BRINGING LGBTQ ADVOCACY INTO THE CLASSROOM

Bringing LGBTQ Advocacy into the Classroom: Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice

By

Meghan Condon

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Abstract

This study focuses on encouraging anti-homophobia education in schools, specifically in regards to fostering safer school environments and bringing LGBTQ advocacy and perspectives into the secondary school classroom. Particular attention was paid to the current dialogue around traditional gender binaries and how concerned educators can combat these troubling stereotypes. The questions guiding this study were *in what ways does working with a Gay-Straight Alliance inform the practices of four Ontario Secondary School teachers’ regarding anti-homophobia education? And what efforts are being made to reach out to male students regarding anti-homophobia education?* Four participants were interviewed for this qualitative study, all of who are dedicated and passionate teachers working in the Greater Toronto Area to combat homophobia. Data analysis as well as the relevant literature revealed that fostering safe school environments for LGBTQ youth is a complex process and the individual teacher can have a detrimental role (either positive or negative) in contributing to feelings of safety within a school. Findings also indicated that a serious disconnect exists between current anti-homophobia policies and the practices occurring in schools. This study strives to raise awareness about this divide and to educate teachers regarding the steps they can take to bridge this gap in their classrooms.

Keywords: LGBTQ Advocacy, Safe Schools, Inclusivity, Gender
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Chapter One: Introduction

In Western culture there exists a dominant and more accepted form of gender identity and expression. Men and women are expected to conform to these identities, those who do not are often met with forms of sexism and violence. The default reaction when discussing gender is to look only at women, and because of this, gender issues are often viewed specifically as “women’s issues”. Anti-violence educator Jackson Katz (2012) urges society to reconsider how gender issues are viewed; he asks us: “what is happening with men”? Men are both the perpetrators and victims of violence, but they often get removed from the equation of gender violence (Katz, 2012). There is a heightened sense of what it takes to ‘be a man,’ and men who do not live up to this standard often become involved in violent activities, with actions taken out on both women and other men, as a way to prove their masculinity.

There are many places where the label of ‘masculinity’ can fall on the wide spectrum of gender definition, and those who “adopt the masculinities that achieve hegemony are much better off, in terms of the distribution of social goods and social status, than those who do not” (Weaver-Hightower, 2003, p. 480). This notion of the hegemonic masculinity is where the problem lies. The idea of a dominant and more accepted form of gender expression inherently means that all those who differ from the hegemonic group are labeled as outcasts. This is particularly true when it comes to male youth who identify as gay or express their gender in an ‘unacceptable’ way. This labeling of gay males has an especially disastrous and violent affect on adolescents within the confines of the secondary school system.
Definitions of Terms

When approaching an analysis of gender parameters, it is important to realize the differences between one’s ‘sex’ and one’s ‘gender.’ Sex historically refers to one’s biology: are we anatomically ‘male’ or ‘female’? The definition of gender, however, has grown into something much more complex:

Doing Gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that case particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126).

To put in simpler terms, gender is now widely considered by many theorists to be more than just how we portray our femininity/masculinity. Many often think of gender as natural, as “rooted in biology,” because men are men and women are women (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 128). However, societal perceptions of gender have evolved, and the Western world has now begun to understand that gender is a social construct. Despite this evolution, pressures still exist to perform gender in specific ways because, socially, we are expected to. To perform gender (or to “do” gender), means that socially, we are “creating differences between girls and boys and women and men” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137). These differences are not a natural phenomenon, but once they have been constructed, “they are used to reinforce the ‘essentialness’ of gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137), and are henceforth considered as natural. This reinforcement has become a policing of sorts in the lives of men and women. West and Zimmerman (1987) remind us that gender is a powerful ideology (pg. 147), and its power evolves when it is used as a policing tool and system.

This system of gender has strict rules and there are serious consequences for those who step outside of these rules. In order to distance themselves from ‘gay’
characteristics, men often construct a “façade of masculinity that publicly affirms heterosexuality through exaggerated rules and norms ... the relationship between heterosexuality and homophobia is unmistakably parasitic, in which young men attempt to prove their manhood at all costs” (Kehler, 2009, p. 203). The harassment that males who deviate from this façade of masculinity in their gender expression experience is inherently homophobic because it stems from a perceived notion of their sexual orientation as a result of their gender expression.

This form of homophobia acts as a policing of gender as the victims are taunted and tormented by the highlighting of their ‘gendered flaws.’ From as young as kindergarten, children are targeted with this kind of bullying because of “minor gender transgressions,” which, for boys, include some of the following behaviours: “boys who hate sports [and] hang out with girls during recess” (Soloman & Russell, 2004, p. 25). Children thus learn to stay carefully within these gendered lines, and the pressure to stay inside these lines only continues to grow. Unfortunately, and especially in males, we see these constructs erupt as children reach their adolescence. For young males, homophobia is a “powerful mechanism in which verbal taunts punish, repress, and deny alternative displays of masculinities” (Kehler, 2009, p. 215).

This kind of violence is referred to specifically as gender-based violence. Normally, gender-based violence is used interchangeably with the concept of violence against women. For instance, the World Health Organization defines gender-based violence as violence that “results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women” (World Health Organization, 2015). This is a common misconception of gender-based violence, as it does not relate exclusively to violence
against women but to “any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and is based on socially ascribed [gender] differences between males and females” (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2005). While violence against women is still an area of concern, some of the most aggressive incidents of gender-based violence have been against gay men who often openly defy the standard norms of masculinity (Katz, 1999). Within this understanding, gender-based violence is directly related to the concept of homophobia. Homophobia/homophobic violence is defined as “hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation” (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2012), and is usually directed towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\(^1\), and queer\(^2\) (LGBTQ) people because of their differing sexual orientations and expressions of gender identity.

**Purpose of Study**

Homophobic violence and gender-based violence are particularly dangerous forms of violence in a high school setting because of the potentially disastrous outcomes for both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students. Many young men take taunts such as “faggot,” “homo,” and “queer” as insults to their sexual orientation or gender expression. These words appear all too frequently in everyday language and are the fuel behind the horrific events of homophobic bullying. Homophobia does not have to be specifically targeted against people who identify as gay, but as those who are considered to be ‘less than’ by

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\(^1\) The term trans is used as an umbrella term for people who identify as transgender and/or transsexual. The term “trans” refers to “a person whose biological sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity” (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2012).

\(^2\) The term queer is part of a movement of reclaimed language. It was once considered to be a very offensive word used against people who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Some people now use this word as an umbrella term to refer people who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender, however it is still considered offensive by some and is used cautiously (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2012).
the dominant group. The effects of homophobia can cause severe mental health issues amongst those that are targeted, and these effects can also be incredibly violent.

Much of the stigma surrounding differing sexual orientations or gender identities can be traced back to the old definitions of homosexuality that existed in the first editions of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). It was only in the 1986 publication of the DSM that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a mental disorder, and it was not until 1990 that it was removed from the World Health Organization’s list of mental disorders (Rainbow Health Ontario, 2011).

Regardless, beginning as early as the 1980s, research began to highlight the increased risk of depression, mental health problems, and suicide among LGBTQ youth. These reports indicated that these youth had significantly higher rates of depression and substance abuse (Russell & Joyner, 2001), and cited that LGBTQ youth were twice as likely to have attempted suicide than their heterosexual peers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Broken down between the sexes, “sexual minority women were particularly at risk for substance-related disorders, while sexual minority men had a higher risk of suicide” (Rainbow Health Ontario, 2011).

The violent and aggressive tendencies that many men display as a way to demonstrate strength and masculinity are not in fact inherent, but learned. These feelings develop over years of being told how to ‘be a man’ from family members with particular expectations, societal and media pressures, and even from mentors and peers. From a young age, boys learn to establish their masculinity in opposition to femininity, and end up defining their masculinity by rejecting feminine attributes and behaviours.
Both men and women experience pressure to conform to gender expectations, but not living up to the pressures of masculinity can be particularly devastating for young males. In 2014, a twelve year old boy in California committed suicide after he had been continuously bullied and gay-bashed for being the only boy on the school’s cheerleading team (ABC Eyewitness News, 2014). Homophobia also played a role in the infamous Columbine shooting of 1999. The shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had experienced years of homophobic bullying for being perceived as different before they retaliated by bringing guns to school. These two examples are only a small sample of the countless acts of violence committed as a result of homophobic bullying over the last several decades, and are indicative of a much larger systemic issue.

When discussing issues of mental health in LGBTQ youth, the World Health Organization defines mental health as: “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (Rainbow Health Ontario, 2011). Given that the number of homophobic hate crimes in Canada doubled between 2007 and 2008 (Rainbow Health Ontario, 2011), it is no wonder that LGBTQ youth experience increased stress when it comes to their own sense of self and feelings of exclusion in the community. In 2011, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust released the results of their national climate survey, Every Class in Every School. This survey indicated that: “one in seven students [14%] who completed the survey...self-identified as LGBTQ” (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 13). These statistics suggest that over one-tenth of students across Canada are suffering from mental health issues as a direct result of their encounters with homophobia.
The statistics are difficult to ignore, and it is because the issue is so glaringly obvious that this study exists. At a foundational level, teachers and administrations need to work towards eliminating gender-based violence within schools. Mills and Keddie (2007), in their article, “Teaching boys and gender justice,” urge teachers to reconsider the structure of the classroom as a way to work towards confronting these issues. They encourage changing the classroom to be a welcoming space for male students of all “ethnicities, sexualities, and physical abilities” (p. 337), because this culture of domination and disrespect surrounding our male students is inevitably accompanied by “high levels of violence, sexual harassment, and homophobia,” creating an unsafe environment for all students (Mills & Keddie, 2007, p. 337). According to Egale Canada, 10% of non-LGBTQ students report being physically harassed/assaulted because of their gender expression (Taylor & Peter, 2011), and students in the United States report experiencing more harassment about not acting “masculine” enough than not acting “feminine” enough (Kosciw, 2012). The problems of homophobia and gender-based violence are not confined only to LGBTQ youth and its commonality is indicative of a more widespread and systematic issue.

**Statement of Research Problem**

Considering the potentially devastating consequences, my concern lies in today’s high school environments, and the ways in which homophobia is being combated within schools. Furthermore, I am particularly concerned with whether or not non-LGBTQ males are being included and educated in ways that are beneficial to the development of their sense of masculinity and identity. I certainly remember incidents of homophobic behaviours from my own time in high school, and while schools are becoming more
inclusive, I am still concerned as to how students, specifically male students, are being educated about gender issues. Mills and Keddie (2007) encourage pedagogies where “boys who are prepared to resist dominant representations of masculinity can feel safe,” and the hegemonic and damaging displays of masculinity can be safely challenged (p. 342), but is this a reality within Ontario schools? This kind of education would benefit the safety of both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students across the Ontario school system.

Gay males and trans youth often experience some of the worst violence and harassment because they openly rebel against a strict system of societal gender rules, with 49% of trans students and 40% of gay male students report experiencing sexual harassment during the last school year (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2012). The presence of this type of violence does not make any student feel safe in their school, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Turning the focus to the Ontario school system, what steps are being taken to prevent future outbreaks of gender-based violence? What steps are being taken to ensure that all students are safe? The release of The Safe and Accepting Schools Act by the Ministry of Education in 2012 mandated that all schools must allow for the creation of a Gay-Straight Alliance should it be requested by the students, including Catholic schools (p. 9). A Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) is an official school club composed of LGBTQ students and allied students (often with a faculty advisor) to discuss issues relating to LGBTQ youth and to encourage the creation of safe spaces within the school. In the recent study conducted by Taylor and Peter on behalf Egale Canada (2011), students from schools with GSAs reported a much more inclusive school environment than students from schools without GSAs. These students also agreed that schools with
specific anti-homophobia policies are more likely to have administrative support behind their GSAs (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 10). However, is the simple addition of a GSA enough to fully promote anti-homophobia education within the school?

