Challenging Heteronormativity In the Primary Grades

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) issues continue to be excluded from the primary classrooms. This is a matter that requires the acknowledgment and attention of educators, as the needs of these students are being ignored, and their invisibility from the curriculum has resulted in schools becoming an unsafe place for them. This research analyzes how primary teachers can integrate LGBTQ issues into the taught curriculum, in order to challenge heteronormative norms in the primary division. Addressing heteronormativity through the curriculum is essential in order to challenge the beliefs that are at the core of homophobic sentiments. Through the use of qualitative methodologies, this research explored the practices of two exemplary teachers and the findings confirmed that it is possible to challenge these complex ideas with young students, in a way that it is relevant, meaningful and practical.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Education is an avenue for social change, and it is our duty as teachers to educate and give students the tools not only to comprehend the world around them, but also to inspire and bring about change within society. As a racial minority and as an individual who is strongly committed to social justice and equity, becoming an inclusive teacher and fostering critical consciousness is one of my main priorities.

Throughout my experience in the field of education, I have witnessed the conscious effort of educators to include and ensure that all students are represented in their classrooms. However, certain students continue to remain absent from the curriculum. The term *curriculum* will be used to define the total learning environment, including the content that is explicitly and implicitly addressed within the classroom, the physical environment, learning materials, pedagogical practices and assessment instruments (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, p. 29). In my personal and professional experience, students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning, (LGBTQ) continue to be invisible within the primary classrooms of the Toronto District School Board. This is an issue that requires the acknowledgment and attention of educators, as the needs of these students are being ignored and their invisibility from the curriculum has resulted in schools becoming an unsafe place for them.

**Purpose of the Study**

In 2009, Egale Canada and the University of Winnipeg conducted a study on the extent of homophobic incidents at schools in Canada. This study resulted in some alarming findings. According to the findings, almost 64% of LGBTQ students and 61% of students with LGBTQ parents reported that they felt unsafe at schools (Taylor et al.)
Unsafe Spaces, 2011). In addition, youth with LGBTQ parents were three times more likely than other students to have skipped school because they felt unsafe, either at school or on the way to school (Taylor et al. Youth with LGBTQ Parents, 2011). Over half of the LGBTQ students did not feel accepted at school and felt that they could not be themselves. Thus, they could not openly express their LGBTQ identity (Taylor et al, Unsafe Spaces, 2011).

This study clearly illustrates the need for change; however, this change cannot be limited to anti-homophobia policies. Anti-homophobia policies are a crucial aspect of creating a safer and more inclusive school environment for LGBTQ students and children of LGBTQ parents, however it is simply not sufficient. The previously mentioned the Egale Canada study, found that although 80% of LGBTQ students from schools with anti-homophobia policies reported never having been physically harassed, this did not result in higher numbers of LGBTQ students feeling safe at school. (Taylor et al, Safer Schools Policies, 2011). This indicates that anti-homophobia policies are not sufficient. Schools need to go beyond this step and begin to integrate LGBTQ topics into the curriculum, in order for these students to see themselves included, reflected and validated in the taught curriculum. There needs to be a conscious effort by educators to address LGBTQ issues and to deconstruct the norms that are actively oppressing those who do not fulfill heterosexual expectations, also known as heteronormativity (GLBTQ, 2011). Heteronormativity pivots on the privileging of heterosexuality through its normalization, and it can only be understood through attention to both gender and sexuality, and how each of these is interwoven with the institutionalization, meaning and practice of
heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006, pg. 109). Deconstructing these norms in schools is a crucial aspect of interrupting prejudice.

**Research Question**

The purpose of this research will be to investigate how teachers can challenge heteronormativity within the primary classrooms, by exploring the exemplary practices of two primary teachers in the Toronto District School Board. Through this research I hope to discard the excuse of ‘age-appropriateness’ by providing concrete examples of how exemplary teachers challenge heteronormativity with young students. I intend to explore the materials that exemplary teachers use in their classrooms, and how they utilize them to challenge heteronormative norms. In particular, I would like to understand how and if these teachers engage in a critical discussion with their primary students and how they embark on these conversations.

**Background of the Researcher**

My decision to undertake this research project is rooted in various reasons. On a personal level, I feel strongly about the inclusion of LGBTQ content in the classroom as I have friends and relatives who identify themselves as LGBTQ, and through them I have witnessed the effects of discrimination and exclusion. In addition, as a teacher I believe that it is important to meet the needs of each of my students, and to help foster a classroom environment where they feel safe to be themselves and where they can develop to their full potential. I have also undertaken this research because I believe that education is the most important avenue to create change within society, and our society is in urgent need of change. It is important to educate the younger generations and to foster critical consciousness so that social action can occur. I believe that early education about
LGBTQ issues will help students become more understanding and more accepting individuals, and as a result they will help eradicate heterosexism. Heterosexism is a term designating to the bigotry that privileges heterosexuality to the detriment or exclusion of other sexualities (GLBTQ, 2011).

The inclusion of LGBTQ issues in the classroom is an area of research that has abundant amount information. Researchers and educators have addressed the invisibility of these students and have recommended ways of addressing it. However, in my experience very few teachers are implementing these recommendations, and have thus failed to meet the needs of all their students. This is the kind of teacher that I refuse to become. Therefore, I have chosen to undertake this research, not only to make myself more aware of the current LGBTQ issues, but also to inform myself on how to create a more inclusive classroom environment by learning to integrate LGBTQ issues throughout the curriculum.

Discrimination, on any grounds, is a social justice and human rights issue, and thus educators must address it, regardless of how controversial some might view it. I recognize the existence of various resisters, such as parents, religious advocates, administrators and fellow colleagues. However, the needs of the students have to come first, and therefore teachers need to work on educating not only students, but also their school community in order for them to understand the purpose and importance of integrating LGBTQ topics in the classroom.

Teachers must stop taking an approach to education that is supposedly ‘neutral’, and understand that our values are present in our teaching whether we recognize it or not. Therefore, as teachers we must make a conscious effort to be more aware of our values
and how these affect our teaching, and understand that when we choose not to address a
certain topic within the classroom we are indeed teaching about it (Null, 2011, p.93). By
not addressing LGBTQ issues we are communicating to the students that these are
‘inappropriate’ topics that should not be discussed within the classroom (Hanlon, 2009,
p.36). As educators, it is also crucial to become more conscious of our actions and our
decision, and reflect on our practices in order to identify whose identities are validated
and whose are not. I believe the decision to omit LGBTQ issues from the curriculum only
serves to maintain the heteronormative values of society.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploring Laws and Policies

The implementation of Board or Ministry of Education policies and regulations should not be the driving reason to address issues of discrimination in the classroom. However, in order to address these topics without the fear of risking one’s career it is important that the Ministry and School Board policies support your teaching. Kathy Bickmore (1999) argues that teachers often make more independent choices to address issues of gender and sexual orientation when official policies ‘require’ that all teachers address sexual and homosexual topics (p.17). Thus, teachers are more willing to address these issues when they are supported by the policies in place. Therefore, it is crucial to begin by first exploring the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Toronto School Board’s policies, in order to have an understanding of the kind of support that these governing bodies provide for teachers to address LQBTQ issues within the classroom.

Ministry of Education

The Ontario Ministry of education has recognized an increasing rate of discrimination in our society, and has acknowledged that racism; religious intolerance, homophobia and gender-based violence are still very evident within Ontario’s schools (Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009, p. 7). One of the ways that the Ministry has responded to these issues is through the implementation of the Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education strategy. This is one of the Ministry’s strategies to ensure that diversity is realized throughout the education system. The Ministry defines diversity as,

The presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited
to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation and socio-economic status (Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009, p. 4).

The action plan outlined focuses on, “respecting diversity, promoting inclusive education, and identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases, systematic barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ learning, growth and contribution to society” (Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools, 2009, p. 6). This strategy was also designed to promote fundamental human rights, as described in the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Charter of Rights and freedom (Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009, p. 13). It highlights the importance of the Ministry, the School Boards and the schools to commit to eliminating discrimination through the identification and removal of bias and barriers (Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools, 2009, p. 50). I believe that in order to help eliminate discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, it is imperative for teachers to identify bias and barriers within the education system, and to challenge these through explicit critical discussion.

The strategy was followed up by the 2009 Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools. The 2009 policy replaced the 1993 Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity. The policy expanded on the principles of the first memorandum with the intention of including other factors, such as sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, gender and class that can also intersect to create additional barrier for certain students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 3). This document set out an action plan to provide school boards direction on the, “review, development,
implementation, and monitoring of equity and inclusive education policies to support student achievement” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p.2). The action plan explicitly outlines that, school boards should make every effort to identify and remove biases and systemic barriers, and that they must cover the prohibited grounds of discrimination set out in the Ontario Human Rights Code (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p.3). The Ontario Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination on any of the following: race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, citizenship, ethnic origin, disability, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, family status, and marital status (Ontario Human Rights Code, 1990). Thus, addressing LGBTQ issues within the classroom is not only supported, but also mandatory as these are issues that are affecting the achievement and growth of LGBTQ students.

Bill 145, Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour, also seeks to promote a positive school climate, indicating that school boards must provide opportunities for students and staff members to increase their understanding and knowledge of issues such as sexual harassment, inappropriate sexual behaviour, gender-based violence, sexual harassment and homophobia (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p.6). The policy highlights the importance of these issues, as well as the fact that these issues must be discussed within our schools in order to create a safer and more equitable environment for our students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, p.6).

