concerns (Beck et al., 2014; Kuff et al., 2019; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2013).

Despite growing scholarship on LGBTQ+ youth and school counseling, less is known about how rurality, race, and queer/trans identity intersect in students' perceptions of counseling—particularly how students assess whether counseling is safe, relevant, and culturally responsive. This study addresses that gap by using narrative inquiry to explore rural QTBIPOC students' perceptions and lived experiences of school counseling related to sexual/affectional and/or gender identity.

## Literature Review

### QTBIPOC Students and Intersectional School Experiences

In this study, QTBIPOC is used as an umbrella term to describe Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who also identify with sexual/affectional and/or gender identities outside dominant heterosexual and cisgender norms. The term is not intended to suggest a singular or uniform identity; rather, it foregrounds the intersection of racialized, sexual/affectional, and gendered identities while recognizing that participants' experiences and self-identifications remain distinct. Consistent with an intersectional framing, these identities are understood as situated within social structures that differentially confer privilege and marginalization.

Historically, scholarship on LGBTQ+ experiences has often centered White queer narratives in ways that can obscure the realities of queer and trans youth of color (Rosenblum, 1994). QTBIPOC students occupy a distinct position in schools because their experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of oppression. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) provides a framework for understanding how racism, heterosexism, and cisnormativity operate simultaneously, producing school experiences that cannot be reduced to a single identity category (Cyrus, 2017; Murphy & Hardaway, 2017).

Across the broader LGBTQ+ student population, discrimination and hostile school climates are associated with elevated victimization, absenteeism, and mental health concerns (Gnan et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022; Savage & Chandling, 2013). These conditions have academic consequences: students may avoid school spaces, disengage from extracurriculars, or miss class to reduce exposure to harassment, contributing to achievement and attendance disparities (Gnan et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022). Mental health disparities further heighten risk, including elevated depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, with QTBIPOC youth often experiencing intensified vulnerability due to compounded minority stress (Cyrus, 2017; Murphy & Hardaway, 2017; Trevor Project, 2022). Because affirming support is a well-established protective factor, limited access to culturally responsive mental health resources—particularly in rural areas—raises the importance of school-based supports (Ramos & Chavira, 2022).

Intersectional conditions shape not only exposure to harm but also what support feels culturally intelligible. QTBIPOC students may weigh whether helpers can recognize racism-, culture-, and family-

context stress as central (rather than peripheral) to identity development, and whether dominant narratives of queer experience align with their realities. When support is grounded in assumptions that privilege more socially protected pathways (e.g., uncomplicated disclosure and public identity affirmation), students who face cultural, familial, or safety constraints may anticipate misunderstanding and withhold disclosure. These dynamics can increase the burden of self-explanation and reduce the likelihood that school-based help feels usable.

### Rural Context as a Condition Shaping Visibility, Safety, and Support

Rural schooling contexts can shape help-seeking in distinctive ways. Close-knit social networks, religious conservatism, and limited access to mental health or queer-affirming resources can heighten the perceived risk of being “known” or targeted (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; O’Connell, 2010). In such contexts, visibility may increase vulnerability, and students may anticipate social consequences if identity disclosure becomes public (Kosciw et al., 2015). For QTBIPOC youth, rurality can further intersect with racial isolation and constrained access to culturally competent care, amplifying barriers to belonging and support. These dynamics also shape how students determine whether support is safe before ever initiating contact. In tightly networked settings, help-seeking decisions may be influenced by observations of what happens to peers and by reputational information that circulates through friend groups, making trust socially mediated rather than solely dyadic. Relatedly, rural visibility heightens the practical stakes of confidentiality; students may avoid services not because they reject counseling, but because being seen accessing support can function as unintended disclosure. For QTBIPOC youth, these conditions can intensify the perceived costs of seeking help, even when school-based services are formally available.

### The School Counselor Role, Preparation, and Constraints in Rural Schools

School counselors are often positioned as key providers of student support, yet their ability to enact this role is shaped by training, institutional demands, and community norms. ASCA (2022) outlines an equity-oriented professional mandate that includes advocacy for students marginalized by sexual, affectional, gender, racial, and cultural identities. However, research suggests counselors may report limited preparation and lower self-efficacy for supporting LGBTQ+ students and addressing intersectional concerns (Beck et al., 2014; Kuff et al., 2019; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2013). Role expectations can also narrow what students experience counselors as “for,” particularly when counselors’ time is dominated by scheduling, testing, and postsecondary planning. When counseling is publicly communicated primarily through academic functions, students may come to view identity-related concerns as outside the counselor’s scope—even if counselors are trained to address them. In rural communities where identity disclosure is already high-stakes, unclear role messaging can function as a barrier by increasing uncertainty about what is safe to name and by shifting the burden onto students to test the boundaries of support.