My research question stems from these thoughts: In what ways does working with a Gay-Straight Alliance inform the practices of four Ontario Secondary School teachers’ regarding anti-homophobia education? While this focus on anti-homophobia education will drive my research, the link between sexism and homophobia is so strong that it cannot be ignored. A sub-question to my research is: What efforts are being made to reach out to male students regarding anti-homophobia education?

**Significance of Study**

There are numerous pieces of research indicating a connection between homophobia, masculinity, and incidences of gender-based violence. We, as educators, talk about violence with our students; educating women on the potential threat men are to their safety, and how to watch for signs of abusive relationships. The education system is falling into the trap that Katz (2012) warned us about; we are removing men from the story, and we are ignoring the connections between male gender violence and homophobic discourse. I wish to examine how motivated and allied teachers are attempting to create safe spaces for all students in the schools, for both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ youth. My research will advocate for the rights, inclusion, and safety of LGBTQ students in classrooms but also for the education of males regarding incidences of homophobic and sexist violence in schools.
Background of the Researcher

During the completion of my undergraduate degree in English Literature, I spent time with a professor who specialized in linguistic discourse, and who introduced me to the world of critical theory. Throughout the two years I spent taking multiple classes with her, my eyes were opened to the likes of critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory (to name a few). I quickly developed a passion for using feminist and queer theory in my analysis of various texts and media outlets, and it provided me with a language in which to express my own feminist-minded political opinions. The more I learned and was able to apply to the world around me, the more shocked I was that no one taught me this earlier in my education. When I got my acceptance letter to the Master of Teaching program at the University of Toronto, I immediately knew I wanted to find a way to incorporate what I had learned in my undergraduate education into this research paper. Feminist and Queer theories helped me understand how women's identities are being manipulated through the culture in Western society, but also how men's identities are being manipulated as well. Feminism is not about women tearing men down, but freeing both sexes from the constraints of gender expectations, and recognizing how harmful these expectations can be to both sexes. I also learned how these ideas of what is masculine and what is feminine gave way to the ideals surrounding methods of oppression like homophobia. This understanding changed my perspective on these oppressive issues, and I was better equipped to understand why people behaved in such ways.
As I was narrowing down the idea for this research project, I was initially focused more on the experience of boys. As I delved further into my research and interviewed my participants, I realized that LGBTQ youth still experience crippling obstacles while trying to navigate the education system. Given the potential for homophobic violence by male youth, it was impossible to ignore the gap in anti-homophobic education facing male students. In an effort to foster safer school environments, it seemed crucial to further understand the experience of these students so that we, as educators, can create an environment where individuals are not taunted for not expressing their gender in ‘appropriate’ ways.

Additionally, in recent years I discovered a passion for LGBTQ rights. I was fortunately able to spend time at the Alliance program with John and his students for my final practicum block. This experience shaped my perspective as an educator and allowed me to further understand the supports that LGBTQ students need to be successful. Homophobia is so closely tied to sexism that I cannot examine one without the other. Educating boys about healthy ways of expressing masculinity will lead to men who do not view others (both men and women) as being lesser. This has the potential to create a generation of men who are not threatened by those who express masculinity differently than the norm. By focusing my research only on LGBTQ youth, I lose the opportunity to also help the non-LGBTQ students who also do not feel safe at school.

**Limitations of Research**

As with any research study, limitations should be noted. In my research, I only examined a specific area of the homophobia that both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students experience. My study did not look at how race and socio-economic status also contribute
to the pressure felt by adolescents to measure up to societal and family expectations. Furthermore, the LGBTQ experience differs throughout the stages of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and this study only examined LGBTQ students in their adolescence. The specific nature of my research means that it is not generalizable to a) the experience of LGBTQ students (and other victimized students) outside of schools in the Greater Toronto Area, and b) the policies and attitudes surrounding homophobia and gender-based violence outside of the Greater Toronto Area. Given these restrictions, I speak only to the policies of the Ontario Ministry of Education and to the experiences of the teachers I interviewed.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

In Chapter One, I discussed the strict gender norms that regulate members of Western society. Those who step outside of the norms are often treated with extreme violence. While this includes all people who do not conform in some way, the most common recipients of this violence are people who identify as LGBTQ. The statistics around the violence and discrimination that LGBTQ adolescents experience are staggering: For example, lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are twice as likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Russell & Joyner, 2001).

The Egale study, Every Class in Every School, examines the presence of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools. Conducted between December 2007 and June 2009, online questionnaires were distributed to students across Canada, asking them to answer questions about their demographic (e.g. age, gender, sex, sexual orientation), as well as their school experiences and the policies their schools have in place to prevent and/or stop bullying. The results were disheartening: 70% of LGBTQ students reported hearing homophobic slurs such as “gay,” “faggot,” “lezbo,” and “dyke” daily, with “that’s so gay” being the most common phrase heard (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Additionally, approximately half of all LGBTQ students reported being verbally harassed based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender expression, and 21% reported being physically harassed and/or assaulted for the same reasons.

The survey also measured the responses of non-LGBTQ students; these answers being the most relevant to this study. Almost the same percentages of non-LGBTQ students reported having the same homophobic experiences. 70% of non-LGBTQ
students heard “that’s so gay” on a daily basis, and astonishingly, 26% admitted that they had been verbally harassed because of their perceived gender (and 10% physically harassed for the same reason) (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Additionally, 30% of non-LGBTQ youth felt unsafe in school change rooms, and nearly the same percentage (28%) felt the same in school washrooms. This did not differ much from the experiences of LGBTQ youth, almost half of who reported feeling the same way (Taylor & Peter, 2011).

To compare, the American results are not much different. The National Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) discovered that 84.9% of students reported hearing the derogatory use of the word “gay” at school (the survey also revealed that nearly all of the students felt distressed by that use of language). Similarly, 71.3% indicated that they also heard the terms “dyke” and “faggot” on a regular basis, and 63.9% of students felt unsafe because of their gender expression (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Most significantly, the GLSEN report included some information that is missing from the Egale report: Only 38% of GLSEN participants reported being harassed based on how they were expressing their femininity, while a much larger 55.7% experienced violence because of their chosen expressions of masculinity (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Homophobic hate crimes are some of the most violent crimes committed, especially against gay men. The infamous case of Matthew Shepard was so violent that it became one of the most notorious anti-gay crimes in the history of the United States (Matthew Shepard Foundation, 2015). On October 7, 1998, two men abducted twenty-two-year-old Matthew and drove him to a remote area outside Laramie, Wyoming. Matthew was left beaten and tied to a fence for 18 hours before a passing cyclist found
him. Matthew passed away five days later on October 12, 1998. The nature of this crime speaks to the extreme violence that stems from homophobic hate and fear, a hate and fear that still continues.

Suicide is another way that homophobic violence is often manifested. LGBTQ youth who commit suicide are driven to do so by years of bullying at the hands of classmates, members of the community, and even members of their own families. In 2011, 15-year-old Jamie Hubley killed himself after years of battling depression and experiencing relentless bullying for being the only openly gay student in his Ottawa high school (CBC News Ottawa, 2011). This past December (2014), Leelah Alcorn, a trans girl from Ohio, committed suicide because her parents refused to accept her identity as a transgender youth (Matthew Shepard Foundation, 2015). Matthew, Jamie, and Leelah did not fit the heteronormative mold of gender expression or sexual orientation, and their lives ended in extreme violence as a result. These patterns will only continue unless a change happens in the dialogue around mainstream ideas of gender roles and expectations.

Examining Gender Identity

Gender roles are enforced from a young age, for both boys and girls. Adolescence is an especially critical period of development where youth find role models in both peers and the media, and develop their own identities. Bickford’s research illustrated that these themes appear as early as seventh grade (2009). He witnessed boys attempting to reinforce their masculinity through activities and interests that excluded the girls such as farting, vomiting, and other “bodily expressions” that the girls often found repulsive (Bickford, 2009, p. 169). As boys grow into adulthood, they continue to
use their masculinity for the purpose of social positioning. It is at this stage that we see often see a “crisis of masculinity” occur as various forms of masculinity compete for societal dominance, and the groups that do not achieve this dominance (usually working class men, men of colour, gay men, etc.), face oppression at the hands of the ruling group (Weaver-Hightower, 2003, p. 480).

Men often demonstrate masculinity through expressions of power, separating themselves from the ‘others’ who are perceived as not being masculine, namely women or homosexual males (Bickford, 2009, p. 186). Unfortunately, given the pressure for young boys and men to fit into their predetermined and traditional masculine roles, some men turn to violence as their way to express their dominance over the ‘other.’ This part of the masculine identity becomes even more alarming when it works its way into schools.

Growing Up “Male”

From a young age, misogyny and homophobia are rampant in the lives of boys, used as a means of policing masculinity and male gender. Sandy White Watson (2007) relays her personal observations with this method of policing the male gender that her son experienced during a karate lesson:

As the class began, I was shocked to see that the two male instructors regularly and publicly shamed the boy students anytime they seemed to display anything less than what they (the instructors) thought was ‘masculine behaviour’. They did not hesitate to isolate and ridicule any whom they saw as not performing up to their ‘masculine’ standards. Taunts included ‘You kick like a girl!’ ‘Sissy!’ ‘Are you going to let a girl beat you?’ … Not only did these taunts serve to humiliate and embarrass the boys they were directed against, but they also served to demean the girl students. (p. 733).
Many parents and teachers still encourage girls to be passive and ‘ladylike’ while boys are encouraged to be aggressive and competitive. Boys are more likely than girls to get into physical fights because they have been conditioned to see violence as normal (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1450). Part of this conditioning revolves around the physical changes that boys experience during puberty. The voice change and rapid growth allows them to take on a façade of “false bravado, of foolish risk-taking, and gratuitous violence—what some have called ‘boy code’...The once-warm, empathetic, communicative boy becomes, very early, a stoic, uncommunicative, armor-plated man” (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1450). This “boy code” is present in schools, communities, and the media across North America (Watson, 2007, p. 732).

The media contributes to the dichotomy of male-female relations, pushing girls towards interests such as fashion, appearances, and relationships, while boys are encouraged to pursue avenues such as sports and adventures. They are taught to believe that men must be strong and in control (Sanford & Blair, 1999, p. 104). In an effort to maintain these binaries, men find the need to constantly prove their masculinity by denouncing anything that is remotely feminine. Men create fences around their gender to ensure that nothing ‘deviant’ slips through, and this heteronormative attitude is one that dominates in most school systems (Kehler, 2010, p. 354).

**Everyday Occurrences of Homophobia**

Being called “gay” or a “fag” is widely considered among male culture to be the worst type of insult, and there is a fear, especially among teenage boys, of being identified as “fags” within the peer culture. Masculinity has been defined, in part, by its separation from women, by the “repudiation of femininity” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 126), and
being labeled a “fag” actually has very little to do with sexual orientation but with the “failing at masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength” (Pascoe, 2005, p. 330). When boys feel that their masculinity is being threatened and they are faced with being labeled as a “fag”, violence is considered to be an appropriate response. Masculinity is not a performance meant for women; it is a performance for other men—one’s manhood is demonstrated for the approval of other men (Kimmel, 1994, p. 133). Violence is viewed as the “single most evident marker of manhood” (Kimmel, 1994 p. 131); it is the easiest way to demonstrate fitting into the masculine gender lines of power and control.