The Toronto District School Board Policies

As this research will focus on the Toronto District School Board, it is also crucial to analyze and understand the strategies and board-wide programs in place to address LGBTQ issues. In 2010, the Toronto District School Board adopted policy P071, Gender-
Based Violence. The objective of this policy is to establish the Board’s commitment to eliminating gender-based violence in its schools. The policy defines gender-based violence as, “any aggressive action that threatens safety, causes physical, social or emotional harm and denigrates a person because of his or her gender identity, perceived gender, sexual identity, biological sex or sexual behaviour” (Toronto District School Board, 2010, p.1). According to the policy, discrimination such as homophobia and transphobia operates on a “societal imbalance of power and control based on social construction of sexual identity, sexual orientation, gender, perceived gender and sexual behaviour” (Toronto District School Board, 2010, p.1). The policy outlines preventative strategies, such as training for all staff, annual support and training on responding to incidents of gender-based violence as expected procedures (Toronto District School Board, 2010, p.2). Most importantly, it highlights that students will have the opportunity to participate in gender-based peer education programs. According to this policy, issues related to gender-based violence such as gender stereotyping, homophobia and sexuality shall be integrated and reinforced in subjects across the curriculum (Toronto District School Board, 2010, p.3). This policy outlines the guidelines for reporting incidents and urges compliance and accountability as, “with all Board policies, all staff are expected to be compliant with this policy and its related procedures. Failure to comply may lead to disciplinary action (Toronto District School Board, 2010, p.2). Therefore, in the Toronto District School Board integrating LGBTQ issues in the curriculum is not a choice, as it is Board mandated that all staff must integrate these issues throughout the curriculum.

Evidently, as per Section 3 of the Equity Foundation Statements, Commitments to Equity Policy Implementation, the Human Rights, Safe and Caring Schools, and the
Gender-Based Violence Prevention policies of the TDSB, schools must address issues of heterosexism and homophobia within the educational system (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, p. 10). Students must also be equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitude to engage the world and others critically, thus developing a critical consciousness in our classrooms is a crucial aspect of taking action and making schools and communities more equitable and inclusive for all people, including LGBTQ students (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, p. 5).

The previously outlined Ministry of Education and of the Toronto District School policies provide teachers with a better understanding of their responsibility regarding addressing issues of heterosexism within their classrooms. According to the TDSB, teachers should recognize that creating positive environments for students where they can learn free from homophobia and heterosexism is not only sound pedagogical practice, but it is also mandated through TDSB policy and Ontario legislation (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, p.4). Thus, teaching LGBTQ issues within the classroom is not a personal choice; students must learn about heterosexism and learn how to deconstruct heteronormativity.

As previously outlined, teaching about LGBTQ issues within the classroom are supported by federal and provincial laws, the Ministry of Education and the Toronto District School Board. However, through my practicum, volunteer and student experiences, it became apparent that most teachers do not take the time to incorporate LGBTQ issues, or even to simply mention and recognize the existence of them in a positive way. Teaching against the grain can be very challenging, without support within the school it is difficult to address topics that are not usually discussed (Bickmore, 1999,
p.17). However, as teachers it is our professional and ethical duty to care for all students, and by omitting LGBTQ issues and not deconstructing society’s heteronormative values we are doing a great disservice to all students, not just the LGBTQ community. Students live in a very diverse society, where they have neighbours, relatives or friends who identify as LGBTQ. Thus, all students need to be exposed to these issues, in order to decrease ignorance, promote acceptance and respect, and provide students the vocabulary to interact in such a diverse society.

**Critical Pedagogy As The Theoretical Framework**

*What is Critical pedagogy?*

In order to deconstruct heteronormative attitudes and values, teachers must engage in critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy explores the “relationship between culture and power, specifically as it translates into the everyday life of pedagogical theory and practice” (Weil, 1998, p.25). Unlike the school of radical educational theory, critical pedagogy presents an idea of schooling that goes beyond the critique of domination to encompass possibility, hope and compassionate liberation (Weil, 1998, p.25). Advocate and influential theorist of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire encouraged the understanding that education should be a transformative activity aimed at self-production through an understanding of unequal power and social relations (Weil, 1998, p.26). They also argued that education is not independent from power, therefore without intervention, schools simply reproduce the logic of capital and the ideologies of the privileged (Weil, 1998, p.26). Schools award a privileged status to specific students from the dominant culture and by doing so it “relegates to a subtle murmur the histories, aspirations and goals of disenfranchised cultures or subordinated groups within society” (Weil, 1998, p.27).
Disrupting heteronormativity requires teachers to incorporate and address how society normalizes heterosexuality and how this awards privileges to certain people and devalues others.

_Fostering Critical Consciousness_

In order for students to be able to deconstruct heteronormative values, educators must help to foster critical consciousness. Critical consciousness can be defined as the “ability to recognize and challenge oppressive and dehumanizing political, economic, and social systems” (Garcia et al. 2009, p. 19). Fostering critical consciousness involves reflection and a continuous dialogue to increase awareness and take action against the agents of oppression (Garcia et al. 2009, p. 19).

As previously mentioned, developing a critical consciousness is crucial for students to develop the tools to critique the cultural norms, values and institutions that produce and maintain social inequalities. In order to develop a critical consciousness, students must learn to “continuously reflect upon and examine how our own biases, assumptions, and cultural worldviews affect the way we perceive difference and power dynamics” (Weil, 1998, p.119). Critical consciousness is not a categorical process, it is a continually evolving process and it involves a general awareness of the systems of privilege and oppression, as well as an understanding of how those systems operate within local context (Garcia et al. 2009 p. 20). Therefore, teachers need to construct a curriculum that is rich in reasoning and that promises “relevancy, controversy, problem posing and the exchange of cultural points of views” (Weil, 1998, p.119). Without these opportunities students cannot develop a critical consciousness, and thus cannot learn to question society’s heteronormative beliefs. Integrating LGBTQ-theme topics in school is
an excellent and necessary step in challenging heteronormativity and combatting homophobia and transphobia. However without the critical discussions of these issues we risk the over-simplification of LGBTQ issues, without affording context to the systems that continue to reinforce heteronormativity (Blackburn and Clark, 2011, p. 235).

Teachers must also be concerned with how the development of learners as critical thinkers, allows them to engage with the world in a way that allows them understand how society functions and their capacity to change it (Collins, 2001, p.88). Teachers and students need to participate in the process of understanding their lives in relationship to the world, and only then can an action plan be developed to address the problems (Collins, 2001 p.88). Students must become aware that through our silence we are all responsible for the inequalities in our society and in order to bring about change, we must accept this responsibility and make our contribution to changing it.

Looking at the Curriculum

*The Explicit and the Actual Curriculum*

The explicit curriculum is the stated or public purposes of an outlined educational program. Portelli (1993) refers to it as, the formal curriculum, which is officially recognized and it is public, available to everyone and it is meant to be explicit (p.343). Moreover, he defines the actual curriculum as what is actually carried out in the classrooms (Portelli, 1993, p.343).

*The Hidden Curriculum*

The hidden curriculum identifies those nonacademic and systematic side effects of education. It consists of the values, norms and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the structure of schooling and the organizational pattern of the school as a
microcosm of the social value system (Null, 2011, p.93). Thus, teachers are teaching about sexuality and gender through language choices, content choices, assumptions and everyday decisions. For example, when the material in the classroom does not positively reflect the existence of LGBTQ people, and when LGBTQ issues are not discussed, teachers are sending the message that these are inappropriate topics for the classroom (Hanlon, 2009 p.43). Educators must become aware that even without realizing it, we are reinforcing gender norms, defining gender roles, assigning different expectations to these roles and teaching in a heteronormative manner (Hanlon, 2009, p.36). For example, assuming that marriage to a man or a woman is in their student’s future or by providing only books with images of heterosexual families (Hanlon, 2009, p.36) we are reinforcing heteronormative norms.

The Null Curriculum

The null curriculum is just as important to consider as the hidden curriculum. The null curriculum is referred to the content that is not taught, either by choice or by oversight (Null, 2011, p.93). What is not taught is just as important as what it is taught because, “the silence influences, informs and instructs” (Finnessy, 2009, p.34). Thus, the null curriculum becomes as important as the explicit curriculum. It is not possible to address everything that is desired or necessary within the span of one academic year, therefore teachers should be profoundly aware of whose voices are represented and whose are omitted while considering the content to address in their classroom. When teachers choose to not include LGBTQ content in their classroom, they are in fact teaching about it, they are giving students the message that these kinds of issues are either unimportant or inappropriate for classroom discussion (Hanlon, 2009, p.43). It is through
these decisions that teachers continue to reinforce heteronormative attitudes. If heterosexual children are only exposed to images that portrayed heteronormative values, then they will continue to uphold the misconception that homosexuality is deviant (Hanlon, 2009, p.43). Conversely, if students who identify as LGBTQ or who have parents, who identify as LGBTQ (or have siblings, best friends, neighbors, aunts, uncles, and other relationships) are only exposed to these heteronormative attitudes, this will inevitably affect how they view themselves, and perhaps lead to an increase feeling of abnormality (Hanlon, 2009, p.43). Petrovic (2002) argues that, what is included within the classroom and how teachers address or choose not to address a topic plays a pivotal role in the development of student’s identities as,

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a convening or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm; can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being (Petrovic, 2002, p. 150).

**Heteronormativity**

Letts defines heteronormativity as, “the view that institutionalized heterosexuality and constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements”(Letts, 1999, p.98). Meaning that heterosexuality is the ‘norm’, which is unmarked, unspoken, presumed and against which all else is judged as different and abnormal (Letts, 1999 p.98). Heteronormativity is also premised, and supported by a supposed “natural” binary division of the sexes and the privileging of the opposite sex desire and relationships (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2009 p. 544). According to Wilkinson and Pearson (2009), it is a celebration of “heterosexual relationships as well as the
organization of culture, including institutions, around such relationships” (p. 544). Yep (2002) argues that heteronormative thinking assumes that heterosexuality is the indisputable and unquestionable foundation of society, and thus heterosexuality appears as a natural, coherent, fixed, and universal and all other forms of human sexual expression are pathological, deviant or invisible (p. 167). Heteronormativity reinforces the ‘cultural power’ of heterosexuality; therefore, deconstructing these views is necessary in the primary classroom in order to disrupt the heterosexual hegemony (Letts, 1999, p.98).