In rural settings, counselors may face additional constraints related to community norms and administrative pressures. In contexts where LGBTQ+ affirmation may be contested, counselors may avoid

explicit engagement with identity-related concerns to reduce conflict with parents or school leadership (Guest et al., 2024; Bishop & McClellan, 2016). Yet when counselors provide visible allyship, validate identity, protect confidentiality, and advocate against bullying, students report greater safety and belonging (De Pedro et al., 2018; Greytak, 2013; Goodrich & Luke, 2010; Leung et al., 2022). What remains underexamined is how rural QTBIPOC students interpret these dynamics—including what signals safety, what produces disengagement, and what practices are experienced as affirming under rural constraints.

## Research Gap

Prior research establishes that LGBTQ+ youth face significant school-based inequities and that rural context can amplify risk through heightened visibility and limited resources. The literature also documents variability in counselor preparedness and the constraints counselors may experience in rural schools. However, less is known about how these dynamics operate for rural QTBIPOC students specifically, and how students' perceptions of counselor role, identity, privacy, and advocacy shape whether counseling becomes a viable resource. To address this gap, this narrative inquiry centers rural QTBIPOC students' accounts of their school counseling experiences related to sexual, affectional, and/or gender identity. This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of school counselors among QTBIPOC students in rural schools? (2) What are the experiences of QTBIPOC students who seek help from school counselors in rural schools?

## Method

### Methodology

Human experience is inherently storied, and the telling of these narratives, especially of those whose stories have gone untold, promotes power, agency, and resilience for those who live in the margins (Hendry, 2007; Jones, 2016). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology focused on the study of experience as narrated, attending to the interwoven dimensions of temporality (past–present–future), sociality (personal and social conditions), and place (the specific contexts in which experience occurs) (Clandinin, 2022; Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Narrative inquiry was selected because it offered an approach suited to exploring how rural QTBIPOC students interpret school counseling encounters without reducing their experiences to decontextualized themes alone.

### Study Design: Retrospective Narrative Accounts

Due to recruitment constraints related to working with minors and the contemporary sociopolitical climate surrounding queer issues (Ramos & Chaviral 2022; Schelbe et al., 2015; Wimberly & Battle, 2015), this study used a retrospective design with recent high school graduates who were proximally removed from their rural schooling experiences. Retrospective designs are useful when concurrent research is infeasible and can yield high-quality accounts when the temporal distance from events is relatively close

(Schwartz & Sudman, 2012). To strengthen recall and support narrative specificity, participants completed a brief written reflection prior to interviewing, which functioned as an autobiographical text to “trigger the telling of stories” and anchor interviews in concrete events (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

Importantly, this study treats retrospective narratives not as objective records of the past, but as meaning-making accounts shaped by present standpoint. Participants' developmental maturation, increased access to LGBTQ+ discourse (e.g., in college settings), and distance from rural communities may have influenced how experiences were interpreted and narrated. Accordingly, the analytic approach intentionally attended to how participants narrated change over time.

## Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling (Creswell et al., 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Robinson, 2014). Recruitment materials were distributed via LGBTQ+ centers, social media groups (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), and identity-based undergraduate organizations. Inclusion criteria included: (a) identifying with a sexual/affectional and/or gender identity outside heterosexual and/or cisgender identities; (b) identifying as Black, Indigenous, and/or a Person of Color; (c) graduating from high school within the last four academic years; (d) attending a school in a rural area as defined by U.S. Census criteria (Ratcliffe et al., 2016); (e) access to Zoom; and, (f) being 18 years or older. Six participants were selected after eligibility screening. The selection process was focused on meaningful variation across racial/ethnic identities, sexual/affectional identities, gender identities, and rural contexts to illuminate diverse patterns of meaning-making. Recruitment stopped at six cases based on information power—the combination of: (a) a specific sample (rural QTBIPOC recent graduates), (b) focused research questions, (c) rich narrative interviews, and (d) strong relevance of the narratives to the phenomenon under study—rather than aiming for theoretical saturation as used in other qualitative approaches. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1 using self-selected pseudonyms.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Racial/<br/>Ethnic Identity</b> | <b>Sexual/<br/>Affectional<br/>Identity</b> | <b>Gender<br/>Identity</b> | <b>Pronouns</b> | <b>Post-<br/>Secondary</b> |
|------------------|------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Daniel</b>    | 21         | Black/African<br>American          | Bisexual                                    | Cisgender<br>Male          | He/Him          | 4-year<br>college          |
| <b>G</b>         | 18         | Native<br>American/<br>White       | Bisexual                                    | Cisgender<br>Female        | She/Her         | 4-year<br>college          |
| <b>Pasack</b>    | 21         | Native<br>American                 | Queer                                       | Cisgender<br>Male          | He/Him          | 4-year<br>college          |
| <b>Soob</b>      | 19         | Latine                             | Queer                                       | Non-<br>Binary             | They/<br>Them   | 2-year<br>college          |
| <b>Lilo</b>      | 19         | Black/African<br>American          | Pansexual                                   | Cisgender<br>Female        | She/Her         | 2-year<br>college          |
| <b>Tomas</b>     | 19         | Latine                             | Gay                                         | Cisgender<br>Male          | He/Him          | 4-year<br>college          |

**Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of a demographic questionnaire, written reflection and a semi-structured interview. Prior to the interview, participants responded to a written prompt centered on their first experience seeking help from a school counselor regarding their sexual/affectional and/or gender identity. The written reflections were treated as narrative artifacts that anchored participants in specific events and were included as analytic materials (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). I then conducted 60–90-minute semi-structured Zoom interviews, which were audio/video recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. Interview questions centered on precipitating factors leading to help-seeking, school counseling experiences, and student perceptions. Following each interview, I wrote a reflexive journal entry documenting emerging interpretations and assumptions shaped by positionality. Prior to analysis, participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy, clarify statements, and identify any transcription errors or content they wished to amend; no substantive corrections or clarifications were requested.

## Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry involves iterative and reflexive analysis that attends to both the integrity of individual narratives and patterns across narratives (Clandinin, 2022). To balance idiographic richness with cross-case understanding, analysis occurred in two linked phases: (1) within-case narrative analysis (narrative smoothing and re-storying) and (2) cross-case paradigmatic narrative analysis (coding and theme development) (Clandinin, 2022; Polkinghorne, 1995).

During the initial phase of analysis each participant's interview and written reflection were read multiple times to construct a coherent narrative account that preserved sequence, turning points, and meaning-making across temporality, sociality, and place. I engaged in narrative deconstruction and narrative smoothing by identifying core events, tensions, and resolutions most central to the research questions, while maintaining the internal logic and voice of each participant's story (Kim, 2016). Analytic memos documented how each narrative portrayed help-seeking, counselor role, perceived safety, and rural context. This phase ensured that cross-case claims were grounded in intact narrative cases rather than fragmented excerpts.

I used paradigmatic narrative analysis to examine patterns across cases (Polkinghorne, 1995). Coding proceeded through three iterative cycles. During the first stage, I used open and in-vivo coding to identify recurring words, phrases, concepts, and meanings across transcripts and written reflections (Saldaña, 2016), resulting in 146 distinct codes. In the second stage, I engaged axial coding to cluster codes into analytic categories that captured relationships among conditions (e.g., rural visibility and surveillance), interpretive processes (e.g., safety appraisal), and counseling experiences (e.g., role ambiguity, affirmation, confidentiality) (Saldaña, 2016). In the final cycle, I used constant comparison across cases to refine categories into six cross-case themes that best represented shared experiences and meaning-making similarities while preserving narrative complexity. Themes were repeatedly checked against participant narratives to ensure they remained grounded in participants' storied contexts rather than decontextualized excerpts (Clandinin, 2022; Kim, 2016). Throughout analysis, reflexive journal entries were consistently referenced to surface and bracket positionality-informed assumptions and support interpretive accountability.

## Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Positionality is integral to qualitative rigor because knowledge is co-constructed through researcher-participant relationships and interpretive decisions (Holmes, 2020). I identify as a queer Indigenous man raised and educated in rural Southeastern North Carolina. This study emerged from my commitment to amplifying narratives that are often marginalized within educational institutions and within research, and from my own experience of receiving queer-affirming support from my rural school counselor.

My shared identity and experience functions as both a strength and a potential bias. Shared cultural knowledge enhanced rapport and interpretive sensitivity, yet it also inclined foregrounding narratives of possibility or resonance. To address this, reflexivity practices were integrated throughout the study,

including journaling after each interview, memoing analytic decisions, and explicitly interrogating how my investment could shape what was heard, emphasized, or interpreted.

### Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness was guided by Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for qualitative quality. The study received Institutional Review Board approval. Participants provided informed consent and selected pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and extend agency over representation (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Credibility was supported through the use of complementary participant-generated narrative materials, including written reflections and semi-structured interviews, and through repeatedly checking interpretations against participants' full narrative accounts. Reflexive journal entries were used not as independent corroborating data, but to document and interrogate researcher assumptions throughout data collection and analysis. Dependability and confirmability were further supported through an audit trail that included coding documentation, analytic memos, and reflexive journaling. Transferability was supported through rich, thick description of participants' contexts, identities, and narrative conditions.