In 1999, Wayne Martino conducted a study of the dynamics of masculinities amongst adolescent males at a co-ed high school in Australia where he had been teaching for several years. Martino’s (1999) research highlights the difficulties that young men and boys feel to fit into a certain mold of masculinity, but also provides incredible insight into the minds of young men. Eric, a seventeen-year-old student in Year 12 of his studies provided perhaps the most insightful answer:

There seems to be a real thing about homophobia around males...the only explanation I could come up with is that they are insecure about their own feelings so that’s why they’re afraid of other people...who are different to themselves (Martino, 1999, p. 258).

Eric seemed to have valuable insight into the thoughts of his fellow students and their answers to reflect his observations. Take, for instance, Jason’s response when asked about the ease in which boys can express their feelings in their social circles:

It’s a hell of a lot easier for girls to do it...It comes backs to masculinity and stuff like that...you can’t really talk about your innermost feelings like it you’re quieter or not as rough...people might call them ‘wussies’ (Martino, 1999, p. 244).
These interviews also confirmed that boys who did not fit into the traditional roles of “masculinity” were seen to behave “like girls” (Martino, 1999, p. 247). The “cool” boys made these boys feel like outcasts by further diminishing their masculinity and by making derogatory and homophobic remarks like, “Oh I hate him, he’s really gay” (Martino, 1999, p. 256). Another student, Nathan, commented that: “guys are supposed to be big, strong; girls are supposed to be really smart, weak” (Martino, 1999, p. 250). These responses demonstrate exactly how the systems of gender policing present themselves in a high school setting, and highlight the need for boys to be educated about homophobia and gender expression. Martino asked Eric if he thought the social dynamics for boys could ever change:

> It would have to begin with schools, your parents, society, TV, newspapers...everything is seen as the one type of male stereotype, but it's a particular version of masculinity...it is always fed to you from day one...and you’re never actually seen the other version of masculinity (Martino, 1999, p. 258).

Eric's insight is astonishing given his young age, and also provides hope with regards to other young men and their views on masculinity.

Shaun also responded in kind, stating that what is being taught in schools is not enough to change the status quo: “There has been stuff about don’t fall into peer pressure and stuff like that but that's nothing as deep as going into stuff about how you feel about masculine or what is masculinity” (Martino, 1999, p. 258). These perceptions of masculinity and education collaborate with what Kimmel and Mahler (2003) discovered in their study of homophobia and violence: Most of the boys who were at the receiving end of homophobic bullying were not gay (or at least not openly gay), but they were different in some way. These boys were: “shy, bookish, honor students, artistic,
musical, theatrical, nonathletic, ‘geekish,’ or weird” (p. 1445). These boys had been bullied, beaten, and humiliated because they did not fit the appropriate gender mold.

A lack of appropriate male role models for these students is often cited as being a contributor to these issues surrounding the portrayals of masculinities in adolescent boys (Martino, 2009, p. 268). Martino insists that this mindset only aggravates the problem because it ignores the “limits imposed by systems of hierarchical masculinity” (Martino, 2009, p. 268). Simply acknowledging that a concern may exist (i.e. a lack of male role models contributing to unhealthy expressions of masculinity), does not alter the larger systemic concerns around gender policing that male adolescents experience within high schools and the effects this policing has on all students.

There has been a steady rise in youth violence since the mid-1990s, with the majority of these violent acts being perpetrated by males (Stoltz, 2005, p. 52). Stoltz (2005) postulates that the increasingly “rigid and stereotypical male gender role socialization process is linked to psychological problems for males” has influenced these trends in youth violence (p. 57). Though school violence prevention programs are also on the rise, boys are still less responsive than girls to anti-violence messages. Stoltz (2005) theorizes that traits like dominance and power are so intertwined with masculinity (and violence) that boys perceive anti-violence programs to be asking them to give up pieces of their masculinity (p. 58). Boys need to be taught (and shown) that deviating from the socially acceptable norm is not only possible, but that it can also be ‘normal.’ By educating male youth on the ways “societal expectations of masculinity confine and oppress them…we may be able to curb not only the problems of violence in schools, but in our communities…as well” (Stoltz, 2005, p. 61). This is where teachers
have the opportunity to impact change on their students’ lives. When it comes to building positive relationships and encouraging safe schools, “teachers have a greater chance of connecting to students than most other adults in the school...[these] relationships that exist between teacher and students shape the school climate in a number of ways” (Daniels & Bradley, 2011, p. 83). Teachers and administrators need to work together within the school environment to define and enforce “acceptable and unacceptable behaviour” (Daniels & Bradley, 2011, p. 92), and students “need to know that disrespect of any kind will not be tolerated” (Daniels & Bradley, 2011, p. 92).

**Ministry of Education Policies**

The Ontario Ministry of Education currently has a number of policies in place regarding the safety and inclusion of all students. The most noteworthy of these policies are the *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) and *Bill 13: The Safe and Accepting Schools Act* (2012). Both were passed through legislation by the former Minister of Education, Kathleen Wynne. In *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, the Ministry defines “Inclusive Education” as:

> Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4).

The strategy continues with a “Call for Action” against homophobia and gender-based violence (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 7).

Two particular areas of this new strategy should be highlighted: The first is the initiative to redesign the curriculum documents to ensure that a section on “antidiscrimination education” exists, a revision that “encourages teachers to recognize
the diversity of students’ backgrounds, interests, and experiences, and to incorporate a variety of viewpoints and perspectives in learning activities” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 25). The second initiative is the “Safe Schools Strategy,” a strategy specifically designed to move towards the elimination of gender-based violence, homophobia, and sexual harassment from schools through a redesign of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 26). This initiative is more widely known in the education circles as Bill 13: The Safe and Accepting Schools Act, which directly amends the Education Act to promote diversity and equity within schools.

The Safe and Accepting Schools Act echoes the sentiments of the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy by emphasizing the connections between a safe school environment and student success: “The people of the Ontario and the Legislative Assembly...Understand that students cannot be expected to reach their full potential in an environment where they feel insecure or intimidated” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 1). The Safe and Accepting Schools Act highlights this in specific relation to the discrimination faced by LGBTQ students and dictates that:

   Everyone—government, educators, school staff, parents, students and the wider community—has a role to play in creating a positive school climate and preventing... bullying, sexual assault, gender-based violence and incidents based on homophobia, transphobia, or biphobia (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 1).

Despite these positive changes in policy, these directives have not yet been fully adopted within all schools. For instance, I have witnessed school staff members actively avoid participating in the school-wide Day of Pink campaign (a day dedicated to raising awareness about homophobic discrimination). This refusal to participate is problematic because these teachers are negatively impacting the spirit of a safe and positive school.
Additionally, section 7.1 of *The Safe and Accepting Schools Act* indicates there must be “annual professional development programs to educate teachers and other staff of the board about bullying prevention and strategies for promoting positive school climates” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 4). While I have been exposed to anti-bullying workshops and professional development sessions, I have yet to witness mandatory professional development sessions related directly to LGBTQ students and anti-homophobic practices. Similarly, section 303.1 of *The Safe and Accepting Schools Act* now states that students must be allowed to start a Gay-Straight Alliance or similar gender equity club, and that the school board or the principal cannot “refuse to allow a pupil to use the name gay-straight alliance” for such an organization (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 9). While the presence of a GSA within secondary schools is fairly common (at least within the Greater Toronto Area), given the issues that have been previously raised regarding the policing gender expression for both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students, I do not think that the simple existence of a GSA, or some form of social justice club, is enough to truly make a change in the school environment.

*Changes to the Ontario Secondary School Curriculum*

In 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced a new series of social science courses into the high school curriculum, under the umbrella of “Equity Studies.” The purpose of these courses is to examine “various aspects of diversity, including those related to gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, and ability” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 57). These elective courses range from a University/College level Grade Eleven Gender Studies course, to a Grade Twelve Equity and Social Justice class, and include two Workplace level courses on Social Justice. While
an admirable step in the right direction, the introduction of these courses raises several questions: Is it actually being offered in schools for students to take as an elective? Who is teaching it, and how is it being taught? The course itself appears to address gender issues regarding both men and women (its description includes: “analyze images of female and male bodies and representations of beauty and fashion in media and popular culture, and describe their impact” [Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 63]), but would this course attract both male and female students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students? The curriculum documents lack specific mention of dealing with homophobia and its links to violence, which I consider to be a huge hole in the content of the course. Ideally discussions around gender, sexual orientation, and the LGBTQ community should be incorporated into multiple courses so that the wider student population can be reached.

**Gender and the Educational System**

The Toronto District School Board has a history of attempting to incorporate feminist policy into its curriculum. Beginning in 1970, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada identified that “sex-role stereotyping, the lack of strong female role models for girls, and inadequate career counseling were key factors contributing to women’s inequality in Canada” (Coulter, 1996, p. 434). The Toronto Board of Education spent time in the early 1990s organizing retreats for both male and female students in an attempt to educate them about sexism. The purpose of these retreats was to inform students about the ways that patriarchal, male-dominated culture is harmful to both males and females (Coulter, 1996). While admirable, particularly at the time, how much of the teachings still remain in today's school culture? There are still rampant examples of homophobic behaviour in schools, and as previously noted,
misconceptions of male and female gender expression are still on the rise. The transcripts from the Global News interview regarding six-year-old transgender student Coy Mathis (Mathis, a trans girl from Colorado, was banned from using the girl's washroom at school) certainly indicate that the education system is still lacking in its preparedness for dealing with students who are of a gender minority (Friesen, 2013). In the United States, the national statistics indicate “three quarters of self-identified sexual minority teens as well as three quarters of all females experience sexual intimidation during their adolescent years in school” (Heffernan, 2010, p. 10). Fortunately, school boards in the Greater Toronto Area are making more positive progress in this area. For instance, the Toronto District School Board has specific policies laid out regarding the accommodations for transgender students, which includes allowing students the right to be addressed by their preferred pronouns, to change their official school record to reflect their current choice of name or gender, and the right to use the washroom corresponding to their preferred gender (Toronto District School Board, 2011, p. 2). This same policy also declares that all “transgender or gender non-conforming have the right to be who they are openly. This includes expressing gender identity without fear of unwanted consequences” (Toronto District School Board, 2011, p. 1). Despite this, is the policy really enough? Bickford (2009) urges teachers to step in to interrupt and address sexism and homophobic behaviours in the classroom (p. 176). Teachers need to enforce and encourage these inclusive policies and act as positive role models for their students.
Queer Theory as a Theoretical Framework

I have chosen queer theory as the framework for my research because its analysis of the fluidity of gender, as well as its examination of heterosexual hegemony, fit very closely with the analysis of gender and LGBTQ policy in my research.

What is Queer Theory?

The word queer has a bit of a tumultuous history within the world of feminist theory and LGBT advocacy. It is a word reclaimed by the LGBTQ community, and was once considered to be a very hateful and abusive word, often directed at members of the gay and lesbian community. It is now widely used as a term of self-identification for those who do not feel as though they fit within the heteronormative expectations of our society (Halperin, 2003, p. 339).