Heteronormativity, also involves the celebration of socially constructed gendered behaviours that highlight the difference between men and women as well as the gender transgressions that disrupt this “natural” binary (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2009, p. 544). Research on schools and adolescents, clearly illustrates this relationship between gender and sexuality (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2009) For example, when a student calls another one ‘gay’, more than often this is a reference not to boys who are attracted to other boys, but as a reference to boys acting in a “non-masculine” way (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2009, p. 544). Such practices encourage students to display ‘appropriate’ gendered behaviour, and simultaneously marginalize and stigmatizes same-sex sexual desire (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2009, p. 544). Therefore, boys and girls ‘do gender’ to avoid such social sanctions, and through this they continue to create and reinforce heteronormativity (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2009, p. 544). Additionally, Sapon-Shevin (1999) argues that, these fears surrounding non-normative sex-role behaviour are directly related to homophobia, as children who deviate from the ‘appropriate’ gender behaviour are often suspected of being homosexual and as a result harassed and isolated (p.114). Bickmore
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(1999) argues that by the time children have entered middle school, they have already learned that their gender identity is formed in large part by heterosexual behaviour (p.16). Thus, challenging heteronormativity in the classroom requires educators to understand the relationship between gender and sexuality and to challenge the ‘appropriate’ gendered behaviours.

**Addressing Heteronormativity in The Classroom**

Time is often an issue when it comes to addressing curriculum expectations, thus for some teachers it could seem as an added task to address issues of heteronormativity or heterosexism in the classroom. Therefore, the Toronto District School Board released the *Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism: A K-12 Curriculum Resource Guide* that suggests a number of ways to address and challenge heteronormativity quickly and efficiently. This resource provides multiple activities that can be linked to curriculum expectations, and therefore teachers can meet the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum expectations while addressing these issues. (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, 29). For example, teachers may want to help their students think about mainstream media images of masculinity and femininity as well as of gays and lesbians, and a discussion could arise from these images and what they see (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, p.54). Additionally, students can be exposed to different kinds of family arrangements through storybooks and include same-sex families (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011). Students can also brainstorm and discuss family structure and diversity and share their information in written form (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, p.53). Similarly, they can also deconstruct stereotypes through the use of a Venn diagram in which they list the gender norms for boys and girls. They can further question gender
norms by looking at children’s toys for males and females, and some that are gender neutral (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, p.42). The children can then have a discussion about how these gender norms are constructed and what it means if you do not fit into either category (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011, p.42).

Moreover, Hanlon discusses how teachers can use brainstorming strategies found in the language arts, such as webbing and mapping in order to generate ideas about stereotypes and LGBTQ people (Hanlon, 2009, p.37). For example, students can write their ideas connected to a circle that says words such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘transgender’, ‘bisexual’, after the students have written their thoughts down, replace these words with ‘me’, then ask the students the kinds of feelings that these thoughts bring about (Hanlon, 2009, p.37).

Additionally, the film It’s Elementary can serve as a great resource for teachers who are beginning to address LGBTQ issues in their classroom. The documentary itself could be used as an excellent teaching tool, as it highlights many of the misconception that students have about homosexuality. Conversely, teachers could also utilize the documentary to gather various strategies to implement in their classrooms. For example, in the documentary, a grade 1 and 2 classroom made a class book called, “Everybody is Equal: a Book about Gay and Lesbian People.” The teacher then facilitated a discussion to expand on the notions of family and had the students in the classroom discuss the current debates about the legalization of gay marriages. One of the most listed strategies for addressing LGBTQ issues in the primary classroom was the use of picture books or storybooks. For example, Swartz argued that literature is the most practical subject to address multicultural issues (Swartz, 2003 p.12), and teachers often used books such as
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My Two Uncles (Virginia 1995), Daddy's Roommate (1990), and Heather Has Two Mommies (1989), as a starting point to initiate discussions.

Social issue books could also be used to bring about discussions; these are books that are particularly useful for starting and sustaining critical conversations in the classrooms (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 4). These books help teachers build awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 4). Leland and Harste (2000) defined social issue books as, books that do not make differences invisible, and instead they are explicit so that they can be discussed (p. 4). In addition, they also enrich our understanding of history and life by giving a voice to those who have been traditionally marginalized, and they also help us to question why certain groups are positioned as ‘others’ (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 5). These types of books also make explicit the social systems that attempt to maintain economic inequalities, as they explore the dominant systems that operate in our society (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 4). Most importantly, these books also portray how people can begin to take action on important social issues (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 4).

The context of social issue books can vary, some focus on historical issues such as slavery and the industrial revolution, while others are more contemporary in nature and focus on social groups such as the elderly, handicapped and LGBTQ (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 5). Social issue books do not have simple happy endings, instead they invite students to engage in conversation and often expects the reader to draw their own conclusions about what will happened next (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 5). Due to the nature of these books, they are often an excellent source of conversation, and they can be used to encourage students to critically analyze historical events and the world around
them. (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003, p.185) Through readings, videos and activities and discussions educators can foster student’s critical consciousness about heterosexism and heteronormativity, but also racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that are present in the community.

**The Teacher’s Misconceptions, Values, Beliefs and Apprehensions.**

*The Teacher’s Values and Beliefs*

As previously addressed, what we choose to include and exclude in the curriculum, is crucial to addressing issues of heterosexism and heteronormativity. What is explicitly and implicitly taught in the classrooms and what is excluded correlates to the values and attitudes of the teacher. Petrovic (2002) argues that, teachers hold a great influence over the opinions, actions and thoughts of their students, in particular at the primary level, as this age students are less likely to question their teachers and often take at face value what the teacher says (p.150). Thus, teachers have a great deal of power to maintain the status quo and extend heterosexist hegemony of schools or to challenge these values. Evidently, the teacher’s attitudes and values play a pivotal role in the shaping of students perception of the world. This is a critical aspect to consider, as the majority of teachers in the primary grades are heterosexual. Petrovic (2002), encourages that teachers should refrain from expressing their negative positions against same-sex sexual orientation, and instead include positive portrayals of LGBTQ youth, adults and community in the curriculum (p.150). Teaching about these sensitive issues is necessary in order for children to have the existence of LGBTQ people recognized, and for their experiences to be validated. It is possible to address these topics without discussing personal feelings or beliefs, as Finnessy (2002) states, “acknowledging that
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gay/lesbian/bisexual people exist does not mean that someone, personally, believes that homosexuality is ‘okay’. It only means that you are being honest and open about the world children live in” (p. 150). Thus, teachers need to recognize but then put aside their person beliefs and prejudices and teach what is in the best interest of the students.

Reflecting on and Questioning our Beliefs and Values

According to Hall Piazza (2008), it is crucial for teachers to first understand their own views and prejudices in order to foster a genuine critical mindset within their students (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p.37). Teachers need to analyze and reflect on the content in their classroom in order to unmask the dominant curriculum and develop a better understanding of the values and ideas that are being promoted (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p.37). Hall and Piazza also argued, that without this understanding, teachers might select books that lead to discussions that are prompted by their own ideas and stereotypes (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p.37). Thus, teachers need to question and reflect about their own assumptions concerning diversity, and how these influence their decision of who can and cannot learn, and how they decide to distribute learning opportunities (Weil, 1998, p.154).

The Teachers’ Misconceptions

Teachers often have a distorted understanding of what it means to address LGBTQ issues within the classroom. Teachers have tendency to associate LGBTQ education with sex education, which is not the case. Petrovic (2002) argues that, this is an assumption driven by heterosexism (p.146). Teachers often fear that LGBTQ content in the classroom would prematurely expose innocent children to sexuality (Hanlon, 2009 p.35). There are various advocates who would strongly disagree. For example, Bickmore
(1999) argues that sexuality is already present in the lives of students; children are constantly exposed to sexuality through the media, family and friends (Bickmore, 1999, p.16). Hanlon (2009) also addresses the fact that young children generate their own ideas about what it means to be gay (p.35). In the film It’s STILL Elementary, there is evidence that students are already aware of homosexuality at the primary level, however they also hold many misconceptions about what homosexuality is (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007). Thus, educators are not introducing new ideas into the lives of students, rather they are challenging and addressing the stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, and at the same time are promoting acceptance and creating a safer environment for all students (Hanlon, 2009, p.35).

Additionally, some teachers also chose not to address LGBTQ content in their classroom from the belief that it is not ‘age-appropriate’, which is also a common argument formed by those who oppose inclusive education in primary grades. Finnessy (2002) argues that age-appropriate is not an issue. He iterates that if students are presented with concrete or familiar materials, very abstract ideas can become accessible (Finnessy, 2002, p. 149). Thus, because children are coming from families of LGBTQ parents, or have friends or relatives who identify as LGBTQ or they are identifying as LGBTQ, these discussions are, in fact, age-appropriate (Finnessy, 2002 p. 149).

The Teacher’s Apprehensions

Through her research Hanlon (2009) concludes that, teachers more than often fail to address LGBTQ issues in the classroom for fears about job security, parent opposition, and fears about how students’ changed perception of them (Hanlon, 2009, p.39). As a result, teachers often practice self-censorship. Self-censorship occurs when teachers avoid
any topics involving sexual diversity, because it is an uncomfortable topic for themselves or their students, and not as a result of policies restricting them from talking about these issues (Hanlon, 2009, p.42). Hanlon urges educators to understand how powerful it can be for a student to hear an adult using the words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ in a positive context (Hanlon, 2009, p.43). I understand that addressing topics that one might not be accustomed to speaking about could be uncomfortable, however these conversations need to occur. If students are exposed to books with gay characters, or taught about significant gay historical figures, or the idea of two people loving each other then perhaps this would seem less ‘abnormal’ and less uncomfortable to discuss (Hanlon, 2009, p.43).