## Findings

This study resulted in the curation of six themes that illustrate the narrative arc of rural QTBIPOC counseling experiences. The findings that follow trace participant narratives from initial role ambiguity and barriers to help-seeking, to the conditions that facilitated positive counseling experiences and the forms of "small but radical" advocacy students identified as most consequential in rural school contexts.

### "How should I go about getting help? And the sad part is, I didn't know...": Perception of School Counselor Role

The first theme, named from Daniel's interview, illustrates how the omission of queer-affirming and culturally responsive messaging shaped participants' understandings of what role school counselors played. Across accounts, students learned—implicitly—that the concerns most consequential to their daily lives (e.g., sexuality, gender, race-based stress, and belonging) were not legitimate reasons to seek school-based support. Daniel described this distancing effect simply: "It's not like I thought less of them, but more so I just never really thought of them in general." For rural QTBIPOC students navigating conservative contexts, counselors became peripheral not necessarily because of direct harm, but because the counselor role was introduced in vague, procedural terms that required students to translate their lived experiences into institutionally acceptable reasons for help-seeking. As G recalled, counselors appeared early on to say, "Hey, we're here if you need us," but didn't even tell us what type of things they could help us with." Soob similarly remembered being told, "If you ever need help, just reach out," without any explicit naming of "tough times," mental health, discrimination, relationships, sexuality, or gender. In this context, ambiguity did not read as neutral; it often functioned as a kind of institutional silence. When counseling is publicly

framed around what is measurable and politically safe, the absence of explicit language about identity and oppression can reinforce heteronormative and racialized norms by teaching students which topics are able to be spoken in school, and which are better kept private. The consequence was delay, uncertainty, and disengagement from supports that students could not see reflected in the counseling role.

Participants' perceptions were further narrowed by experiencing counselors primarily as academic advisors. Pasack captured how this coding constrained what felt possible to bring to counseling: "It's odd to me that people actually talk to guidance counselors about their sexuality. It was very academic-based...we just went there for class changes and left as soon as it was done." Here, identity talk became not merely uncommon but almost unintelligible—as if it violated the expected script. Participants connected this academic emphasis to rural institutional pressures and aspirational narratives about mobility and achievement. Pasack described a push to "get test scores up" and "get rural students to college so they can come back to their communities," while G noted counselors were "really encouraging us to go to college because they knew how difficult it is for BIPOC students." Although these commitments supported important access goals, they also positioned students' futures primarily through achievement, leaving emotional and identity development under-addressed.

### "I didn't feel comfortable talking about my sexuality to my high school counselors": Factors Impacting Help-Seeking Behaviors

The second theme, titled from Pasack's interview, shows that help-seeking hinged on assessing relational and social risk in contexts where identity-based disclosures can travel quickly and carry consequences. Participants did not evaluate counselors as neutral professionals; they evaluated them as community members embedded in a conservative rural ecosystem—someone whose beliefs, affiliations, and social ties could determine whether disclosure would be met with affirmation, minimization, moral judgment, or inadvertent exposure. In these accounts, rurality functioned as an organizing context: conservative politics, religion, and heteronormativity were often treated as default, and the counseling office was read through those same community expectations.

Several participants described counselors' self-presentation and perceived ideology as immediate cues about whether queer identity could be named without penalty. Pasack recalled a counselor referencing "her affiliation with a political party that doesn't support LGBTQ people," which "didn't help the case of... 'this is a safe space for me to explore my sexuality.'" The point was less partisan detail than the signal it produced: the counselor's disclosure suggested alignment with norms students already experienced as constraining, raising the likelihood that counseling would reproduce the same heteronormative expectations present elsewhere in the school community. Tomas similarly described how rural context intensified anticipatory distrust: "I had a hard time believing that anyone from my community would be accepting of my queer identity, even the counselor." "Even the counselor" highlights that professional role alone did not confer safety; instead, students weighed the counselor's embeddedness in local networks and the potential

social repercussions of being known. For Tomas, help-seeking became a last resort—"My back was against a wall"—only after sustained bullying made silence untenable.

At the same time, participants' stories complicate the assumption that rural context functions only as barrier. Daniel's narrative suggests that perceived distance from local networks could create an opening for disclosure. When two new counselors arrived from outside his community, he explained, "We didn't have any info on them... I was willing to take the risk... when I heard they weren't from my hometown." Here, help-seeking operated as risk management: outsider status reduced the likelihood of social entanglement and made it easier to test safety. Across accounts, counselors were evaluated as potential gatekeepers of normative belonging—either as extensions of dominant community ideology or, in rarer cases, as comparatively safer figures because they were less socially accountable to local expectations.