The theory itself is an extension of Feminist Theory: Feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis believed that the study of feminism and feminist theory was evolving, and that there was a shift in thinking from the notion of “woman” being a physical being (sexually different from a man), to a more global understanding that to be “woman” is a complex understanding of identity, and that this identity is made up of many competing factors (i.e. sexual, racial, cultural, etc.) (de Lauretis, 1986, p. 14). In a 1990 conference at the University of California, de Lauretis created the term “queer theory,” much to the offense of the crowd in attendance. de Lauretis purposely chose to use this controversial word to “challenge...[the] homogenizing discourse of (homo)sexual difference, and to offer a possible escape from the hegemony of white, male, middle-class models of analysis” (Halperin, 2003, p. 340). Her attempt at challenging these norms has been successful, as queer theory has since re-shaped the analysis of gay, lesbian, and feminist studies:
Queer theory has effectively re-opened the question of the relations between sexuality and gender, both as analytic categories and as lived experiences...it has pursued the task...of detaching the critique of gender and sexuality from narrowly conceived notions of lesbian and gay identity; [and] it has supported non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality (Halperin, 2003, p. 341).

Judith Butler is another highly regarded theorist who has explored gender through the lens of feminist and queer theory. Her 2002 book, *Gender Trouble*, examines this very idea of non-normative or non-traditional expressions of gender:

> If it is possible to speak of a “man” with a masculine attribute to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a “man” with a feminine attribute, whatever that is, but still to maintain the integrity of the man (Butler, 2002, p. 32).

The gender fluidity that Butler speaks of is in direct violation of the assumptions of gender created by a heterosexual hegemony. Men, especially gay men, have historically been labeled as abnormal, mentally ill, or deviant. They are dominated by “social discourses and practices that declare [them] not to be ‘real’ men” (Kinsman, 1993, p. 4).

The language of gender fluidity that queer theory provides is appropriate for my research, since it is concerned with the empowerment of LGBTQ youths in their school environments. Sheila Radford-Hill (1986) provides a definition of empowerment within the feminist/queer theory movement:

> Empowerment occurs when individuals recognizing their common oppression mobilize against the exploitation, victimization, marginality, expendability, powerlessness, suppressed rage and degradation that characterize both the reality of oppression and the experience of being oppressed (p.159)

Heteronormative hegemony is rarely questioned because “the emergence of heterosexuality has not been seen as worth exploring in many disciplines since it

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3 “Heterosexual hegemony” names the social experience in which heterosexuality is labeled as normal and the experiences of gay/lesbian people as “abnormal”. Gary Kinsman (1993) reminds us that this hegemony is “continually...accomplished in various practices including...criminal law, social and family policies, definition of the ‘proper’ family, [etc.]” (pg. 5).
continues to be assumed to be ‘natural’” (Kinsman, 1993, p. 6). Translating queer theory to the lens of critical pedagogy and education provides both the freedom and the language to question the current classroom practices regarding LGBTQ students, gender expression and sexual orientation. The teachers I have interviewed, in their own ways, try to empower their students to fight back against their feelings of oppression or powerlessness by creating safe spaces for LGBTQ youth in their schools. All four participants welcome differing sexual orientations and gender expressions in their classrooms and (sometimes unknowingly) embrace the cornerstones of queer theory in their practices.

**Overview**

As indicated by the literature, the prevalence of homophobic language, violence, and hate crimes towards LGBTQ youth is staggering. The presence of these discriminatory practices creates a detrimental environment for today’s youth, causing increased mental health issues and incidents of bullying and self-harm. Daniels and Bradley (2011) emphasize that the key to preventing “school violence is about having the knowledge and skills to avoid problems before they blow up” (p. 91). The recent changes to the Ontario Education Act (*Bill 13*) and the emergence of anti-homophobia policies across Greater Toronto Area schools indicate that the knowledge is there, but the skills, the action, and the practice still need considerable attention.

With consideration of the literature concerning LGBTQ youth, and the continuing need for anti-homophobia education, the next chapter explores and outlines the methodology used to approach and address my research questions.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Procedure

This research study focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the efforts made by teachers to create positive and inclusive environments for LGBTQ students, as well as the efforts made to promote anti-homophobia education throughout the entirety of their schools. This included examining the prevalence of homophobic bullying and other gender violence issues in Ontario high schools. My research consisted primarily of reviewing relevant literature on the subject of gender violence and bullying, as well as conducting a series of qualitative interviews with four high school teachers who were considered qualified participants. The results of these interviews were used to determine what practices were actually occurring within schools. My goal was to highlight the best practices of these educators, and to examine any gaps that may exist in the school policies regarding gender, sexuality, and bullying.

Data Collection

My primary method of data collection was a series of qualitative interviews. Each interview was approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length, and was conducted at a time and place convenient for my participants (this ranged from their place of work to outside in the community). The interviews were taped to ensure accuracy in the transcriptions, and my transcripts were then examined for recurring themes and experiences. In an effort to be transparent with my participants, I emailed a redacted copy of the transcript to my participants within a week following their interview. This allowed them to review
the interview and make any clarifications if necessary. This also provided me with the opportunity to follow up with my participants regarding any outstanding questions on my part.

My interviews consisted of approximately 20 to 30 questions, ranging from semi-structured to open-ended, which allowed my participants to provide relevant details throughout the duration of the interview. My questions spanned a variety of topics to obtain well-rounded answers and to ensure that the information gathered would be relevant to my research question(s). Between my second and third interviews, I revised my questions to be more effective and concise, as I realized they were repetitive. By rephrasing certain questions, I found that I could elicit more precise responses from my participants. I used these revised questions for my fourth and final interview.

A second set of interview questions was used for the third interview, which was conducted at a program created specifically for LGBTQ students who could not continue in a mainstream high school. This second set of interview questions contained questions that revolved around the same topics, but were geared specifically towards the context of the participant. My revised interview questions can be found in the appendix, as well as the questions for my specialized interview with the teacher from the LGBTQ program.

The creation of my questions were based on four initial categories: Gender/Sexuality, Bullying & Inclusivity, Gay-Straight Alliances, and Individual Practices. I based my questions on these categories because I anticipated that the answers from my participants would revolve around these topics in some way.

Gender/Sexuality is a broad category, and refers to anything that relates to issues around sexual orientation, gender identity, misconceptions, stereotypes, and so forth.
Bullying & Inclusivity encompasses incidents of bullying within the school, policies regarding bullying, and the inclusivity of the school culture. The Gay-Straight Alliance theme includes both the teacher’s involvement in the GSA, and the students’ involvement in the GSA, as well as projects that the GSA has been involved in within the school. Finally, Individual Practices brings together the answers that relate to the teacher’s individual practices, within the GSA or the classroom, and the choices that these educators make to create an inclusive, safe, and welcoming school environment. These topics were further narrowed down during my analysis to more accurately interpret my findings.

**Participants**

My participants were chosen based on the following characteristics: a background as an educator or classroom teacher, and experience working in the field of anti-homophobia education (specifically facilitating a GSA within a secondary school). Additionally, my participants were chosen based on a willingness to participate, as they were recruited on a voluntary basis, and had to be willing to share their best practices regarding anti-homophobia education.

The requirement for teachers who specifically work with the LGBTQ students in their schools allowed for unique and knowledgeable perspectives in my research; perspectives that have encountered forms of gender violence and bullying towards LGBTQ students. I recruited my participants through professional connections and through researching LGBTQ programs in the Greater Toronto Area, which ensured my participants would meet my requirements.
There were some risks involved in participating in my research, as the topic is quite sensitive in nature, and revolved around incidences of school violence, gender violence, bullying, and offensive language. These topics could not only be triggers for my participants, but they are also slightly controversial, and there was concern that my participants could be speaking out against their administration. However, there were two primary benefits for the participants in my study: My participants were able to learn about what other educators are doing in other school boards, as well as share their own best practices. My participants were able to share their beliefs on what further work needs to be done to create truly safe school environments. Additionally, their participation benefited me directly because it allowed me to complete my research, thus providing me the opportunity to fulfill the degree requirements for the Master of Teaching program.

**Participant Information**

The following teachers voluntarily participated in my research. All individuals have been given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

*Lyndsey*

Lyndsey is a female History/English secondary school teacher in a public school board in the Greater Toronto Area. She has been teaching for seven years, six at her current school, and is currently teaching in the Student Success Department. She has been facilitating the GSA at her school for the last four years.
Mick

Mick is a male secondary school teacher currently working as a long-term occasional teacher in a Greater Toronto Area public school board. He has been teaching for the last three years, primarily as a French teacher but has taught a variety of other subjects as well. He has been involved with the GSA at every school he has taught at over his career.

John

John is a gay male teacher who has been working at an alternative secondary school in the Greater Toronto Area during his twelve years as a teacher. He has been consistently working in the LGBTQ program (the Alliance program) at the school for his entire career, with English as his main subject area.

Christine

Christine is a female secondary school teacher in a Greater Toronto Area Catholic school board. She has been teaching for thirteen years, spanning multiple schools, but she has spent the last eight years teaching English at her current school. She was involved in the implementation of the GSA at her current school last year and is currently facilitating the club.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure that my research moved forward with ethical practice, my research participants were presented with a letter of consent to ensure that they fully understood my expectations of them as participants. My participants had the ability to withdraw at any time during the process, even after their initial consent. Additionally, the identities of my participants, as well as the identities of their schools, have been kept completely anonymous during the research process, as well as the writing of my final project, and
will continue to remain anonymous during any subsequent publications or presentations of my research. Only my research supervisor and myself know the names of my participants, a fact that was made clear to my participants prior to their involvement. It is also necessary under the umbrella of ethical considerations to note that based on my recruitment plan, I have prior professional relationships with some of my participants, which may have impacted the nature of their involvement in my study, either in their willingness to participate or in answers they provided during the interview process.

**Limitations**

As noted previously, there were several limitations to my research. The small number of participants meant that my research, as a case study, examined only specific schools and specific circumstances, and therefore cannot be generalizable to a wider population.

There were also geographical and logistical limitations to consider: All of my participants work in the Greater Toronto Area of Southwestern Ontario, meaning that their experiences are not only specific to this location, but also to the Ontario curriculum and the policies put forth by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Logistically, the length of the Master of Teaching program (two years) was a time constraint on the duration of my research, and the requirements of the ethics board meant that I was cleared to recruit adult participants, but without further clearance was unable to interview students. This meant that I was relying on the knowledge of teachers who, for the most part, were only able to perceive the experiences of their students. While I believe that these passionate teachers were acutely aware of their students’ experiences, it provided a perspective that was different than one I would have received talking to students.
Data Analysis

After transcribing each interview, I printed hard copies of the transcriptions. I went through each interview individually, and highlighted different themes as they appeared in the transcript—each theme with a different colour. I used the same colour scheme for each interview to maintain consistency in my analysis. My six themes after this initial round of analysis were Gender/Sexuality, Bullying/Inclusivity, Involvement with the GSA, Male Students, School Policies, and Incorporating Practices. Since the themes were reflective of my interview questions, they were predetermined to a certain extent. Based on my questions, I anticipated answers within these parameters; however, I remained flexible and reflective throughout the process in order to recognize if a particular theme was no longer relevant, or if my findings indicated the necessity for a new/different theme.

Following this first round of analysis, I gathered six poster boards and designated each theme to its own board. Everything I had found under each theme was placed on the corresponding board to further analyze the themes for topics and consistency across all four interviews. I was then able to organize my data into three main themes, with corresponding subthemes. The last step of my analysis was to go through each theme and identify the links between my data and the relevant research in my literature review. By analyzing and making connections between all four interviews and my literature review I was able to triangulate my findings (through data, analysis, and my literature review) to ensure reliability and validity in my research and further narrow down the themes of my findings. The full analysis of my data, themes, and findings can be found in Chapter Four.
Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of my research and analyze the ways in which these four teachers have been motivated by their work with high school GSAs, and how this work influences their practices in the classroom. Lyndsey and Mick both focused heavily on their work with the GSA at their perspectives. They emphasized campaigns and school-wide initiatives. John and Christine spoke excessively about incorporating conversations around gender and LGBTQ issues into their classrooms and about the gaps in educating the wider population about said issues.