In addition, Hanlon argues that teacher’s self-censorship is also a result of the lack of education programs, and professional development, “in order for teachers to be prepared to provide LGBT-inclusive education, they must be educated first” (Hanlon, 2009, p.44). I partially agree with her argument, I do believe that it is crucial for teachers to get educated on how to educate students about LGBTQ. However, I do not agree that there is a lack of education programs and professional development to assist teachers with this matter (Hanlon, 2009, p.44). For example, in Ontario, various teacher education programs have in place courses that help student teachers learn how to address LGBTQ issues. Teachers also have a variety of workshops available to them, in addition to various organizations such as Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and Egale Canada. Thus, teachers have the resources available, however teachers are self-selecting not to take advantage of them. As with all aspects of teaching and learning, educators need to take the initiative to seek information, attend workshops and seek resources, but more importantly stop censoring themselves as this only serves to reinforce
the stigmas unjustly associated with the discussion of LGBTQ topics.

There is also a growing concern amongst teachers regarding the controversy that critical instructions could cause within their schools and communities (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p.37). Critical pedagogy encourages the discussion of social issues in terms of what is the root of these issues, what are the forces that continue to maintain these issues, and more than often it results in the discussion of topics that are controversial and to some, uncomfortable (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p.37). This results in a growing concern about how the school community would react, or even how parents would respond to their children being exposed to such topics (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p.37). Taking into account the school community and the community at large is important. I believe this is a critical part of being a good educator, however I believe that a teacher’s priority should always be the well being of all their students. Thus, teachers should always make an effort to respect and include the values of the community, and understand that the community must also be educated in order to further support the teacher.
Chapter 3. METHODOLOGY

This research paper was approached by reviewing the literature on the topic and by collecting qualitative data through interviewing experienced exemplary teachers. The qualitative data collected reflected the current practices of two primary teachers who demonstrated a strong commitment to the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) topics in the classroom and creating a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ students and parents. A qualitative research method was chosen in order to obtain in-depth and insightful information regarding the current practices of teachers who are challenging heteronormativity.

Participants

The interviews were conducted in order to collect data regarding teacher practices, beliefs and values surrounding the inclusion of LGBTQ content in the primary classroom. In order to collect the necessary data on challenging heteronormativity in the primary classrooms, it was imperative to locate and interview teachers who were strongly committed to this topic and had experience incorporating LGBTQ topics in their classrooms. The participants for these interviews were chosen with the use of three criteria. First, due to the fact that the research focused on the Toronto District School Board, it was important to interview teachers who had experience, or were currently teaching in this board. It was also imperative for teachers to demonstrate commitment to the inclusion of LGBTQ content in their classrooms. The last criterion focused on the division that the teachers had experience teaching. Due to the fact that the research focused on addressing heteronormativity in the primary classroom, it was crucial for the participants to have experience teaching within the primary division.
The teachers were selected through referrals from colleagues from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Prior to asking the participants to take part in the research I discussed their classroom teaching via email, to ensure that they understood the purpose of my research and to ensure that they were integrating LGBTQ issues in their curriculum. Both of these teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to the inclusion of LGBTQ content in their classrooms, and had experience volunteering their expertise at workshops for teachers who were interested in beginning to address these topics within their own classrooms. Thus, I believed that they would be able to contribute very insightful and practical information to my research.

Pseudonyms will be used to address both participants throughout this research paper. Grace is one of the teachers who participated. She is a grade 2 teacher with 9 years of experience teaching in the Toronto District School Board, and 3 years in the independent school system. In addition, she also teaches music to grade 1, 2 and 3. Grace currently teaches at a Toronto District School Board school that was recently developed. The school takes pride in providing students with the tools to become more critically conscious of the world around them, and provides its students with an alternative perspective to education. It is a very small school with a very strong focus on social justice and equity.

Mark was the second teacher that participated in the interview process. He is a kindergarten teacher with 20 years of experiences teaching in the Toronto District School Board. Mark is an openly gay teacher who prides himself in creating a very inclusive curriculum. The school where Mark works is very diverse and as a whole is very inclusive and supportive of the LGBTQ families that are part of the school community.
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**Procedure**

As this is a qualitative research paper, the first steps were gathering information through a review of the current literature on the topic of LGBTQ inclusion in elementary schools. The main instrument of data collection was the informal interviews with the two teachers. Each participant was interviewed in person and individually. Both interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were recorded to ensure that the accuracy of the responses was maintained. The interviews were conducted with the use of 23 semi-structured questions. These questions were formulated to address the teacher’s beliefs and values regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ in the classroom, examples of practices and resources they used to address these topics, and current or past challenges that they have encountered. The attached Appendix B includes a complete list of the interview questions for a more comprehensive understanding of the questions that were discussed during the interview. The interview questions were divided into five main categories, which included background information, beliefs and values, teacher practices, influencing factors and next steps.

Subsequently, I transcribed the interviews the use of a tape recorder and the software program ExpressScripe. The program allowed me to slow down the speech in order to ensure an accurate transcription. The information was thoroughly analyzed and the findings were categorized into key themes that illustrated the key findings in the data. The analysis included colour coding, grouping of data and the use of graphic organizers. These simplified the process of making connections between the data from both interviews and the literature review, by organizing the information in a very visual manner.
**Ethical Review Procedures**

The participants for this research voluntary agreed to take part in the interview and were provided with ample information about the research prior to making their decision.

A week prior to the interview the participants received a copy of the letter of consent (see Appendix A), in order to ensure that they had sufficient time to carefully review the information and make an informed decision about their role as a participant in the research. The letter of consent explicitly outlined the purpose of the research and the topic being investigated. Additionally, it also ensured that their anonymity would be preserved through use of pseudonym. The participants were informed that the interview would be recorded and that they could withdraw from the process at any given point. This ensured that the participants felt comfortable with the process and did not feel forced to take part in it. In addition, a copy of the transcribed interviews was made available to both participants. A copy of the letter of consent was also given to the participants and another copy was kept for the records of this research. No changes were made to the agreements referred to in the letter of consent, and the participants were encouraged to ask questions or ask for clarifications prior to the interview and afterwards.

The time and location of the interview was chosen and negotiated by the participants themselves, this allowed them to feel more comfortable with the process. No questions were asked about specific students or parents, and no names were given that would compromise the safety and privacy of any of the students in the classroom. The teachers were given the contact information of the research supervisor, and were invited to request a copy of the final product.
Limitations

I recognize that as there were only two participants in this research, and thus the findings of this research cannot be used to draw inferences or a general conclusion about the population. However, the purpose of this research was not to infer about the population at large. Instead, the purpose was to investigate exemplary practices and to improve my personal and professional understanding of the topic at hand by exploring the practices of two Toronto District School Board Teachers.

I recognize the existence of bias, from the participants and myself. I recognize that the information gathered from the interviews was not free from bias, as these were teachers that were speaking about their own practices. Additionally, I also recognize that my interpretation of the information is also not free from bias, as my experiences, position and assumptions to certain extent shaped how the data was interpreted.

In addition, the number of questions for the interview process was also very limited, and thus the information gathered from these interviews only reflects a small portion of this subject. For the purpose of this research, I feel that the questions were sufficient, however I recognize that the findings were limited. I also recognize that the literature chosen to review was also very selective. Due to the scope of time of this research, the literature that was chosen reflects selective views of the inclusion of LGBTQ topics in the classroom, and thus there were various areas of interest and relevancy that were not address. Moreover, this research mainly focused on the integration of gay and lesbian topics into the classroom and did not further explore the integration of transgender issues. In addition, the intersectionality of race and sexuality was not address, and thus it is another limitation of this research.
Future Study

In the future I hope to further research this topic and investigate the unexplored areas of the literature. Such as, how the intersectionalities between race, ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation can be highlight and addressed through the curriculum. Another possible area of research would be challenging heteronormativity with an emphasis on transgender issues. I would also be highly interested in exploring the long-term impacts of challenging heteronormative norms in the early primary grades and whether or not students are able to internalized this information and have the necessary support and skills to respond differently at the face of injustice.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

The focus of this chapter will be on discussing the aggregated data obtained through two semi-structure interviews, which examined how teachers of early primary grades challenge heteronormativity through the curriculum. The names used in this chapter are both pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of both teachers. This chapter describes the data obtained from the interviews with Grace, a grade 2 teacher and Mark, a kindergarten teacher both teachers at an urban Toronto District School Board School.

The data from both interviews was structured using various themes that emerged based on the commonalities in the answers of the participant and it was organized using heading and sub-headings. The key findings will be organized using five themes that will address:

- The integration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) issues as part of an inclusive curriculum.
- The effects of challenging heteronormativity on the students.
- How heteronormativity is challenged in the primary grades.
- Providing students with the tools and opportunities to think critically.
- Challenges and teacher recommendations.

The Integration of LGBTQ Issues As Part of An Inclusive Curriculum

Both teachers were asked to participate in this research because they were both primary teachers in the Toronto District School Board, who demonstrated a commitment to the integration of LGBTQ issues in the classroom.
Although both participants felt personally connected to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) issues, they also felt that the integration of these issues was simply part of creating a fully inclusive curriculum.

*It is Part of An Inclusive Curriculum*

Through the information that each teacher provided, it became clear that incorporating these topics was a necessary aspect of having an inclusive curriculum in their classrooms. Grace described her vision of an inclusive program as one that reflects and honors the diverse experiences of all the students in the class. Comparably, Mark described his vision as one that incorporates various perspectives and that thoroughly embeds LGBTQ issues within the curriculum; in his own words he explains his views,

> It [the inclusion of LGBTQ issues] becomes part of the daily thing,
> you don't say ‘oh I’m going to do a lesson on homophobia, and I’m going to do a lesson on gender variant,’ It just becomes part of it what you do in the classroom.