Family cultural narratives created a second layer shaping whether counseling was imaginable as a legitimate resource. For some participants, counseling was culturally coded as shameful, unnecessary, or indicative of weakness, producing stigma that narrowed what could be shared and with whom. Soob explained, "There's still that mentality that therapy is for crazy people... it affects children because they hesitate to reach out—they're scared someone will judge them or think they're weak." Tomas similarly described counseling as something he "kind of knew internally... wasn't something I'd have access to," adding, "my culture, my family—it felt saddening because I had less access to resources than I should have." In rural areas where alternative supports may already be limited, stigma did not merely discourage service use—it effectively removed counseling from the menu of coping options. Taken together, these narratives show that students' reluctance was not disengagement but an adaptive response to intersecting systems of normativity at school and at home, where disclosure could carry real social costs.

### "They Just Didn't Have the Cultural Background and Awareness": Impact of Counselor Identity

The third theme, titled from Soob's interview, highlights counselor identity as a relational condition shaping students' expectations of being understood and the amount of work required to be understood. For rural QTBIPOC students, counselor identity often operated as a proxy for multicultural and queer competence—signaling whether counseling would feel culturally attuned and emotionally safe, or whether students would need to translate, justify, or educate in order to receive support. In participants' accounts, identity functioned less as a preference and more as a risk-and-effort calculation: whether disclosure would be met with immediate recognition or with requests (explicit or implied) to provide cultural context before care could begin.

Participants frequently linked counselors' racial and cultural identities to how readily they expected their experiences to be legible, particularly when discussing stressors inseparable from race, culture, and community context. Daniel described the anticipated relief of not having to translate: "It kind of sucks not having a Black counselor... I think I'd feel more understood. I wouldn't have to explain why I feel the way I do in certain situations." Even when counseling was helpful, the expectation of having to "explain why"

created friction—especially in rural settings where being seen as different already carries social risk. Soob similarly described how counselor Whiteness shaped perceptions before any session occurred: “We had mostly minority students, and the counselor being White did affect a lot of people—they felt she wouldn’t understand.” Students also noted how dominant, White-centered scripts can narrow what counselors recognize as “typical” queer experience. Soob critiqued a counselor-led GSA talk that framed coming out as the default pathway: “She went into specifics that sounded centered toward White people... ‘this is how you come out,’ but we never talked about people who can’t come out or only tell their chosen family.” For queer students of color, such scripts can erase the relational, cultural, and safety constraints that make disclosure complex or impossible, reinforcing the sense that their realities sit outside what the counseling space is prepared to hold.

Participants also described queer counselor identity as an immediate signal of safety, often because it reduced the likelihood of heteronormative discomfort or moral judgment and lowered the burden of explanation. Daniel shared, “It was nice... these were people who had experience with that lifestyle and weren’t disapproving. It was just nice to have that validation,” while Lilo noted, “It just made it easier to talk about queer topics with her because she would just get it.” At the same time, students emphasized that shared identity was not the only pathway to affirming care; competence could substitute for similarity when counselors demonstrated genuine knowledge and responsiveness. Soob explained, “Even if they’re not queer, just having someone who’s educated on queer issues would be really beneficial. It gets tiring having to explain every detail about my identity.” Across narratives, one of the most harmful dynamics was the transfer of educational labor onto the student. When QTBIPOC youth had to teach counselors about queer identity and cultural context, support became taxing rather than relieving, and trust diminished because the direction of care reversed. Overall, this theme suggests counselor identity matters because it shapes whether students anticipate recognition or translation, validation or explanation—and it underscores both the importance of workforce diversity and the necessity of strong multicultural and queer competence so students are not positioned to educate the professionals tasked with supporting them.

### “This Isn’t as Bad as I Thought”: Changes in Perception

The fourth theme, titled from Soob’s interview, demonstrates that rural QTBIPOC students’ perceptions of school counselors were not fixed attitudes but ongoing judgments of safety shaped by accumulating evidence—both direct encounters and stories circulating through peer networks. In rural school settings where relationships are tightly woven and reputations travel quickly, participants described help-seeking as deliberate risk assessment. Students watched how counselors responded to others, weighed the likelihood of dismissal or harm, and used that information to decide whether approaching a counselor was worth the potential social cost of exposure. As Soob explained, “I didn’t trust them fully when I approached them about my identity, but once I met with them through different situations, I could build up trust and connection.” Trust, in this sense, was not presumed; it was earned through repeated interactions that signaled whether identity-related concerns would be held with care and confidentiality.