Despite the recent addition of 2012’s Safe Schools Act by the Ontario Ministry of Education, in the initial stages of my research, I was skeptical about the measures being taken to educate students about issues relating to sexuality and gender expressions. This opinion was only fueled by the research I read for my literature review: somewhere, there appeared to be a disconnect between policy and practice and I wished to examine what teachers committed to the education of LGBTQ issues and the safety of LGBTQ students were doing in their classrooms to foster a supportive and inclusive\(^4\) environment.

Through the process of analyzing the data collection, I grouped my findings into three broad themes: Creating Safer Schools, Teacher Practices, and Bridging Policy and Practice. These three themes come together to answer my research question: In what ways does working with a Gay-Straight Alliance inform the practices of four Ontario Secondary School teachers regarding anti-homophobia education?

\(^4\) For my purposes the term “inclusive” or “inclusivity” is used to mean an environment where students feel safe, welcome, and included.
Theme One: Creating Safer Schools

For the particular circumstances of my research I am focusing on the parts of the school culture that foster a sense of inclusivity for LGBTQ students, many of which varied from school to school, but were mentioned by all four participants during their interviews. I use the term “culture” to refer the facets of a school such as the teachers, administration, student body, parent community, and the surrounding neighbourhood that contribute to the formation of the school identity and attitudes.

One facet of school culture that both Mick and Christine talked about as having an influence on the attitudes of the student body is the focus of the school (Is it more academic in nature, or is the school centered around a specific focus such as athletics or the performing arts?). Both teachers work at schools that offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program. According to Mick, the academically focused students drawn to the IB curriculum tend to create different sorts of cliques and expectations than students in schools offering the traditional Ontario provincial curriculum. He notes that: “these kids are generally very academically focused, very extra-curricular focused...they’re not someone who will go out of their way to bully or attack others.” Christine echoed this sentiment, observing that she does not see a lot of fighting in the halls of her school: “We’re also in a community where people really value education; it’s an IB world school, which means we’re getting a certain type of students more than another...So that really lends to, I think, a more all-embracing kind of community.”

While it is impossible to generalize schools simply by their focus, Mick compared his experience at his current IB World School with his experience at a more traditional
high school that had a heavy focus on sports and athletics. He observed that if a school is “much more sports oriented, where the culture is supposedly macho, there is more of a misogynistic undertone to that school in general, and...the door is open then to stereotypes and guys to do this, girls do that.” Mick’s observations raise an interesting argument that is reminiscent of the previously mentioned code of masculinity: These stereotypes of actions that are appropriately ‘male’ and ‘female’ are directly linked to homophobic stereotypes. For example, many of the insults directed towards gay men involve feminizing them in some way. These insults are often directed towards straight men as well, as a way to, as Kehler (2010) phrases it, punish and insult them for letting something “deviant” slip through boundaries of acceptable masculinity behaviour (p. 354). Mick is not the only participant who noted the presence of these gender binaries, and this topic will be further explored in the following subtheme.

The focus of the school is not the only aspect of school culture that contributes to its inclusivity. Lyndsey discussed two very different features of her school community that she believed contributed to a relatively welcoming environment for LGBTQ students. The first was that she thought most students had other things on their minds besides the personal identities of other students. The school Lyndsey works at is located in a low-income neighbourhood where many students struggle with their home lives and their academics. Lyndsey’s interpretation of the school environment was that: “a lot of our kids have their own crap going on...everybody’s kind of got their own drama.” The second thing she noted was the specific program for students with high special needs offered at her school. Lyndsey believes that this program creates a more open-minded student body. She stated that her students are “very, very aware of people being
different.” Lyndsey admitted being surprised by the culture of acceptance in the school when she first began teaching there: “I assumed because our school has a history of conflict between a lot of students...and that would include homophobic bullying...I know there have been incidents but not anywhere near the level I assumed there was.” While Lyndsey’s thoughts are positive to hear, given the data collected by Every Class and Every School (70% of Canadian secondary school students reported hearing offensive, homophobic language daily [Taylor & Peter, 2011]), it is unwise to assume based on the day-to-day observations of a teacher that all students feel safe within the school.

John reiterated this during his interview when he shared his stories of the harassment he experienced as a gay high school student. At the Alliance program, he works daily with students who are “unsuccessful in mainstream schools because of the harassment and bullying...[they’re] not getting the support they need.” John remarked that the stories he hears from his students are the same stories he has from his own time spent in high school. Despite the policy put forth from the Ministry regarding safe schools and anti-discrimination, John noted that students are still coming to Alliance “younger and younger.” The Alliance program provides a safe place for LGBTQ students to earn their high school credits and, as John notes: “this is the first year [they’ve] had students come to [them] right from grade eight.”

The fact that this program is continuing to grow, despite the three-year-old policies, indicates that there are still serious concerns that need to be addressed. Both Lyndsey and John described serious incidents of violence their students have experienced, both of who happen to identify as trans individuals. Lyndsey spoke about a student who was attacked by members of the community and student population on his
way home from school, and John spoke of a student who had enrolled in the program after being raped in a washroom at a previous school (an incident that went unreported for many reasons). John expressed that these safety concerns are regularly discussed among his students: “This week when we were having conversations with our students around accessing washrooms...they were saying ‘I’m more afraid to use the public washroom, than I think heterosexual or cisgendered people are’...When you’re behind closed doors, you never know how someone’s going to react to you.”

In the Ministry of Education’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategies document, Kathleen Wynne pledged that the Safe Schools strategy will “ensure that issues such as gender-based violence, homophobia, sexual harassment, and inappropriate sexual behaviours” are addressed in schools (2009, pg. 15). Additionally, in 2011 the Toronto District School Board released Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students and Staff. This document emphasizes that: “all students have the right to safe restroom facilities and the right to use a washroom that best corresponds to the student’s gender identity” (2011, pg. 2). These policies are crucial to the success and safety of LGBTQ students in the classroom; however, given that 50% of LGBTQ students feel unsafe behind closed doors at school (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 8), and that John’s students have blatantly expressed feeling unsafe at school, it is apparent that the policies are lacking in practical application.

Safe Schools: Addressing Homophobic Language

Language is an incredibly powerful tool for both empowerment and discrimination. Some language is born from incredibly intense emotions; homophobic language, for example, is rooted in unbelievable violence and fear. Students commonly
use inappropriate language without fully understanding the detrimental effect it can have on all students. Both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students are offended by hurtful language and the stereotypes it encourages. All four participants spoke extensively about the importance and difficulties of addressing issues related to the language around gender expression and sexual orientation within their schools, and this subtheme examines those small moments of discrimination that often create hostile environments for students.

Christine spoke passionately about combating homophobic and violent language during her interview: “I think we’ve just become incredibly desensitized to the violence of that language and the implications of that language.” Lyndsey also echoed this sentiment in her interview: “I’ve had kids in this room [and] they’ll say ‘math is so gay’...and I’m like do you understand that that doesn’t even make sense...you realize that they genuinely don’t even understand how that’s a problem.” Mick reported that he also notices the common use of violent language. When I asked him specifically if he hears homophobic language in the hallways, he responded: “Yes, homo this and homo that. That girl is totally a lesbian because she’s looking at me weird.” While Mick shuts down the language when he hears it, he wonders how effective this method is in combating the language and making students understand the magnitude of their words: “[The students] nod their heads, go along with it, [and] walk away”. In his experience, Mick has not received information from administration about a specific anti-homophobia policy that should be referenced in situations like this. In Every Class and Every School, student responses indicated that schools without specific anti-homophobia policies were less effective in combating homophobic attitudes and language than schools with those
policies. Mick’s response about a lack of professional development and access to anti-homophobic policies is therefore very troubling.

Another concern that was prevalent in the interviews was that both students and teachers bring their own cultural and religious misconceptions about gender and sexuality into the classroom with them. Working in a Catholic school, Christine told me she noticed that many students carry around misconceptions about the church doctrine and, unfortunately, there are teachers who share these misconceptions. Christine reported that there have been “teachers on staff who have said things [concerning the topic of homosexuality] to students like ‘you know there’s conversion [therapy].’” Christine considers the bigger problem to be the teachers who refuse to address the homophobic language in the first place:

I think you have two teachers. You have teachers who are comfortable doing it [addressing homophobic language] and then you have the teachers who pretend like they don’t hear it...And this was something that came up in a meeting a couple weeks ago where I said I’d like to think that teachers are correcting this kind of language if they hear it, and all the students [said no].

These types of teachers are not limited to Catholic schools; Mick also described encountering some of these teachers during his time at various schools: “I wouldn’t say most teachers, but there’s a group of teachers who won’t [address the language].” This unwillingness to address language is incredibly problematic because, as John points out: “until we start doing the work in schools as educators to challenge stereotypes and beliefs and myths, and celebrate new images of LGBT...things aren’t going to change.”

I want to take this opportunity to return to the connection between sexism and homophobia. My participants discussed seeing a particular pattern of homophobic behaviours with male students. Christine, Mick, and Lyndsey all remarked that they hear
homophobic language coming mainly from male students, especially those on sports teams or in physical education classes. Lyndsey conceded that since her office is so close to the gymnasium, she hears this language “all the time.” She continued by saying: “It’s definitely a higher volume of males and I understand that historically the reasoning behind that is homophobia, you’re trying to feminize a player on another team, and you’re trying to be derogatory.” Christine was also very frank in her response to the same question regarding the perpetrators of this language: “[It’s] male students. Predominantly male students.” Mick was a little more hesitant when the topic came up, but in the end still admitted the same thing: “I would say it’s much more noticeable in males.”

Why might this be the case? Pascoe (2005) reminds us that calling another male a homophobic name is the easiest way to insult his masculinity, and it often has very little to do with that individual’s sexual orientation, and more to do with rampant stereotyping (p. 330). The prevalence of stereotypes in the male culture is not surprising as boys are taught from a young age that “to be a boy” means to be “aggressive and competitive” (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1450). These expectations are reinforced and become so naturalized that many males view them as the norm and grow uncomfortable when these norms are challenged. Moreover, they begin to recognize that the easiest and most harmful way to insult someone is by commenting on their inability to adhere to these norms.

However, the pressure of trying to live up to a standard of masculinity is not just something that heterosexual males encounter, but something adolescents who differ in their gender expression experience as well. When my conversation with John turned to
portrayals of masculinity, he mentioned what he has observed with his trans students: “They put on these hyper masculine poses sometimes and the attitudes, because they think that’s what it means to be a guy.”

Christine actively incorporates discussions of gender into her classroom and notes that the cultural demographics of the students in any given class determine the nature of conversation she is able to conduct with her students. She recognizes that she can physically see the students’ body language change when they become uncomfortable during these conversations: “Some [students] are going to be receptive...But you’ve got to watch body language because you get a lot of this [hunches down in her chair and looks at the floor], and that’s very loaded in itself.” This discomfort makes it difficult to reach out to and converse with students about these issues, but there is an interesting level of discomfort when it comes to the male student population. Mick has noticed this discomfort as well: “I often find the reason boys chuckle [when discussing the GSA] isn’t because they’re making fun of it but because the topic makes them nervous.” Men are taught to maintain rigid fences around their gender and are somehow perceived as “less than” if anything deemed ‘feminine’ slips through this fence (Kehler, 2010, p. 354).