Both participants indicated that teaching about LGBTQ issues is simply part of creating an inclusive curriculum, as it makes the program representative of the students and provides them with the tools to live and negotiate their identities in a diverse society. Therefore, in order to have an inclusive program, these issues must be incorporated throughout the curriculum, as there are students in the classroom that come from LGBTQ families, or that have relatives or friends who identify as such, and their experiences must also be validated and represented through the curriculum. This understanding is also echoed in the literature. Petrovic (2002), argues that it is crucial for teachers to include positive portrayals of LGBTQ youth, adults and community in the curriculum, in order
for children to have the existence of LGBTQ people recognized, and for their experiences
to be validated (p.150).

**LGBTQ Issues Must Be Integrated Throughout the Curriculum**

As previously discussed, an inclusive curriculum must go beyond incorporating
one unit or one lesson on homophobia awareness. Instead, these issues must be integrated
throughout the taught curriculum. Both teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to
going beyond the inclusion of LGBTQ and focusing on the integration of these issues
throughout the curriculum. In Mark’s own words,

> It should be incorporated throughout the curriculum is not just
something added on top. Every time you are doing something in
the classroom you are covering more than the curriculum. So layer
the curriculum…. I understand that this [LGBTQ issues] is seen as
a mountain, but something as being heterosexual or not, is a just a
pebble over here, is not a huge thing. There is this mountain of
literacy and math, so then take your pebble and put it into the
literacy and math.

Therefore, the purpose is not simply to have one lesson on anti-homophobia, or anti-
transphobia, but to have these topics integrated throughout the taught curriculum.

Mark appears to be able to successfully meet the curriculum expectations for
kindergarten, while at the same time challenging heteronormative ideas. He explained
that this type of work becomes part of the daily routine; he does not simply implement a
lesson on homophobia or on gender variant, it effortlessly becomes a part of everything
that he does in his classroom. He argued that it is not difficult, as it could begin by simply
changing the language used within the classroom. For example, if discussing a verbal
mathematics question the teacher could ask the students, ‘if Mommy and Mommy went
to the grocery store...’ instead of saying Daddy and Mommy. He explained that although
this is just a slight change in language, it helps change the perspective of the students. By
acknowledging the existence of non-heteronormative family structures and doing it in a positive way, it sends the message to young students that these types of families are normal. This coincided with the literature, which urges the need to present students with positive images of LGBTQ individuals (Petrovic, 2002, p.150). Mark has also taken field trip opportunities to integrate LGBTQ issues within his classroom. In past years he has taken his Kindergarten students to the Toronto Pride Week flag rising at City Hall and together with parents they not only celebrated this event, but he also developed a whole unit around the field trip.

Grace also confirmed these statements and added that, because there is so much material to cover from the curriculum, teachers have to make choices about which aspects to focus on. However, teachers need to learn that they can challenge heteronormativity and meet the expectations, by simply embedding these issues throughout the curriculum. Grace also expressed her concern with the superficial way that sometimes these issues are addressed, and explained that it is crucial to convince teachers that this type of work is relevant and that it should be embedded and integrated within the curriculum as supposed to just being an add-on.

**The Effects of Challenging Heteronormativity On The Students**

*Challenging Heteronormativity Is Important for All Students*

Some teachers could argue that, if there are no students in the class who identify as LGBTQ or who come from LGBTQ families, then there is no reason why these issues should be addressed in the classroom. However, Grace and Mark demonstrated that challenging heteronormativity and including LGBTQ issues and themes into your classroom is not only necessary, but it also benefits all students as all students have a
gender identity and sexual orientation. Having these discussions not only provides students with opportunities to better understand those around them, but also to better understand their identity and sexual orientation. Both teachers indicated that, addressing heteronormativity and including LGBTQ stories into the classroom is extremely important, not only because there are students in the class who come from LGBTQ families, but also because students live in a city that is extremely diverse and students must learn to develop the language and understanding about difference and diversity.

Both teachers indicated that for students who came from LGBTQ families, this work was extremely important because it helps reflect and validate their experiences and instill a sense of pride and acceptance. Teachers who self-censorship are only putting shame around the issues. This is echoed throughout some of the literature, as previously stated teaching about these issues is necessary in order for children to have the existence of LGBTQ people recognized in a positive way (Petrovic, 2002, p.150).

Moreover, for the other students in the class this work is equally as important because these students might have friends who come from an LGBTQ family, and because they live in a diverse society and they need to be aware and have a sense of different family structures. Grace indicated that this kind of work made all students more accepting, understanding and respectful of people’s differences. Similarly, Mark felt that the inclusion of LGBTQ topics and challenging heteronormativity, allowed even the younger kindergarten students to alter their perspective. He explained that this kind of work allows students to develop an understanding that what is occurring in their household and their family structure is not necessarily the only possibility. Thus, the inclusion of LGBTQ issues within the classroom is not only beneficial for those students
who can personally identify. By exposing students to various perspectives and helping them develop the skills to understand and challenge heteronormative norms, teachers are helping all students to become more accepting and respectful of difference.

*Challenging Heteronormativity Makes A Difference*

As previously mentioned, challenging heteronormativity and the discussion of LGBTQ topics in the classroom are important for all students. Doing this kind of work in the classrooms, even with young primary students has the potential to influence student perception and provide students with the tools to understand diversity and negotiate their own identity. The participants agreed that after doing some work in the classroom around challenging heteronormative norms they noticed changes in the ways students approached and discussed LGBTQ topics. In Mark’s classroom, the students were noticeably more comfortable talking about another student’s two mothers, and none of the students responded negatively to any remarks about same-sex households, or even other family structure such as single parents home or grandparents as guardians. This was due mainly to the fact that work was done around challenging the heteronormative ideas regarding family structure. Mark also indicated that he noticed changes in other ways such as, students being more reflective, were thinking more critically and were challenging previous and new ideas. Thus, through challenging these heteronormative ideas he was also helping students to develop crucial skills to become critical thinkers.

Grace also indicated a substantial change in the perspectives of her grade 2 students. The school that Grace works at is extremely committed to social justice and does a substantial amount of work around gender, heteronormativity and anti-homophobia education. Every year they take part in a weeklong school wide initiative
that discusses these issues, and this year they had a filmmaker who recorded the students before these activities took place and after, Grace describes the changes,

Before they couldn't talk about these topics, and now they can tell you what a stereotype is, and why it is a rule that should be broken. The most exciting thing is to hear kids use these kinds of language, and also begin to make connections. It would be interesting to see if and how they start making different choices, but also to see how they stand up to each other, or how they stand up to in the face of injustice, are they going to be able to challenge, and feel confident and supported. I think that they will, I'm hopeful.

Additionally, she stated that as a school and in her own classroom they will continue to challenge heteronormative ideas, and because they are committed to these issues, each year the student’s understanding will be further develop. The older the students become the more in depth they will be able to discuss and critically analyze these issues. Grace also indicated that, discussing and challenging heteronormativity in the classroom also helps to address many of the misconceptions that students have regarding homosexuality and transgender people. She explained that,

[Heteronormativity] Is not a word that I use in the classroom, but we do challenge it, sort of when we think about events like Valentine’s Day. As a school we said we want to challenge this heteronormative holiday and be more inclusive and talk about different kinds of love and different ways of loving people and that was the inspiration for Gender Splendour week. So I think that of course when you challenge patriarchy, colonialism, heteronormativity etc. you will help unravel some of these beliefs.

The way in which both of these teachers challenged heteronormativity varied, however by critically analyzing these beliefs and challenging heteronormative norms they helped to unravel some of the misconceptions, and influence the perspective of the students in each class.
How Heteronormative Can Be Challenged In The Primary Grades

Heteronormative norms can be challenged through various ways, thus it is crucial to explore how teachers can accomplish this work with primary students. Although both participants demonstrated exemplary practices, they both challenge heteronormativity in different ways.

Challenging The Concept of a Family

In Mark’s kindergarten classroom, he mainly focused on challenging the heteronormative beliefs that families are composed of a father and a mother and that this should be the norm. He believes that, it is important to allow students to understand that what is occurring at one’s home is not necessarily the only possibility. Mark begins challenging this idea from the first day the students walk into the classroom,

I had a girl come to me and the first thing she says is, ‘hi I have two Mommies’. I said wonderful that’s great. But everyone heard that, all the kids around heard it. Okay so two mommies is great, so it’s already set in stone, and then you hear...I have two daddies, and two grandmas.

Thus, from the very first time the topic is raised through his positive remarks, Mark not only acknowledges the existence of different families, but at the same time he sets the example for all students by modeling an inclusive and accepting attitude.

He further explores the topic through the use of picture books that address different kinds of families. Some of the books he uses include, but are not limited to Heather Has Two Mommies; One Dad Two Dads Brown Dad Blue Dads (Valentine, 2004); King & King (Haan, 2002); King & King & Family (Haan, 2004); Molly’s Family (Garden, 2004); Asha’s Mums (Elwin & Paulse, 1990) and Mom and Mum are Getting Married! (Setterington, 2004). Through the use of these picture books, Mark
challenges heteronormative beliefs regarding the family structure and presents students with different perspectives. Mark’s focus on different kinds of family arrangements and the inclusion of same-sex families through story books is one of the strategies that is suggested by the *Equitable and Inclusive Schools* a document drafted by the Toronto District School Board (Equitable and Inclusive Schools, 2011). This is a document that was drafted by the Toronto District School Board’s Equitable and Inclusive Schools Team, the Human Rights Office, Library and Learning Resources, and classroom teachers of the TDSB in partnership with community organizations. The purpose of it was to assist teachers in the process of beginning to integrate LGBTQ issues in their instruction. This document provides information regarding the importance of this work, and provides teachers with lessons plans and ideas to introduce these topics into the classroom in an effective and practical way. This was one of the resources that Mark addressed as being very practical and helpful for teachers who are just commencing this type of work.

Mark also indicated that due to the fact that there are limited resources that address LGBTQ families, he often challenges the heteronormative beliefs about the family, by changing the content of picture books that are not necessarily for this purpose. For example,

Sometimes in a book there might be two guys, and because the age the kids cannot read the words so then I’ll change the words and I’ll bring in “oh these two men share the house” and what not, this way you bring it into the story line.