For some participants, early hope that counseling included mental and emotional support eroded after witnessing or hearing about counselors responding to queer-related concerns as if they were peripheral—or treating counseling as primarily institutional “business.” G initially believed counselors were available “if you needed help mentally or had something going on you didn’t know how to deal with,” but described her perception shifting after seeing a friend’s attempt to seek support following sexuality-based bullying be dismissed. Importantly, the impact extended beyond one interaction: in a rural context, these experiences became shared knowledge within peer networks, shaping collective expectations about what counseling could offer. Once a counselor was perceived as reproducing the school’s heteronormative status quo—or as minimizing queer students’ experiences—students described withdrawal not only individually but across friend groups, as accessing counseling came to feel both ineffective and risky.

Conversely, participants described powerful positive shifts when they encountered concrete evidence of affirmation and advocacy. Daniel emphasized that peer narratives could function as a bridge to help-seeking: “I’m not sure I would have been comfortable talking to them either—it really meant a lot to have another student hype up the counselors.” Here, “hype” operated as social verification—an informal mechanism for assessing safety in an environment where students could not assume adults would be supportive. Tomas’s story reflects an even more dramatic recalibration when a counselor offered explicit validation and intervention. After enduring bullying, he sought help with low expectations: “I didn’t expect him to do much... I thought it was pointless.” What changed his perception was not generic kindness but a clear stance: “He told me, ‘This is not okay. You don’t deserve to be picked on for who you are.’ I assumed he was just like them, and I was wrong.” The phrase “just like them” underscores how students initially located counselors within the same conservative moral ecosystem that often enforced silence and normativity. When a counselor named harm, affirmed dignity, and acted, that response disrupted the expectation that school adults would maintain the status quo.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that rural QTBIPOC students’ perceptions shift when counselors provide observable, socially shareable evidence that identity can be held safely. Trust increased when counselors demonstrated confidentiality, explicitly affirmed queer identity, and addressed bullying as unacceptable—actions that countered the assumption that counseling would replicate local conservative norms.

### “It Was the First Time I Really Felt Heard”: Factors Leading to Positive Experiences

The fifth theme, titled from Tomas’ interview, identifies the relational and structural conditions under which rural QTBIPOC students experienced school counseling as affirming. Although rapport building, unconditional positive regard, and confidentiality are familiar counseling constructs, participants described them as more than generic good counseling. In rural schools marked by tight social networks, conservative norms, and rapid circulation of personal information, these practices functioned as identity-safety strategies that reduced the social risks attached to disclosure and helped students determine whether counseling could hold queer and racialized experiences with care.

Participants described rapport as a graduated pathway into disclosure rather than an abstract “relationship first” ideal. Trust was built through small, low-risk interactions—brief check-ins, informal hallway conversations, and everyday talk—that allowed students to test whether a counselor was attentive, consistent, and safe before naming higher-stakes concerns. Lilo described feeling recognized through repeated micro-interactions: “She always had positive things to say... It felt like she knew me even through our brief interactions.” Soob similarly framed rapport as scaffolding that bridged “school-safe topics” and private identity concerns: “Even if I was just telling my counselor about my day or study tips, that’s how I built the relationship—to feel comfortable talking about more sensitive topics. It’s really vulnerable and scary, especially when it’s something only you know about.” In these accounts, rapport building operated as risk reduction—an antidote to earlier themes of invisibility and uncertainty—because it created repeated evidence that the counselor saw them as a person rather than a problem to manage.

Participants also emphasized that positive experiences were anchored in counselors’ ability to communicate acceptance without interrogation, correction, or subtle moralizing—responses students experienced as rare and stabilizing in conservative contexts. Daniel captured this need succinctly: “I don’t need someone to agree with me—I just need you to listen and let me feel validated.” Lilo described acceptance not only as affirming language but as relational consistency after disclosure: her counselor “accepted me for whatever... she loved to hear my jokes and didn’t change, no matter if I was pan or straight.” The phrase “didn’t change” is central here; for students accustomed to heteronormative expectations that queer identity should be minimized or treated as controversy, the counselor’s steady presence served as proof that disclosure would not transform the student into a risk or problem.

Finally, participants positioned privacy as a prerequisite for help-seeking rather than an ethical backdrop. In small towns where “this person knows that person who knows that person,” Daniel explained, “I didn’t want my sexuality to be everyone’s business.” Importantly, students described confidentiality as something counselors had to *enact* visibly through protective logistics. Daniel noted that when sensitive topics emerged, counselors would “close the door or take me outside,” adding, “It meant a lot that they thought about those little things.” Across narratives, these “little things” were experienced as dignity-affirming demonstrations that counselors understood the rural stakes of disclosure and were actively working to protect students from social exposure.