Lyndsey expressed some interesting observations on this topic when our conversation turned to the comfort levels of gay male versus gay female students being “out” in school. While observing the students in her GSA, Lyndsey has noticed a big difference in the way that female students behave compared to the male students. When it comes to LGBTQ students openly dating at school, she noticed that the female students are more comfortable being openly “out”. When I pressed further and inquired about the dating habits of the boys, she replied: “We have a couple boys in our GSA right now and
both of them are openly gay, but they don’t date anybody. I’ve never seen them walking down the hall holding hands with anybody.” This observation brought out an interesting perspective on the different societal discriminations that lesbian females face versus gay males. Lyndsey noted that in society it seems to be more acceptable “to boys for a girl to be a lesbian than for a guy to be gay.” This could be a reflection on the sexualization of lesbian women in a society where gay men are harassed and victimized. This, combined with the stigma noticed by my participants that anyone within a GSA is gay themselves, might explain why these GSAs are lacking in male participants. Lyndsey commented: “It’s never been boys, I’ve only ever had two, maybe three boys on GSA.”

This is an observation echoed by Mick as well. He shared his experience of starting a GSA at a previous school where the students struggled to promote the club and to recruit male members. He recalled a story where one of his female students approached a male student in the hallway and asked him to join the GSA. The male student was interested until his friend came up to him and whispered “bro, you know that’s the gay club,” at which point both students walked away. This interaction demonstrates how scared boys are about being designated as anything less than masculine. Even the simple association with the GSA weakens their credibility as a male and lowers their status within the school.

**Safe Schools: The Role of Gay-Straight Alliances**

The role of the GSA in each participant’s school had very different capacities based on the commitment of the teachers involved and the attitudes of the administration. One that exceeded my expectations was the GSA at Christine’s school. This particular GSA is extremely active in its promotion and education of LGBTQ issues.
This is partly due to the willingness of the administration and the other teachers to educate themselves about the LGBTQ students, but it is also a testament to the passion and hard work of Christine and the other teacher facilitators. Christine shared a story about the success of a recent training day her GSA students ran for teachers during the last faith day (Professional Development Day):

Students led the discussion, they created questions and then it was a big discussion period in the afternoon...the dialogue was spectacular. And at the end a teacher had organized a little craft, and the teachers didn’t want to go to it. They wanted to stay and continue talking.

The willingness of these teachers to be educated by their own students allows for a very positive and empowering experience for both the teachers and the students, and it provides students with the opportunity to allow their voices to be heard.

Unfortunately, this level of administrative support is not present at every school. Mick described a situation with his GSA where the group was handed every social justice campaign by the administration because there were no other social justice clubs being run at the school. Instead of being able to focus solely on fostering a safe and supportive school environment, the GSA was viewed as an umbrella club for all social justice issues. Mick listed off the multiple campaigns his GSA students organized that year including Day of Pink, Violence Against Women, and the entire Black History Month campaign. When I asked why the GSA was responsible for these events, Mick responded by saying that they had been told by the administration to cover these events. The discrimination faced by LGBTQ students is such a relevant concern that the efforts of a GSA should be devoted to promoting anti-homophobia education. While other social justice campaigns are of equal importance, I question whether labeling the GSA as simply a general social
justice club is really beneficial to the well-being of the students. In this case, it appears that the GSA was viewed as only a diversity club, not as an organization devoted to promoting the equity, equality, and rights of marginalized students. The GSA at Mick’s school was hindered from focusing on LGBTQ advocacy because of the expectations of the administration. Mick reflected that while his administration has always been supportive of the GSA, “it’s taking a while for the administration to realize that we have to do something more universal and not just have a small pocket that represents this issue.” Compared to the results that Christine’s GSA was able to achieve in terms of educating the school population, Mick’s relationship with his administration demonstrates that the way the administration views the role of the GSA greatly impact the level of its achievements within the school.

However, not all GSAs need to take on an advocacy role to be effective. The GSA that Lyndsey facilitates is an example of a different role it can take: This GSA is less about advocating for LGBTQ issues, but instead, acts as a safe, social space for her students (“I think they feel more supported and more comfortable.”). She believes that this environment is what her students need the most so she is happy to provide that space for them. This is not to say that Lyndsey’s GSA is not active: the group runs the annual Day of Pink campaign, puts up posters advertising LGBTQ support groups, and encourages the use of rainbow “safe space” stickers on classroom doors.

All three of these GSAs are, in their own way, creating more inclusive environments within their schools whether it is through education, promoting diversity, or by creating safe spaces for students. Unfortunately, it is not all victories: both Mick and Christine talked about the setbacks their students have faced while trying to
promote the GSA. Most of the setbacks have occurred because of existing stereotypes and stigmas surrounding GSAs and LGBTQ students. The biggest misconception thwarting students from joining the GSA is the assumption that anyone who is a member of a GSA is gay. Mick noted that while his students worked hard to recruit new students to the club, no students came to the events they held or expressed interest in joining the club. In fact, by the end of the year, his students were so discouraged about this lack of progress that they wanted to change the name of the GSA. Mick commented on how disheartened he felt when the students approached him with this request: “[they came up to me and said] we don’t want to call ourselves the GSA anymore. We want to call ourselves the social justice club.” This kind of reality is discouraging, and it demonstrates the power of the stigma associated with being gay.

During the Faith Day workshop at Christine’s school, a teacher asked one of the students facilitating the workshop if “coming out had been a positive experience for them.” Christine said the girl responded by saying she had never come out to anybody because she did not identify as gay. The teacher was, rightfully so, very embarrassed. Christine reflected on this incident: “This is the misconception [that everyone in a GSA is gay] we deal with right? So because of that, I think that might limit participants.” These misconceptions and stereotypes are harmful for all students and they are very indicative of the gap between policy and practice in these schools. The policies may by in place, but they do not erase the harmful misconceptions of LGBTQ students and allies that members of the community carry with them. It is ultimately up to teachers to individually attempt to bridge this gap.
Theme Two: Teacher Practices

While analyzing and interpreting my data, and comparing the practices of the four participants, I discovered that there were common threads among the ways that my participants advocated for their LGBTQ students. I have divided these practices into two subthemes: School Awareness and Curriculum Infusion. When looking at the practices of these teachers, I took into consideration their awareness of language, classroom practices, and personal experiences or initiatives.

Lyndsey & Mick: Building School Awareness

I have defined “building school awareness” as practices that include organizing school events, educating students about offensive or inappropriate language, and promoting/creating safe spaces. Lyndsey and Mick both shared similar stories of the practices they brought into their classrooms, which focused on promoting the GSA through the facilitation of events, and making their stance as an ally known throughout the school. Lyndsey works closely with the administration at her school to promote anti-bullying and inclusivity: “We do a safe school survey every year and all the students have to fill it out, then the [school] board gives us stats about how [the students] feel, if there’s any sort of bullying happening towards their gender or sexual orientation, where they...don’t feel safe in the building.”

In addition to these board-based surveys on bullying, Lyndsey meets with other GSA teacher-facilitators from her school board to discuss events, concerns, issues, and other ways for the GSAs to promote themselves. Within the school, Lyndsey places “safe space” stickers on classroom doors, addresses students’ language, and advertises places LGBTQ students can turn to for support. She also organizes field trips for the GSA
students to various workshops and conferences that promote differing expressions of gender and sexuality.

Mick also tries to bring LGBTQ awareness to the school by promoting the GSA through school events and campaigns: “I post posters...we have this doorknob hanger, which says this is a homophobic-free zone. The students...know I’m part of the GSA...I’m sort of that presence for everyone that they know [homophobia is not] something I’m going to stand for.” Mick believes it is up to individual teachers to educate themselves on these issues, so he has attended several workshops to further his own education. This included a recent workshop by Egale Canada: “We learned about privilege...what it means to feel like a minority.” Mick also believes that exposing youth to workshops such as these is the key to really changing the conversation around anti-homophobic and anti-bullying messages. This idea of changing the dialogue around gender and sexuality is key to the practices that my other two participants bring into their classrooms.

John & Christine: Infusing LGBTQ into the Curriculum

Similar to building school awareness, this method involves actively facilitating discussions around gender expression and sexual orientation in the classroom, and incorporating LGBTQ materials into the curriculum. An example of this type of LGBTQ advocacy is seen in John’s practices at the Alliance program. Through a combination of his own experiences and the unique aspects of the program, he is able to incorporate LGBTQ content into his classroom. As an English and Humanities teacher, John has a degree of flexibility when it comes to his lessons: “The English curriculum doesn’t say I have to teach this novel or that play or that short story. So my job as a concerned educator is to go out and find the materials that’s going to fulfill the curriculum with a
BRINGING LGBTQ ADVOCACY INTO THE CLASSROOM

LGBTQ lens.” One of the ways that John brings this lens into his classroom is through character analysis in novel studies. John elaborated on the two examples he frequently uses in his classroom. One novel is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*:

[In] *Frankenstein*, the monster is the queer character, it’s created from something that is supposed to be human. He’s othered by everybody he encounters. Mary Shelley’s brilliant because she was talking about humanity as much as she was talking about science fiction...The monster was very gentle until it had to get violent...I use it with my grade twelve students in literature studies and talk about [Dr.] Frankenstein’s monster as a queer character. [For instance] why doesn’t he have a name?

The second novel John frequently uses is *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. In this novel he uses the protagonist, John, as an example of a queer character who does not fit into society: “He doesn’t fit into the [Aboriginal] reserve, doesn’t fit into the modern society, so he’s othered no matter where he is...he’s a queer character.” These examples demonstrate how easy it is to incorporate a LGBTQ voice into the studies of humanities, and yet it seems to rarely happen. John identified this as a problem with current interpretations of the English curriculum. He stressed that if “we can teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* to talk about racism, or we can talk about feminism, [or] we can teach [a certain] book to explore Muslims in our society,” then why can we not teach a book to discuss the treatment of queer people in our society? John emphasized: “if we want to support the people who don’t get seen in our classrooms, the LGBTQ person who may or may not be out, may not be visible, it doesn’t hurt to be talking about these things...heterosexuality and heterosexism is so rampant in our schools.”

Another example of John’s philosophy being used in the classroom is in a lesson he recently conducted with his Careers class, a discipline he feels also woefully neglects the perspectives of LGBTQ students. The decision of “coming out” in the workplace is a
heavy one and a decision that many youths do not get the chance to discuss in a safe place. John elaborated: “We looked at a current CNN piece that was done in October focused on gay and lesbian people coming out...So I put it to [the students]...what does it mean to be LGBTQ and negotiating different spaces?” Conversations around navigating the politics of the work place is a topic that occurs frequently with all youth, but part of the conversation is routinely left out: that which neglects the needs of the students in our classrooms. John stressed that: “we really have to put [a LGBTQ lens] into the curriculum or it remains the hidden curriculum, that it’s okay to bully people because they’re LGBT.”

Christine shares John’s philosophy of teaching and believes gender and sexuality should be openly discussed in the classroom. Her classroom practices demonstrate that these discussions can be just as easily done in a mainstream (and even Catholic) high school classroom. In the classroom, Christine engages in novel studies that are similar to John’s. Christine elaborated on the novel she was studying at the time of the interview in her English class:

I have plenty of opportunities to talk about the construction of gender, and then what we do to various genders...right now I’m teaching Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe...there’s the construction of masculinity as very violent and we talk about [how] you don’t display your emotions because if you do, you’re a woman, and we talk about the implications of that.

Christine understands that these issues around gender expression affect both LGBTQ youth and non-LGBTQ youth, and she sees a lot of this pressure put on the students in her classroom. In an attempt to ease that pressure, Christine is open about her expectations regarding language and gender roles with her students from the beginning of the semester. When going over the class syllabus, she emphasizes what the culture of her classroom will be, which includes a conversation around “language, stereotypes...and
what that implies about gender and expectations of gender.” Part of this strategy includes being aware of her own use of language, and being open with her students about what language is (and is not) appropriate to use.