Mark explained that he chooses to challenge heteronormativity by discussing the family because it is at a level that the students can connect to and can understand. This is
essential, as Finnessy (2002) iterates, if students are presented with concrete or familiar materials, very abstract ideas can become accessible (p. 149).

Challenging Heteronormativity in the Context of the Family and Gender

Grace introduces the process of challenging heteronormativity by discussing differences, she explained that this is important because every student can relate to the idea of feeling different, included and excluded. Like Mark, Grace also approaches the subject through an avenue that the students are able to relate to. She then builds on the idea of feeling different by challenging heteronormativity in the context of family, and opening the concept of the family to be more inclusive. Thus, ensuring that the students understand that families can look very different.

Recently, Grace’s school has been addressing and challenging heteronormativity on a deeper level by exploring issues around gender. Grace admitted that this has been an exciting journey, as students come into the classrooms with strong ideas about how girls and boys should behave and some of these ideas are part of the foundation of homophobia. She explained her reasoning by stating that,

If boys or girls don't behave the ways that they are ‘supposed’ to behave then there is name-calling, bullying, there is homophobia. So what has been interesting is that I have been working for the last 2 years to create curriculum about gender, gender stereotype and homophobia and making the links, and most recently transphobia, so making the links between stereotypes and introducing language, prejudice, exclusion and all that.

Through challenging gender stereotypes, and addressing the origin of these influences, Grace chooses to challenge the heteronormative norms that dictate how each gender is supposed to act. This is one of the aspects of heteronormativity that was discussed throughout the literature (Sapon-Shevin, 1999; Pearson & Wilkinson, 2009; Bickmore,
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1999). Pearson and Wilkinson (2009) argued that, heteronormativity involves the celebration of socially constructed gendered behaviours, that highlight the difference between men and women and the gender transgressions that disrupt this “natural” binary. Therefore, boys and girls ‘do gender’ to avoid such social sanctions, and through this they continue to create and reinforce heteronormativity (p. 544).

Grace partly disrupts these gender norms through the use of literacy. For example, through the use of a picture book titled *William’s Doll* (Zolotow, 1985), Grace addresses heteronormative norms regarding gender roles. This particular book discusses the story of a boy who wanted a doll, but his dad would not buy him one, as he did not believe that this was an appropriate toy for a boy. However his grandmother disagreed stating that if he grew up and wanted to be a father, then he also needed to learn how to be nurturing and take care of children. Grace describes her lesson,

We read the book William’s doll, then we discussed it and I brought plastic babies into the classroom and we talked about babies and how we know if they are boys or girls, how do we talk to boys and how do we talk to girls, and how do we dress each one.

Grace also does workshops with her students about fairy tales and princesses, in which students challenged the gender roles and what it means to be a hero. The students first read several fairy tale books, and then they read books such as the *Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) and explore how to reject gender roles. Through these discussions and activities students challenge their own understanding about these roles and explore the powers that influence our perceptions of each. Grace strongly believes that such lessons also challenge the idea that there is only one-way to express your identity, which is essential in combating heteronormative beliefs.
Grace is committed to embedding LGBTQ content throughout the curriculum; however, she admitted that she tends to address and challenge heteronormative values mainly through the use of literacy and the arts. She explained that she uses literature to first address the issues, as she believes that students find it easier to first talk about these issues when they are talking about a character and not themselves. This coincides with the literature, as Leland and Harste (2000) argue that using books to bring about discussions can help to initiate and sustain critical conversations about sensitive issues (p. 4). After the students discuss the issues, Grace feels that they need a creative response, and therefore most of the lessons that she implements have an art component, as it provides students with a lovely way of expressing their ideas and being creative.

Both teachers illustrated various strategies that demonstrate and prove that heteronormative norms can be challenged in the primary grades. Mark chooses to challenges heteronormativity on a personal level by exposing students to different types of families, positively addressing the different types of families in his classroom and validating the personal experiences of his students. He mainly focuses on challenging the concept of the family because he believes that it is at level that the students can connect to and can understand. Conversely, although Grace also challenges the concept of the family she chooses to challenge heteronormativity more broadly by focusing on gender roles and stereotypes and the powers that influence our decisions about what we deem to be ‘normal’ and acceptable. Both of these teacher challenge heteronormativity in a way that is meaningful to them and their students and that is at a level that the students can understand and relate to. Through their expertise they demonstrate that there is not just one correct way of addressing these issues, and that through the use of picture books and
discussions about difference, family and gender roles, heteronormativity can be challenged with young students in a meaningful way.

**Providing Students With The Tools And Opportunities To Think Critically**

Addressing heteronormativity requires teachers to encourage students to think critically about the norms and beliefs that influence our perception of what is ‘normal’. Thus, it is not sufficient to simply read a picture book about LGBTQ families or gender roles, without having a discussion about the issues and providing students, even young primary students with opportunities to think critically.

Weil (1998) defines critical pedagogy as a movement that explores the “relationship between culture and power, specifically as it translates into the everyday life of pedagogical theory and practice” (p.25) For both participants critical pedagogy played a large role in their curriculum, as their goal was not to merely include these subjects but to deconstruct them. The level of critical work varied greatly, this was due in part to the fact that there was a large difference in age and maturity between a junior kindergarten student and a grade 2 students. However, both teachers successfully incorporated LGBTQ material and provided students with the tools and opportunities to think critically at various levels.

*Thinking Critically About Social Issues and The Forces of Influence*

Mark does a substantial amount of critical work with his kindergarten class. However, prior to engaging in critical thinking he ensures that he has a supportive classroom environment and that the students understand that there is no wrong answer. According to Mark, this allows the students to take risks and further explore their thinking.
During the interview, Mark explained that one of his purposes was to help students to learn to think ‘outside of the box’, and to be critical when discussing all social issues. He begins discussing social issues by asking the students what is fair, what is not and why. Through this strategy he is able to engage in a critical discussion of various issue at a level that the student can understand. He applies the same reasoning when challenging heteronormativity in the classroom, by talking about it in terms of what is fair and what is not, he is able to get the students to explore their perspectives and to further understand that everyone has a different points of view. This is crucial, as according to Weil (1998), critical work requires teachers to construct a curriculum that is rich in reasoning and problem solving, and that provides students with the opportunities to exchange cultural points of views, problem solve and engage in discussions that are relevant and controversial (p.119).

Grace takes a slightly different approach to critical thinking. In her classroom critical thinking unfolds through thinking about gender stereotypes. Some of the critical thinking work comes from unpacking gender stereotypes, and developing an understanding and critical awareness of where those messages come from. She encourages students to reflect, and critically analyze why they are making certain choices and what are the factors that are influencing them, their peers and their community. This approach to critical pedagogy is echoed in the literature, as Hall and Piazza (2008) also argued that developing a critical consciousness, or the ability to recognize and challenge oppressive and dehumanizing political, economic, and social systems (Garcia et al. 2009, p. 19), must encourage the discussion of the root of social issues, and the forces that continue to maintain these issues (p.37).
Grace believes that, talking to students about gender stereotypes and discussing the heteronormative norms that influence our decisions, is a crucial foundation to further explore heteronormative norms in older grades. In her own words,

*When you talk to kids about these ideas and stereotypes they are thinking critically about where we get these messages of what it means to be a boy and a girl. This can be taken further in older grades by talking about where do we get these messages about what it means to be straight and gay. And why is it so difficult to be out, and that's because the heteronormative society believes that the normal thing is to be straight to be difficult to come out, is hard to be different and feel safe about being different.*

Additionally, she strongly believes that the earlier the grade level in which teachers begin doing critical work, the more beneficial it will be for the students. As the students get older they can continue to build on this early critical work. This is also echoed throughout the literature on critical pedagogy, as this kind of work should be seen as a continuous and evolving process (Garcia et al. 2009, p. 20). Grace also believes that teachers should begin exploring these issues at an early age, as when students are older teachers have missed the opportunity to challenge years of indoctrination.

**Challenges And Teacher Recommendations**

Addressing and challenging norms that are commonly accepted by society always carries a series of challenges. Grace and Mark both expressed how fortunate they are to be working at very progressive schools and communities that not only support their work, but that are also committed to social justice. However, they were both able to identify and categorize some of the challenges that they have come across in their years of teaching. These challenges can be categorized into four categories: parental, teacher beliefs, administration, and resources.
Parental Challenges

Both participants identified parents as the biggest challenge when addressing heteronormativity in the classroom. Grace explained her opinion on the matter,

I think parents are incredibly protective of their kids and they want to be in control of the messages that their kids receive, and when they receive them. So some parents will believe that their kids are not ready for these issues.

She also discussed the fact that in some families these issues are just not talked about. Thus, the parent’s level of comfort is very low and they do not want their kids to be exposed to these discussions out of fear or worry about what that is going to mean. Grace strongly encourages teachers to be very cautious when approaching these issues, and to invest time in providing parents with some information. Grace urges teachers to be very gentle and open with parents. Teacher should have an open dialogue with parents about what the students will be studying and why addressing these issues is important. They should also provide parents with information, resources and websites. If teachers are able to educate parents on why addressing heteronormativity is so crucial, then perhaps parents would not be such a potential challenge. Mark added that when challenged by a parent, he simply presents them with his curriculum as well as the Toronto District School Board’s policy, as the policy is very clear that teachers are required to challenge these issues within the classroom.

Based on my observations and through the discussions with the interviewees, it is very clear that both of these teachers are strongly committed to creating and maintain a strong home-school connection. In Grace’s school, parental involvement is very crucial and parents are invited to come in and participate in the school-wide activities that challenge heteronormativity, transphobia and homophobia. Similarly, most of the parents
of the school in which Mark works at are also very supportive of this kind of work, and he also often invites them into the classroom to take part in various activities with the students. Therefore, in order to ensure that parents do not become a challenge when addressing LGBTQ issues in the classroom teachers must learn to incorporate parents into their program, provide them with information and resources and establish a healthy relationship with the community. This will ensure that the community becomes a support system rather than a challenge.