### “Taking Small Steps Doesn’t Mean We Can’t Be Radical”: Supporting Students in the Face of Adversity

This sixth theme, titled from Pasack’s interview, positions rural school counseling as advocacy work conducted under constraint. Participants did not describe rural schools as neutral environments where counselors simply support queer students; they described settings structured by community surveillance, administrative caution, and heteronormative norms that make affirmation risky. Within these conditions, advocacy was not defined only by large-scale programming or public-facing initiatives. Instead, participants emphasized everyday, strategic actions that expand safety and belonging without requiring students to

become publicly outed or placing counselors in direct conflict with hostile community forces. From students' perspectives, effective advocacy reduced uncertainty, protected privacy, and disrupted silence in ways that changed the felt conditions of school life.

Participants suggested that "safe spaces" in rural schools cannot be reduced to visible programs (e.g., GSAs) because formal visibility can itself become vulnerability. G explained that "People would go to the meetings just to be ignorant and bully others," illustrating how inclusion mechanisms can be co-opted as sites of surveillance and harm. Daniel described why this risk feels high-stakes in small communities: "I don't know if I'd want the publicity of going to an LGBTQ club—like, no one knows this thing about me, and now everyone would." As a result, safety was often defined less as a designated public space and more as a protected relationship and private access point. Tomas described this relational form of safety when he noted, "He made sure our sessions were private... all the queer students knew he was the person to go to." Here, the counselor's office becomes a "safe space" through enacted discretion and reputation, not simply through official labels.

Participants also emphasized that trust often begins before a student ever speaks to a counselor; students look for cues that signal whether a counselor is likely to affirm queer identity or reproduce dominant community norms. Yet they made clear that visible allyship in rural schools can provoke backlash that exposes the limits of institutional protection. G recalled, "One of the counselors put a rainbow flag on her door, and it was ripped down. The administration even told her she couldn't put it back up." Even so, participants described symbolic signals as powerful precisely because erasure is common—small cues can serve as low-risk indicators of safety. More importantly, students pushed beyond "hints" toward explicit naming of support. As G explained, "Being visible and saying, 'We support queer students and will help you with anything related to your identity,' was the most effective way." The analytic significance is that visibility is not merely symbolic; it reduces the burden on students to test safety through risky disclosure by making the counseling role and its limits clear.

Finally, participants framed heteronormativity in their schools as a climate of silence that marks queerness as abnormal, unspeakable, or socially dangerous. Daniel explained that queerness "wasn't something people talked about... students, teachers, no one. It was always the other, the weird." Participants emphasized that silence is not neutral; it teaches which identities are considered normal enough to be spoken aloud and which must remain hidden, compounding isolation for rural QTBIPOC youth. Advocacy, therefore, included norm-setting through language—making queer topics speakable in ordinary school discourse. Pasack captured this as both personal and political: "Let's bring it up in conversation. Let's not act like it's a bad word—'queer,' 'gay,' 'homosexual.' Why does it feel like I'm cursing when I say them?" In this framing, "small steps" become radical when they interrupt denial, legitimize queer existence, and create conditions where students can seek support without surrendering privacy or safety.

## Discussion

Participant narratives illuminated how rural QTBIPOC students made sense of school counseling and how those meanings shaped access to support related to sexual/affectional, and gender identity. Across cases, barriers were rarely about the absence of counseling services alone; instead, students described a set of school and community conditions that shaped whether counseling felt relevant, safe, and worth the risk. This aligns with scholarship documenting hostile school climates for LGBTQ+ youth and the ways rural contexts can intensify vulnerability through heightened visibility, limited affirming resources, and community conservatism (e.g., Bishop & McClellan, 2016; O'Connell, 2010). What this study adds is a student-centered account of how those conditions are interpreted in real time: students approached counseling as a form of risk management, contingent on cues that disclosure would be met with cultural attunement, affirmation, and confidentiality rather than judgment, minimization, or exposure.

Consistent with literature on counselor role ambiguity (Guzman et al., 2024), participants often understood counseling as primarily academic—an institutional space for scheduling and postsecondary planning rather than social-emotional or identity-related support. In these accounts, heteronormativity operated not only through overt hostility but through silence and vagueness: generic “we’re here if you need us” messaging left students to determine which topics were able to be spoken, inadvertently reinforcing the sense that queer and racialized experiences were outside the counselor’s scope of practice. This finding extends prior work by specifying a mechanism of exclusion that can occur even absent explicit anti-LGBTQ policy—when counseling is publicly framed around what is measurable (grades, schedules), identity-support becomes peripheral.

Participants’ narratives also clarify how intersectional identity shaped what competence meant in practice. Rather than simply preferring identity-matched counselors, students described the burden of education when counselors lacked racial/cultural knowledge or relied on White-centered presumptions of queerness, and they emphasized exhaustion with having to educate helpers about queer and cultural context. These accounts echo intersectionality frameworks that emphasize intertwined systems of racism, heterosexism, and cisnormativity (Crenshaw, 1989), while extending the literature by showing how these systems are encountered as interactional labor in counseling—who has to explain, justify, and make themselves understandable in order to be helped.