Christine shared an example about how she tries to change her own use of language to make her classroom inclusive for all her students: “I’m always second-guessing my use of language... I grew up in a generation and [I say phrases like] ‘hey guys’...so I'll backtrack and [explain to my students that]...I’m learning how to change my language because I think it’s important, so I have those conversations with them a lot.”

Christine credits her work with the GSA for making her more aware of the importance of language:

It’s really encouraged me to rethink my use of language, and then to look for those teachable moments. Because if I know it’s not happening in other classrooms, maybe my classroom is the only place where we’re going to have a conversation about why that language is inappropriate or what the implications of using that language are.

Working in a Catholic school, Christine has learned how to relate these conversations around gender and sexuality back to teachings from the Vatican and the Catholic curriculum. She believes that tying these documents together helps more resistant teachers deal with their discomfort surrounding the issue. One initiative that Christine was involved in is the creation of pamphlets that outline a script for teachers when they are dealing with inappropriate language from students:

We thought that teachers needed a bit of a script to respond to homophobic language, sexist language...So we talk about everything in the context of the Catechism, and some of our staunchest, most conservative right-wing educators have really embraced it.
These kinds of initiatives demonstrate that any teacher can encourage these conversations within the classroom; the problem is that many teachers are still uncomfortable bringing up the topic of sexual orientation and gender expression. The students and teachers who do participants in workshops are often already allies themselves, and so the wider school population is not being reached. The onus is once again placed on dedicated teachers to attempt to bridge this discomfort for the benefit of creating a truly inclusive school community.

**Theme Three: Bridging Policy and Practice**

The third theme that emerged in my findings was in response to the gaps in the curriculum or school policy affecting LGBTQ students. While these gaps will be discussed further in Chapter Five, my participants made some important observations that deserve to be noted under my findings.

The discussion concerning gender expression and sexual orientation is changing, and not just within education. The conversation has been appearing frequently in the media in the last year, and Lyndsey believes that this change has made society more accepting of differences in sexual orientation. She also noted that the conversation about what it means to be gay is beginning to appear in the elementary school classrooms, as many students are now entering high school understanding the language around differing gender expressions and sexual orientations. Both Lyndsey and Christine talked about allowances being made for trans students to use alternative bathrooms, and to be able to choose preferred pronouns and names. Lyndsey also spoke of her school librarian who is actively collecting books featuring LGBTQ characters and resources with a LGBTQ focus for the school library. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the small
victories imply that all issues have been solved for LGBTQ students. While it is true that younger students are being included in the conversation around gender and sexual identity, John specifically pointed out that students are also enrolling in the Alliance program younger than ever: “This is the first year we’ve had students come to us right from grade eight because parents are concerned about them going on and entering a mainstream school.” This clearly indicates that despite the evolving conversation, these students are still facing bullying and discrimination in their mainstream schools, and still do not feel safe.

Another gap that needs to be addressed is the issue of educating the wider student population. Christine acknowledged this problem in her discussion of the Faith Day workshop. Despite the workshop’s success, it was only available at the time to teachers and administrators. Lyndsey also echoed this sentiment when I asked her about workshop availability. She admitted that the students who attend the workshop are often LGBTQ students, and that the student population as a whole is not being reached. While workshops and conferences are great opportunities, they are usually only accessible to students who are in GSAs, which usually means students who already identify as LGBTQ or who are already allies. This does not help spread awareness to the students and faculty who are ignorant or misinformed about LGBTQ issues. Lyndsey admitted: “it’s sort of preaching to the converted who are already in this experience.” She also conceded that there are not workshops on gender and sexuality held within the school that are available to the wider student population.

John voiced a similar sentiment in his interview. He noted that when it comes to social justice and diversity campaigns (such as Black History Month), Pride is rarely
included: "Very few [schools] are celebrating Pride Week or doing Pride Month." This lack of general discussion in the schools sends a message to LGBTQ students that their identities are not something to be discussed at school. *Every Class in Every School* reiterates this message: LGBTQ students are being told that their identities "belong in the guidance office, not in the classroom" (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 22), and this sends a message to the other students that differing sexualities and gender constructions are somehow wrong or 'not normal'.

The key to changing this is through education—and not just once a year, in June, when Pride Week occurs—but through actively incorporating this lens into schools and classrooms. John believes that changing this will change the conversation around LGBTQ students in the classroom: “education changes people, it changes societies, it makes our world a better place.”

**Summary**

The findings from my research highlight the efforts of four dedicated and passionate teachers across the Greater Toronto Area. Though all four participants differ in their methods, each is contributing to the inclusivity of their school culture. However, each participant also highlighted the numerous obstacles faced by LGBTQ-friendly educators in the Ontario school system. The presence of homophobic language is still extremely high, and the fact that some teachers choose to ignore the language is alarming. The literature indicates that teachers who ignore homophobic behaviour within the school are contributing to the discrimination and exclusion of LGBTQ students in the community. All students have the right to attend school with their dignity intact, and to feel safe in the classroom, and research has indicated that schools with GSAs are
much more supportive and inclusive of LGBTQ students than those without (Taylor & Peter, 2011). My participants provided examples of the multiple ways teachers and administrators can become involved in this process and can begin to introduce LGBTQ topics into their mainstream classrooms.

My analysis revealed that my participants had more to say on the topic of creating safer schools than on the other themes, which suggests the complexity that comes with navigating the dynamics concerning creating a safe school environment. This complexity is acknowledged in the subtopics, Addressing Homophobic Language and The Role of Gay-Straight Alliances. The sections on Teachers Practices and Bridging Policy and Practice contained inherently valuable information, but were more focused on the individual experiences and practices of my participants, as opposed to the effects on the wider school community. The smaller portion of information provided in these themes is indicative of a needed shift in the conversation around anti-homophobia education. The focus should not only be on the school environment as a whole, but also on the individual classroom teacher. Suggestions for teachers looking to incorporate LGBTQ-friendly practices into their classrooms will be further discussed in Chapter Five.
Chapter Five: Discussion

In this chapter, I will begin by revisiting the research questions that framed my research in Chapter One, and discuss how the literature and my findings from interviews with my participants come together to answer these questions. I will then analyze the implications of my research and explore further steps that should be taken to remove homophobia from Ontario Secondary School classrooms.

Discussion of the Research Question

The primary research question that framed this study was: *In what ways does working with a Gay-Straight Alliance inform the practices of four Ontario Secondary School teachers regarding anti-homophobia education?* I entered this study assuming teachers who incorporated LGBTQ-inclusive practices into their classrooms were influenced by their work in GSAs. While this was true in some cases—for example, Christine’s consciousness of her own use of language—it was not always true. John’s work with LGBTQ youth was inspired by his own experiences as a teenager, while Mick, Lyndsey, and Christine were all largely inspired by their passions for social justice. Despite their initial intentions or motivations to engage in anti-homophobia education, all four educators participated in specific practices that they believe increase feelings of inclusivity for their students.

The policies and literature presented in Chapter Two sufficiently indicated that there are still issues within the Ontario school system regarding perceptions of gender that have not yet been solved despite the numerous anti-homophobia and safe school policies put in place through *Bill 13: The Safe and Accepting Schools Act, Ontario’s Equity*
and Inclusive Education Strategy, and the Toronto District School Board’s Guidelines for the Accommodations of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students and Staff.

My participants highlighted that many teachers and students are still uncomfortable or uneducated when it comes to discussing the concerns of people who are of a differing sexual or gender identity. These four educators, however, work towards the end goal of creating a space where not only their students feel safe, but where constructive and positive dialogue can occur regarding issues or concerns which others may have. On one hand, Mick and Lyndsey provided multiple examples of school-wide events they have facilitated in an attempt to bring anti-homophobia education and LGBTQ awareness to their wider school populations (e.g. Day of Pink), but other than correcting inappropriate homophobic language, neither spoke directly about bringing the conversation into their classrooms. On the other hand, Christine and John incorporated discussions around gender and sexuality into their curriculums, primarily through novel studies. Even though all four teachers differed in their approaches to anti-homophobia education, the literature suggests that having adults who actively support anti-homophobia policies, and whom the students feel they can approach regarding LGBTQ issues, dramatically increases how safe students who identify as LGBTQ feel in their schools (Taylor & Peter, 2011).

Discussion of the Sub-Question

The sub-question that drove my study was: What efforts are being made to reach out to male students regarding anti-homophobia education? Reviewing the literature regarding male attitudes towards gender and the policing of Western masculinity, I entered my study assuming that dealing with the homophobic attitudes of adolescent
males would be a huge concern in high schools. While there are certain pressures placed on males to express their masculinities in certain ways, my participants did not feel that this was as critical an issue as I anticipated it would be. Mick, Christine, and Lyndsey all agreed that while they do hear more homophobic language coming from male students, they also hear homophobic language from female students. Additionally, while gay males do face discrimination, *Every Class in Every School* revealed that a higher percentage of lesbian females reported facing discrimination than gay males, and trans students experienced the highest percentages of discrimination and violence (Taylor & Peter, 2011). This will be further discussed in this chapter, but the amount of discrimination, violence, and harassment experienced by trans students and the rampant presence of transphobia indicates that more needs to be done in this area. Rather than focusing specifically on male students, the question that should be addressed is how to educate the wider student population on anti-homophobia education, especially since most workshops are generally directed towards students and staff who are already involved in GSAs or other similar social justice clubs. All four of my participants acknowledged this problem during their interviews. Addressing this problem would take huge steps towards closing the gap between what the Ministry policies dictate and the amount of discussion, awareness, and tangible practices occurring in Ontario schools.

**Implications**

The biggest implication of my research is what it insinuates for teacher practices moving forward. John and Christine both raised several questions about the current lack of an LGBTQ lens in the classroom in their interviews. John questioned why various novels are taught to “talk about racism or...about feminism [or]...to explore Muslims in
our society” but not to talk about gender or sexual orientation. Christine commented that she knows discussion around gender and homophobic language is “not happening in other classrooms.” The Safe and Accepting Schools Act specifically states: “Students need to be equipped with the knowledge...that allows them to take action on making their schools and communities more equitable and inclusive for all people, including LGBTTIQ people” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 1). The policy also specifies that “a whole-school approach is required, and that everyone: government, educators, school staff, parents, students, and the wider community: has a role to play” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 1). One of the gaps in this area stems from the education, or lack thereof, of teachers themselves. During his interview, John reflected “If I don’t have the toolset as a [new] teachers to do [anti-homophobia] work, it doesn’t happen. [How can I address homophobia] if I’m not given the tools by the people are supposed to educate me as a new teacher?” John argued that teacher education programs should provide LGBTQ tools (resources, materials, knowledge) for pre-service teachers to take with them into their own classrooms.

John noted being aware of this problem since graduating from his own teacher education program twelve years ago. During his time in his Bachelor of Education, John was asked to teach a class on anti-discrimination from an LGBTQ lens. This left him wondering why the instructors were afraid to touch this material but instead asked the openly gay student to teach the class. John asks:

Why aren’t we giving new teachers the tools to confront and challenge homophobia, and now transphobia, the same way we do racism, sexism, religion, and all those kinds of things? I don’t think we’re going to affect change with just having the policies in place. We actually have to start building it into the curriculum we’re teaching new teachers so they can go out into the field and actually start building it into their curriculum. And it
can be done in age-appropriate ways...I honestly don’t believe we see change until we start talking about it.

In order for these anti-homophobia and anti-discrimination policies to be fully implemented, teachers need to feel comfortable and confident addressing these issues in the classroom, and they need to have access to both grade and course appropriate materials.