The Teacher’s Own Perceptions

The participants also identified the teacher’s beliefs and assumptions as one of the challenges of choosing to address heteronormativity in the classroom. Grace explained that,

A lot of teachers feel intimidated and afraid about confronting these issues, maybe because of their own personal comfort, but also because they believe the topic is not age appropriate.

Grace believes that teachers must be convinced that this kind of work is relevant, and that it should be embedded and integrated within the curriculum, this itself also becomes a challenge. The teacher belief is a challenge that is also addressed within the literature (Petrovic, 2002; Finnessy, 2002; Hall & Piazza, 2008). In order to successfully challenge heteronormativity and include LGBTQ issues in the classroom, the teacher must understand that their attitudes and values play a pivotal role in the shaping of the student’s perception of the world, especially in the primary grades, and that they hold a great deal of power to maintain or to challenge the status quo (Petrovic, 2002, p.150). Thus, this kind of work is not only relevant, but is also crucial component of creating change within society.
Grace advises that in order for teachers to surpass the initial anxiety and learn to put aside their personal bias and beliefs, it is crucial for them to be educated. Teachers require support and opportunities for professional development, in order to be educated on how to educate others about these types of issues. Hanlon (2009) would agree with this statement by arguing that teachers’ self-censor, is partly due to the lack of educational programs, and professional development on the subject (p.44). Mark also further probes the issue by adding that teachers are also worried about what the parents are going to say, as they might not know how to rationalize to parents why they are doing this kind of work. Therefore, both teachers urge educators to seek professional development, and to become familiar with the policies regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ issues in the classroom, as this is a source of support.

Challenges From Administration

The participants also identified members of the administrative team as another possible force to consider. Grace explained that although teachers do not require the approval of members of the administration, challenging issues such as heteronormativity becomes a lot easier if you have administrative support. Mark admitted that in his teaching experience he has had to deal with some challenges from the administrators. He explained that they were not comfortable with the work that he was doing around the inclusion of LGBTQ issues. However, he once again used the Toronto District School Board’s policy P071, Gender-Based Violence, as a source of support to defend his classroom program. As previously mentioned, both of these teachers have the privilege of currently working at schools that share their vision of an inclusive program; however, for those teachers who are not in a similar situation, Grace advises that they seek help from
other teachers who have experience with the subject (even outside of the school), to seek
the support of equity leaders within the school board and most importantly, if possible, to
try to find an ally within the school that shares their vision. In her own words she
describes the importance of an ally,

I think one of the most important resources is an ally. If you have
one other person who thinks this work is important then is
incredibly motivating to work on it together, because you will
often be the only one who thinks this way. So having an ally is
easier even to challenge some parents.

Resources

The last challenge that the participants identified is the lack of resources on the
issue of heteronormativity and LGBTQ issues for the primary grades. They found that
most of the resources around these issues are for the senior or intermediate level, so there
are fewer resources for the primary level. However, they did admit that there are some
excellent resources out there; teachers just have to look for them. In the case of Mark, the
school’s librarian has been a great source of support on finding resources that effectively
addressed LGBTQ issues. In addition, they also advice teachers who are beginning to
teach about these issues to take advantage of the resources provided by the Toronto
District School Board, as these could be a very efficient and quick way to begin
discussing these topics.

Grace and Mark illustrated a variety of challenges that can arise from addressing
LGBTQ issues in the primary grades, however they also provided several solutions to
these challenges. They clearly demonstrated that with some education on the subject, a
strong relationship with the community and the administration, and a clear understanding
of the ministry and board policies it is possible to surpass these challenges. Therefore, there are no excuses to refusing to address LGBTQ issues through curriculum.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this final chapter is to share the implications of this research, including the importance and purpose of it, to outline the implications and future areas of research, as well as my reflection on the research process.

Implications of This Research

The Urgency of Addressing and Challenging Heteronormativity

This research process has been an invaluable learning experience that has provided me with some excellent strategies to effectively integrate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) issues into the classroom. This process has also made me acutely aware of how crucial it is for teachers to become more educated on how to challenge heteronormativity in their classroom, how to create a more inclusive curriculum, and how to validate the experiences of LGBTQ students.

Addressing heteronormativity in the early primary grades is essential in order to challenge those norms that result in homophobia and or transphobia. However, teachers are choosing to ignore the urgency of this issue. They are failing to create an inclusive classroom for LGBTQ students, and in the process are not complying with the Ministry of Education and the Toronto District School Board P071 policy, which states that teachers must integrate issues, regarding sexuality, gender stereotyping and homophobia across all subjects in the curriculum (Toronto District School Board, 2010, p.3).

According to the 2009 EGALE study, students in Canadian classrooms do not feel safe or included, even with these crucial policies in place (Taylor et al. Unsafe Spaces, 2011). Therefore, the onus is on teachers to ensure that these policies are being implemented and that these students are being respected, included and most importantly acknowledged. It
is the responsibility of the teachers to seek information and educate themselves on how to challenge heteronormativity within the classroom.

As a heterosexual primary teacher, I believe that educating myself on issues of heteronormativity has made me more aware of how I maintain the status quo, but most importantly of how I can alter my instructional practices to better meet the needs of my future students. By becoming aware of how I have been promoting heteronormative norms, I have also become more conscious of how my choices of resources, language and curriculum can be altered to challenge these beliefs. Heteronormativity is not something educators purposely teach; instead these are norms that are deeply ingrained within us. Therefore, in order to create a more inclusive classroom and in order to help prevent homophobia and transphobia, teachers need to become aware of how their values are maintaining the heterosexual hegemony. Teachers play a significant role in the social and personal development of students, and in the primary grades the role of the teacher is extremely crucial in this development. However, the majority of primary teachers are also heterosexual, and thus they are sometimes unaware of how their choices in the classroom are excluding LGBTQ students. Thus, to meet the needs of all students, to include them and to validate their experiences, it is extremely important for all teachers to seek information on how to create a safe and supporting environment for these students and parents, how to integrate LGBTQ issues into the taught curriculum, and how to validate the experience of LGBTQ students and children of LGBTQ parents.

Teaching about LGBTQ issues and actively challenging heteronormativity through the taught curriculum benefits all students, not just those who identify as LGBTQ or who have parents who identify as such. For students who identify or who have parents
who do, it is incredibly important because it creates a safe and inclusive classroom and helps instill a sense of pride, safety and support. It also validates the experiences of these students, as they would see their experiences and identities reflected in the materials in the classroom and the taught curriculum. This not only leads to a safer and more inclusive environment for these students, but it also will help improve classroom learning and instruction. Students cannot learn and emotionally develop in an environment that does not include or support them. Through our silence we are not only maintaining the status quo, but we are also putting shame around these issues. By integrating these topics into the classroom and presenting positive stories of LGBTQ families and individuals, we are validating the experiences of these students and helping to remove some of the many stigmas.

The integration of LGBTQ issues in the primary classroom also benefits those students who do not identify as such, as these students might have neighbours, friends or relatives who identify as LGBTQ. Most importantly, because it connects them to the world around them and provides them opportunities to explore, understand and accept the realities of our world. It also provides them with the tools to become more accepting and caring individuals, and it helps them develop into open-minded individuals who are not afraid to advocate for those who are discriminated against. Students live in a city that is extremely diverse, and must learn to develop the language and understanding about difference and diversity. I strongly believe that addressing these topics in the early primary years will help nurture a generation that is less prejudicial and more accepting.
The Purpose of My Research

Prior to commencing this research I had various apprehensions about challenging heteronormativity in the primary classroom. First off, I was concerned that challenging heteronormativity would be a concept far too complex for young students to understand. However, after exploring the literature on the topic, it became clear that the question was not whether or not heteronormativity could be challenged, but of how it could be done. Throughout my review of the literature I did not find sufficient information on how to challenge heteronormativity with primary students, and thus I became highly interested in how this kind of work could be done with younger students. Although there is a large collection of resources on the inclusion of LGBTQ issues in the classroom, they have mainly been developed to be used in the junior and the intermediate grades. Aside from LGBTQ themed picture books, there are not a lot of resources for the primary grades. Thus, I was interested in highlighting how primary teachers are able to use these resources, and are encouraged to create their own in order to challenge heteronormativity.

As a primary/junior teacher, understanding how heteronormativity can be challenged in the primary grades is extremely important to me, and thus I chose to explore how teachers in the Toronto District School Board are successfully integrating LGBTQ issues and challenging heteronormativity in this division.

The findings from this research confirmed that it is possible to challenge these complex ideas with young students, and most importantly that there are teachers who are successfully challenging heteronormativity with students as young as junior kindergarten. I recognize that these findings are based on the experiences of two participants; however teaching is an individual mandate and if these two teachers can successfully challenge
heteronormative norms, so can other educators. Teachers can be agents of change, and as such they hold a significant amount of power to maintain or disrupt the status quo. Thus, teachers must take the opportunity to review and understand the policies that address the integration of these issues in the curriculum. Most importantly, teachers must recognize that they also have the opportunity and responsibility, to communicate and educate parents about the urgency of addressing LGBTQ issues within the classroom. As agents of change, it is our responsibility to integrate and educate about LGBTQ issues, in order to interrupt prejudice and create a more equitable and safe environment for our students and community.