Finally, the findings underscore that best practices (e.g. rapport, positive regard, confidentiality, allyship) (Singh et al., 2013) take on distinct meaning in rural schools. Privacy was not a background ethical principle but a prerequisite for help-seeking in tight social networks; students attended closely to “little things” counselors did to prevent inadvertent outing. Likewise, advocacy was framed as context-sensitive and sometimes contested—visible allyship could be powerful, yet vulnerable to backlash (e.g., symbols removed, administrative pushback), which further positions counselors’ everyday actions as consequential “small but radical” interruptions of heteronormative school norms. Taken together, this narrative inquiry extends existing school counseling scholarship by centering rural QTBIPOC students’ theories of safety: trust was socially mediated (via peer “hype”), shaped by counselors’ perceived embeddedness in rural

ideology, and built through repeated demonstrations that identity could be held with discretion and cultural humility.

### Implications for Counselor and Counselor Educators

Collectively, the findings point to several implications for rural school counselors. Counselors should make the full range of services socially legible to students by explicitly naming identity-related concerns (e.g., sexuality, gender, discrimination, bullying, belonging, and mental health) rather than relying on vague invitations to seek help; doing so reduces uncertainty and shifts the burden off students to test safety through high-stakes disclosure. Counselors should also treat confidentiality as an active, context-specific practice in rural communities, anticipating visibility risks in when and how sessions occur (e.g., discreet scheduling, attention to door/space/transition practices) to reduce inadvertent outing. To reduce cultural taxation, counselors should pursue ongoing training in culturally responsive and LGBTQ+-affirming practice and avoid default assumptions about identity disclosure that may not align with students' family, cultural, or safety contexts (Bidell, 2017; Hook et al., 2013; Hays, 2022). Finally, because trust was often socially mediated in close-knit settings, counselors can build credibility through consistent follow-through, clear anti-bullying responses, and relationship-building that becomes visible through peer networks. Advocacy should be strategic and context-sensitive—making support visible where possible while also using everyday language and responses to harm to interrupt heteronormative silence and reduce stigma and isolation.

Counselor education programs should prepare future school counselors to translate queer-affirming practice to rural constraints by teaching confidentiality as an enacted, logistical skill (not only an ethical principle) and by explicitly addressing how tight-knit networks shape help-seeking and disclosure. Training should also reduce cultural taxation by strengthening multicultural and LGBTQ+-affirming competence, including culturally situated understandings of disclosure and identity development that move beyond White-centered “coming out” scripts (Bidell, 2017; Hays, 2022; Hook et al., 2013).

### Limitations and Future Research

With all narrative inquiry it must be noted that the findings of this study are contextually bound and are not intended to be generalized beyond the participants' lived experiences. Recruitment for the study proved challenging considering the politicized nature of the research topic and the participant identities. Resultantly, we chose to engage with participants who were non-minors and removed temporally from the experience. Because this study draws on retrospective accounts from recent graduates, participants' narratives reflect meaning-making shaped by developmental maturation and time since high school. Recruitment through LGBTQ+ centers, social media, identity-based undergraduate organizations, and participant networks may have increased the likelihood of reaching young adults who were connected to postsecondary or identity-affirming communities. As such, the narratives represented here may not reflect the experiences of rural QTBIPOC young adults who are less connected to LGBTQ+ networks, do not

pursue postsecondary education, have limited access to affirming resources, or remain less able or willing to disclose their identities.

Future work might include contemporaneous student perspectives, counselor perspectives, and school-level policy or climate data to examine how perceptions form over time and how advocacy strategies function within varying rural contexts. Finally, while I engaged in reflexivity and bias-bracketing throughout the analytic process, my own positionality as a queer Indigenous scholar and former rural counselor inevitably shaped interpretation—a feature both enriching and delimiting within narrative inquiry.

## Conclusion

This narrative inquiry underscores that rural QTBIPOC students' use of school counseling is shaped by interpretations of safety within a context marked by close-knit visibility, conservative community norms, and institutional role ambiguity. Across stories, counseling was often experienced as academically coded and therefore ill-defined as a place for identity-related support, contributing to delay and disengagement even when services technically existed. At the same time, participants identified concrete practices that can interrupt heteronormative silence and reduce risk—particularly when counselors explicitly name identity-related support, practice confidentiality as an active strategy for maintaining privacy, and signal competence so students are not forced to test safety through high-stakes disclosure. These findings illuminate a need to be intentional in the delineation and implementation of queer-affirming services in rural schools.

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