The newly introduced two-year Bachelor of Education program in Ontario (to be implemented September 2015) features a new course described as “teaching in the Ontario context (e.g. diversity, equity, safe and accepting schools, creation of a positive school climate)” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013). There are no other specifics provided, nor is it clear what precisely is meant by “diversity, equity, safe and accepting schools, [and] creation of a positive school climate” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013). Does this include bringing a mandatory social justice lens to curriculum studies? If so, how is the Ministry defining social justice in this context?

Egale Canada recommends that all Faculties of Education “integrate LGBTQ-inclusive teaching and intersectionality into compulsory courses in their Bachelor of Education programmes” as a way to actively combat homophobia and transphobia (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 21). This change is incredibly necessary, and appropriate considering the recent mandate by the Safe and Accepting Schools Act that Ontario school boards must support students in activities and organizations that “promote gender equity...and respect for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 9). The act also mandates that teachers receive “annual professional development” regarding the creation and promotion of safe and accepting
schools (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 4). This professional development should also be extended to new teachers so that when they enter the profession they are already equipped with an understanding and knowledge of safe school and anti-homophobia policies. While the specifics of the new course offered in the two-year Bachelor of Education program are unclear, my hope is that this course will act as professional development for new teachers preparing to enter the profession.

Still, while the policies continue to move in the right direction, as my participants have observed, they do not necessarily indicate a direct change for the individual students. Teachers need to actively incorporate the suggestions made by these policies into their classrooms.

**Next Steps**

As previously indicated in my methodology (Chapter Three), further research should be conducted around reducing transphobia in Ontario schools. Trans individuals experience a series of obstacles that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals do not necessarily experience. There are additional accommodations that trans students or students who differ in their gender expression require in order to be comfortable, successful, and safe within their school environments, such as gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms, altering pronouns and names on official school documents, and ensured confidentiality about the students’ transition. All of these are issues that I did not address in my research but my findings indicate that there is a serious gap when it comes to addressing the needs of trans students. In *Every Class and Every School*, 78% of trans students reported feeling unsafe at school and 44% of trans students said that they would miss school because of these feelings (Taylor & Peter,
2011, p. 14). This dramatically affects the education these students receive and ultimately their ability to graduate high school successfully.

Another area to address is support for LGBTQ youth of colour. Egale Canada’s survey indicates that LGBTQ youth of colour often do not even have one caring adult they can confide in (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 18). Both Christine and Mick commented on noticing students carrying cultural stereotypes or misconceptions around differing sexual orientations and gender expressions, which further hinders the conversation around anti-homophobia education. This study has taken a generalized approach to examining homophobia within schools and it does not address the intersectionality aspect of oppression. LGBTQ youth of colour experience entirely different types of oppression and discrimination than non-racialized LGBTQ youth. For LGBTQ youth of colour, and Aboriginal LGBTQ youth, this creates a significant issue: “These youth are not only being physically harassed or assaulted because of reasons related to gender and/or sexual orientation, but they are also much more likely to be physically harassed or assaulted because of their ethnicity” (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 11).

The third area requiring further study is addressing the needs of LGBTQ youth living in rural areas. All the experiences presented in this study were from urban/suburban schools in the Greater Toronto Area. The resources and supports available for LGBTQ youth living in this area of Ontario are far greater than what is available for youth living away from urban centres. Additionally, Ontario is reported to have a proportionally higher frequency of GSAs and supports for youths than “the Prairies, the Atlantic provinces, and the North” (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 10). More
research should be conducted to fully understand the needs of the LGBTQ youth living in these more remote areas of Canada.

Conclusion: Becoming an LGBTQ-Friendly Educator

The intent of this study was to open a dialogue and provide pathways for teachers to infuse an LGBTQ lens into the classroom and into the school, along with other social justice and equity perspectives. Many students have been told that their identities “belong in the guidance office, not in the classroom” which is extremely problematic for all students (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 22). When I began my research, I knew that homophobic bullying was still a concern facing today’s youth, but I did not fully appreciate how crippling an obstacle homophobia and transphobia still is in high schools. Through both my research for this study and professional/educational opportunities I have pursued during my time in the Master of Teaching program, I have gained both experience working with LGBTQ youth as well as the knowledge and confidence to bring LGBTQ materials into my classrooms. This research will provide other teachers the opportunity to gain knowledge around LGBTQ concerns, bring discussions around gender identity into the classroom, and stress the importance of language awareness in the school. I was previously aware of the incredible power language holds and the benefits an active GSA can bring to a school, but until I met and interviewed John and Christine, I had never considered the opportunities I possess as an English teacher to bring these discussions into my mainstream classroom. It was not until John highlighted the various ways that the voices of females, people of colour, and non-Western religions were brought into the classroom that my perspective shifted and I realized the extraordinary gap that exists when it comes incorporating LGBTQ voices
into the classroom. I have created the following list of recommendations based on my findings, the literature, and my personal experiences, to assist other teachers in bridging this gap in their own classrooms. These are recommendations that I will also continue to bear in mind moving forward with my own practices:

*Educate Yourself*

It is imperative for teachers to educate themselves. Attend workshops, conferences, or do personal research. Learn about various ways people can identify on the LGBTQ spectrum, and what the needs of those individuals might be. Research LGBTQ writers, artists, and performers. This will not only help teachers understand the experiences and perspectives of those who identify as LGBTQ, but this research will also provide resources and materials that can be brought into the classroom.

*Know Your Curriculum*

Unfortunately, topics relating to LGBTQ issues are still fairly controversial, especially with certain demographic areas or age groups (e.g. Catholic schools or elementary school grade levels). The first step is finding age appropriate materials and topics of conversation, but the second step is to know where these discussions fall under the Ontario curriculum. If the materials brought into the classroom upset parents, having Ministry documents available would help support the teacher. These documents can be grade/course specific or safe schools/anti-discrimination policies such as *Bill 13: The Safe and Accepting Schools Act.*

*Be Reflective*

Be reflective of both your own language and your practice. Have an open conversation with students about why homophobic language is offensive and be transparent about
your own attempts to correct your language. Moreover, be reflective about your practices. Do not divide your students by “boys” and “girls”. This places students who are transitioning or questioning their gender identities in an uncomfortable position. Be mindful of comments or jokes made in classroom (e.g. comments about male-female relationships are exclusive to students with same-sex orientations).

*Do Not Make Assumptions*

Never make assumptions about students. This applies to both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students. To assume that a student may be gay based on personality traits or physical characteristics supports stereotypes of LGBTQ individuals as well as traditional gender binaries (e.g. assuming that the quiet, artistic boy in the class identifies as gay).

Additionally, do not make assumptions about the gender preference of a student in your classroom. If you are unsure how to address a student, ask what pronouns they prefer (he/his, she/hers, they/theirs), and continue by using these preferred pronouns. Be respectful of the student’s privacy and do not question them in front of their peers. It is the student’s decision when, how, and to whom they discuss their identities. Respect that confidentiality.

These measures are simply a starting point in the lengthy process of removing homophobia and promoting LGBTQ-positive spaces in high schools. The statistics, literature, and findings say it all: This is a serious problem affecting youths of all identities, and it is our job as concerned educators to make our classroom a *safe and inclusive space* for every student that comes through the door.

This process of this research as challenged my own assumptions about the effectiveness of safe school policies and the degree to which homophobia still exists in
high schools. Since realizing the gap in my own practice when it comes to anti-homophobia education I have learned the true importance of being a conscious and reflective educator. I have learned to stop seeing my students as “boys” and “girls” and to see them as people, as human beings, to look beyond their gender expression. I have learned to “practice what I preach” and incorporate LGBTQ conversations and materials into my classroom. This research has illustrated how truly necessary anti-homophobia education is in our education system, and reinforced my commitment to fighting homophobia. I truly and deeply hope that my research will help provide exposure about the measures needed to be taken to stop the cycle of heteronormativity and homophobia in schools.
References


Appendix

Interview Questions – Standard Background Questions
1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been at this school?
3. What classes are you currently teaching?
4. Have you heard the term gender violence before? What do you define it as?
5. Are you familiar with any research regarding homophobic bullying?

School Culture
6. Please describe your opinions on the school culture in terms of inclusivity.
7. Have there been any notable incidences of violence in the school?
8. Are there any procedures in place to support teachers in dealing with incidences of bullying?
9. What kind of culture exists surrounding LGBTQ students in the school?
10. Are issues surrounding gender/sexuality something that is open to discussion in the school environment?
11. How many people are in the GSA this year?
12. What kind of presence does the GSA have in the school?
13. Is the administration supportive of the GSA?

Individual Experience and Practice
14. Do you notice homophobic language being used by students? (E.g. “fag”, “gay”).
15. Do you have opportunities to speak to your students regarding the use of this language?
16. Do you think that other teachers look for opportunities to address this type of language?
17. Do you notice these interactions more with male or female students?
18. Are there particular strategies you find effective in regards to creating a safe environment?
19. Does your work with the GSA impact your practice in the classroom?
20. Do you find you are able to reach out to male students to discuss issues regarding anti-homophobia? Are they receptive?

Curriculum
21. Are there any of the new Equity Studies courses being offered at the school?
22. Does your school offer diversity/inclusion workshops or activities (any that focus on gender)?
23. Do you think educating boys about gender and sexuality is important?

24. Do you have any final thoughts or questions for me?
Interview Questions - Specialized Background Questions
1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been at this school?
3. Why did you decide to work at the Alliance Program?
4. What classes are you currently teaching?
5. What do you describe gender violence as?
6. Are you familiar with any research regarding homophobic bullying?

School Culture
7. Please describe your opinions on the school culture in terms of inclusivity.
8. Are issues surrounding gender/sexuality something that is open to discussion in the school environment?
9. What situations have led the students to come to the Alliance Program?
10. Have your students experienced violence at other schools before coming to the Alliance Program?
11. What role do the social workers play within the school?
12. Does your school offer diversity/inclusion workshops or activities (any that focus on gender)?

Individual Experience and Practice
13. Do you notice homophobic language being used by students? (E.g. “fag”, “gay”).
14. Do you have opportunities to speak to your students regarding the use of this language?
15. Do you notice these interactions more with male or female students?
16. Are there particular strategies you find effective in regards to creating a safe environment?
17. Do you find you are able to reach out to male students to discuss issues regarding anti-homophobia? Are they receptive?
18. Do you think educating boys about gender and sexuality is important?
19. Are there things you think other schools should be doing to better provide for the safety and the needs of their LGBTQ students?

20. Is there anything else you want to talk about that you didn’t get a chance to mention?
Letter of Consent
Dear _______________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, currently enrolled in the Master of Teaching program. Part of the requirements for my program is the completion of a qualitative research project, in which the primary method of data collection is interviews. The topic that I am writing on regards the attitudes of male high school students and its relation to bullying and school violence. I believe that your knowledge and experience will be a valuable contribution to my research.

Should you agree to participate in my research, your voluntary contribution will consist of a single interview, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes in length, with possible follow up emails for clarification or additional information. I will set up a date and location for the interview that is convenient for you. The interview will be tape-recorded to ensure accuracy during the transcribing process, and your name and any other identifiable aspects will be left out of my written work, and any subsequent oral presentations or publications. The only people who will have access to my data will be my research supervisor and myself, and I will share a transcript of the interview with you to ensure accuracy. You are free to withdraw from my research at any time and you are also free to decline to answer any specific questions. There will be minimal risks to you as a participant, and you will be able to benefit from participating in several ways, including the ability to share your practices.

Please sign the attached form if you consent to being interview as a part of this research project. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Meghan Condon

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time.

I have read the letter provided to me and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: _______________________

Date: _______________________