In addition, the datum from the interviews also highlights how primary teachers can begin challenging heteronormativity in a way that is practical and efficient. The participants demonstrated that by integrating LGBTQ issues through the taught curriculum, it is possible to challenge heteronormativity and simultaneously meet the Ministry of Education curriculum expectations. These issues can be integrated through various avenues, such as picture books, guest speakers, whole school activities on challenging gender, homophobia and transphobia, fieldtrip to celebrate the LGBTQ community, and altering the language use in the classroom. Hence, through the use of these strategies and resources that portray LGBTQ families and individuals in a positive light, teachers have the opportunity to challenge heteronormative norms in a way that is relevant to the student’s lives and that is concrete enough for them to understand.
Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

I recognize that the findings of this research cannot be used to draw inferences or a general conclusion about the population. Due to the length and time allocated for this research there were various crucial components that were not addressed. Therefore, there are various limitations that are essential to emphasize.

First off, the focus of this research did not encompass the intersections of sexuality and race, which is an aspect of LGBTQ issues that is crucial to explore and understand. This is an area of concern for one of the participants, as she felt that there is a lack of resources that positively portray racial minority individuals who also identify as LGBTQ. It is important to understand and explore how teachers can address LGBTQ issues while being mindful of the intersectionalities regarding race, ethnicity, nationality, and other identity markers.

Additionally, this research project did not address how to integrate and discuss transgender issues in the primary classroom, which is an area of study that has not been thoroughly explored. Instead, the participants and the literature mainly focused on how to address gay, lesbian and bisexual issues in the classroom. Equally important is the consideration and further exploration of gender constructions, as there is an intersection of gender dynamics and sexual orientation. This is an aspect that was briefly addressed through the literature review and the participants, however due to the complexity of gender dynamics in relation to heteronormativity it is a component that requires a more in-depth consideration.
Furthermore, the participants both highlighted the importance of educating the parents and the school community on the importance of addressing LGBTQ issues in the classroom, however the details of how this can be done were not thoroughly researched. This is an important limitation to consider, as in order for this kind of work to create change within the community, teachers need the support of the parents and the school community otherwise it is very difficult to create change.

Another important limitation to consider is the narrow focus on the practices within the Toronto District School Board. Due to the fact that this research paper focused on urban education, it did not address how LGBTQ issues could be addressed within suburban areas such as, York Region or Peel District. Thus, it would be valuable to investigate how teacher in these areas can challenge heteronormative norms, and how these School Boards are supporting this type of work in their classrooms. Similarly, it would also be beneficial to explore how LGBTQ topics can be integrated in the curriculum of more remote rural areas in Ontario such as Stratford, Brantford or Barrie. In rural regions such as these, addressing heteronormativity could present more challenges due to the remoteness of these areas. Thus, it would be of great value to investigate how educators can do this type of work in their classroom, and how they cope with the challenges.

Future Research

As a result of the limitations of this research, there are various areas that deserve further study. Due to the lack of information on how to address transgender issues in the primary classroom, it would be beneficial to further explore this area. Furthermore, both participants highlighted that they noticed a change in their student’s perceptions of
LGBTQ issues after having the opportunity to discuss them in their classroom. Therefore, I would be highly interested in exploring the long-term impacts of challenging heteronormative norms in the early primary grades. For example, the participants stated that they noticed that their students were more accepting, and were able to develop the vocabulary to discuss issues such as gender stereotypes, heterosexism and homophobia. Thus, I would be interested in exploring if these influences are permanent and whether or not students are able to internalized this information and have the necessary support and skills to respond differently at the face of injustice.

Moreover, I used critical pedagogy as a framework, however this research could be further explored through the use of a different lens. For example, aspects of Marxist theory could use to investigate the role of socioeconomic status and the accessibility of LGBTQ educational resources, teacher education and professional development. Similarly, this topic could be further researched through a critical race theory lens, in order to analyze the intersections of race, gender and sexual orientation.

**Reflecting on The Research Process**

*My Growth As an Educator*

This research process has allowed me to further develop as an educator, as it has provided me with the opportunity to further improve my understanding of how to create a more inclusive classroom for LGBTQ students. The expertise of the participants not only illustrated what an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum could look like, but also allowed me to further understand how teachers can challenge the heteronormative norms that are ingrained within society.
Prior to commencing this research process, I had various misconceptions on what it meant to integrate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer issues in the classroom (LGBTQ). My professional and personal experiences made me aware of the importance of addressing these issues, however I felt unqualified to discuss LGBTQ issues in the classroom, and as a heterosexual teacher I did not feel confident that I could adequately address the topic. I had very little experience discussing these issues, and thus I felt that I did not have the knowledge, strategies or resources to be able to effectively challenge heteronormativity in my classroom. I also did not feel comfortable using the vocabulary and often limited myself from saying words like Queer or Gay, not because I opposed people who identify as such, but rather because I was afraid to somehow insult someone or use the words inappropriately.

These insecurities stemmed from a lack of exposure, vocabulary and experience discussing these issues. However, through this research process, I was able to expose myself and obtain the necessary information to begin challenging heteronormative norms in the primary classroom. As an educator, this research has provided me with a foundation from which I can now further develop my understanding of how to effectively include, support and validate the experiences of LGBTQ students in my classroom.

Recommendations To Colleagues

I would advise teachers with similar sentiments to seek out information, the resources are available, teachers just have to take the initiative to take advantage of them. There will be many resisters such as parents, religious groups, administrators and even students who will be a challenge the motives and the importance of incorporating LGBTQ issues into the classroom. Therefore, I urge teachers to not be discouraged by...
this, as creating change has never been an easy process. Instead I urge them to familiarize themselves with the Ministry and Board policies regarding the integration of LGBTQ issues, and to take advantage of professional development opportunities. Teachers should also seek the advice of a teacher who has experience on the subject, and who can serve as a mentor and ally. In addition, I advise teachers to be more reflective of how their choices in classroom material, lessons and language are excluding LGBTQ students, and begin to take the necessary steps to make some kind of change. This work can begin by incorporating a few books with LGBTQ themes into the classroom, and it can evolve to more critical conversation as the teacher’s understanding of the issues increases. Lastly, I invite teacher to put their insecurities, prejudices and religious beliefs aside, and begin to create a more LGBTQ inclusive classroom, as this is what is in the best interest of all the students.

**Conclusion**

As an educator who has recently began to explore this subject, I can empathize with teachers who do not feel qualified or prepared to do this kind of work in the classroom. However, this cannot be used as an excuse for choosing to exclude these issues from the taught curriculum. As teachers, it is our duty to continuously seek professional development in order to strengthen our practice. There is a rich collection of resources and experts, who can help with the introduction and implementations of these topics in the classroom, however we must actively seek them. Teachers are very conscious of the importance of having a safe an inclusive classroom, and if teachers are capable of seek information on racial or religious discrimination, they are also capable of seeking expert advice on creating an LGBTQ inclusive environment. It is crucial for
teachers to begin to understand the urgency and relevancy of this issue, in order for our future generations to grow in a more inclusive and equitable society.
References


GLBTQ (The world’s largest encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer culture. Retrieved from: http://www.glbtq.com/


Appendix A: Letter of Consent

Date: _____________

Dear ____________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the topic of challenging heteronormativity in the classroom for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Jackie Eldridge. My research supervisor is Dr. Patrick Finnessy. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45-minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Saydi Rodriguez Hernandez
Challenging Heteronormativity In the Primary Classroom

Researcher: Saydi Rodriguez Hernandez  
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Instructor’s Name: Dr. Jackie Eldridge  
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Research Supervisor’s Name: Dr. Patrick Finnessy  
pk.finessy@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): ___________________________________

Date: ______________________
Appendix B

Interview Questions

Introduction

Hi, thank you for taking the time to talk about my research and help me further explore the topic. I know that you already signed the consent letter, but I would just like to briefly go over some of the most important aspects of it. This interview is for the purpose of completing my Master of Teaching research paper, and it will be recorded. Your information will be kept confidential through the use of a pseudonym. In addition, you have all the information for my professor, supervisor and myself, therefore if you have any questions please don’t hesitate to call or email me.

Section 1: Background Information

1. Q: What grade(s) are you currently teaching?

2. Q: How many years have you been teaching for?

3. Q: How long have you taught at your current school?

Section 2: Beliefs/Values

4. Q: What is your vision for an effective inclusive program?

5. Q: How do you see your role as a teacher?

6. Q: What are your views on the inclusion of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, transgender, questioning) content in the primary grades?

7. Q: What prompted you to begin teaching about LGBTQ issues?

8. Q: How do you believe that all students can benefit from including LGBTQ content in the classroom?

9. Q: Do you believe that your students come into your classrooms with misconceptions about LGBTQ issues? If so, could you give me a few examples that have made you aware of this?

Section 3: Teacher Practices

10. Q: Can you please tell me about the experiences you’ve had incorporating LGBTQ content into your classroom teaching practice?

11. Q: How do you introduce the LGBTQ issues into your classroom? What steps do you take to familiarize students with the skills required to think critically about these issues?
12. Q: How do you define heteronormativity?

13. Q: How do you address and challenge heteronormativity in the classroom?

14. Q: How do you think addressing heteronormativity in the classroom challenges your student’s misconceptions and/or heterosexist beliefs?

15. Q: Can you give me an example of a lesson or a unit that you’ve taught in which you addressed heteronormativity through a critical lens that you found to be successful? Why do you think it was a success? What kind of follow-up

16. Q: How do you select classroom resources?

17 Q: Can you tell me about 3 resources that you have used to challenge heteronormativity in your classroom instruction?

18. Q: How do you find out about new resources?

Section 4: Influencing Factors

19. Q: Can you tell me about any challenges or obstacles you have encountered while taking a critical approach to heteronormativity in your teaching?

20. Q: What types of feedback have you received from students, parents and colleagues regarding your approach to addressing LGBTQ issues in the classroom?

21. Q: Have you noticed a change in how students think and/or approach LGBTQ issues after your lessons? If so, could you provide me with a few examples to illustrate this change?

Section 5: Next Steps

22. Q: What are your future goals for teaching LGBTQ content? How do you plan on achieving these goals?

23. Q: What advice would you give to teachers, in particular beginning teachers about incorporating LGBTQ content in the classroom and about challenging heteronormativity?