Challenging Heteronormativity in Elementary Classrooms

By

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ABSTRACT

Heteronormativity is the positioning of heterosexuality as normal and non-heterosexuality as abnormal and deviant. Heteronormativity in schools can be devastating for students and teachers alike. This study focused on challenging heteronormativity in elementary classrooms; specifically, how elementary school teachers are challenging heteronormativity in their classrooms and their perspectives on how their students respond. Four elementary school educators from the Greater Toronto Area participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviewees made it clear that the cycle of heteronormativity is still alive and well in elementary schools; this leads to the oppression and marginalization of both staff and students. It is clear that something must be done. The interviewees spoke about the LGBTQ topics they taught, the resources they used to support their teaching, their students’ responses to their pedagogy, the challenges they faced when challenging heteronormativity in their schools, and the overall importance of challenging heteronormativity. The information outlined in this study is a valuable resource for any staff member looking to challenge heteronormativity in their classroom, school, or school board. If everyone does their part, the bullying, shame, hiding, and hurting can end.

Key Words: heteronormativity, LGBTQ, elementary school
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

It is the duty of teachers to instil in our students an acceptance of and respect for all individuals, regardless of any difference. This allows for a school climate that is safe and supportive. Schools that have a safe and supportive school climate have students who are more able and more motivated to achieve their full potential (Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). Furthermore, a vital goal of the education system is to ensure that education is equal and inclusive for everyone. In their 2014 document *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools*, the Ontario Ministry of Education writes that equity and inclusive education are essential to the Ontario government’s vision of the education system.

Equity and inclusive education aims to understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society. Barriers may be related to sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, race, ethnic origin, religion, socio-economic background, physical or mental ability or other factors (The Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, pg. 6).

On a much larger scale, this type of education has a great capacity to bring about social change through inspiring students to challenge the norms that allow for the oppression of various groups within society. Yet, despite policy commitments to fostering equity, safety, and inclusion for all students, some marginalized identity groups remain less visible than others, and thus are at risk of continued oppression and curricular neglect. The group I am speaking of is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students.

1.1 Research Problem

Bullying of students thought to be LGBTQ takes place in schools all over Canada (Macdonald, 2006). Research suggests that there are several sexual minority students in every
class in every school, not including students whose parents are sexual minorities. Between December 2007 and June 2009, Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (EGALE) Canada surveyed 3700 high school students from across the country. LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ parents reported being both verbally and physically harassed daily to weekly due to their sexual orientation or gender identity or that of their parents. LGBTQ students also face sexual harassment at school. Due to this continual harassment, 64% of LGBTQ students and 61% of students with LGBTQ parents reported feeling unsafe at Canadian schools. Students who are victims of homophobic and transphobic bullying exhibit high rates of health risk behaviour, such as substance abuse, suicidality, and sexual risk behaviours (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar & Azrael, 2009; Birkett, Esplenage & Koenig, 2009; Bontempo and D’Augelli, 2002; Mishna, Newman, Daley & Solomon, 2009; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Treadway & Yoakam, 1992). On top of this, these students experience high levels of homelessness, truancy, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and internalized homophobia (Almeida et al, 2009; Birkett et al, 2009; Mishna et al, 2009). These negative effects of bullying can continue on into adulthood (Rivers, 2004; Greene, Britton, & Fitts, 2014; Rivers, 2004; Russel, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011).

It is clear that there is a pressing need for change within Canadian schools. Recognition, legitimization, and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity are essential for creating a safe, positive, learning environment for every student. The EGALE Canada survey is a survey of high school students. In order to eliminate this type of harassment in later grades, elementary school teachers must encourage students to be accepting and respectful individuals who will not bully someone because they are different. Introducing positive representations of LGBTQ people into the classroom is fundamental to instilling these accepting and respectful attitudes in the minds of
students. That being said, research has found that while most feel sympathetic towards LGBTQ students, few teachers are willing to incorporate lessons about LGBTQ people and families into the curriculum (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Puchner & Klein, 2011; Thein, 2013). In this paper, curriculum will be defined as the total learning environment within the school, including the physical environment, learning materials, pedagogical practices, and assessment instruments (Toronto District School Board, 2011).

There are a variety of reasons why teachers do not include LGBTQ topics in the curriculum. Some of these reasons include fear of backlash from parents and the administration (Bellini, 2012; Bower & Klecka, 2009), personal beliefs about LGBTQ issues (Bellini, 2012), discomfort with talking about LGBTQ topics in the classroom (Bellini, 2012; Schneider & Dimito, 2008), and an association of homosexuality with sex (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). Regardless of the reason, the absence of LGBTQ topics in the curriculum creates a culture of heteronormativity within schools. A heteronormative school culture assumes that all students are heterosexual (Smith, 2004); it sets up heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as abnormal (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008). Heteronormativity in schools causes the oppression of LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ family members. These students can feel unsupported and invisible within the school community (Smith, 2004) and are often bullied. Heteronormativity in elementary schools must be brought to an end, through the implementation of a curriculum that includes positive representations of LGBTQ people and the introduction and discussion of LGBTQ topics.

To further the problem, when progress is being made in the fight to end heteronormativity in Canadian schools, this progress is often met with real backlash. For
example, the new Ontario sexual education curriculum was put in place in Ontario public and Catholic schools in September of 2015. This curriculum introduces the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation in grade 3, with the goal of teaching students that everyone is unique, and to be respectful of everyone, despite their differences (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). However, since the updated curriculum has been released, there has been an outcry from concerned parents who believe that the curriculum is inappropriate for their children. Some of those who are concerned about the curriculum content feel that teaching about gender identity and sexual orientation at this age is inappropriate and should not be done (Freeman, 2015). This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers are challenging heteronormativity within the elementary school classroom. I explore the exceptional teaching methods of four elementary school teachers within the York Region District School Board and the Peel District School Board. This research sought to answer the question: how are elementary school teachers challenging heteronormativity in the classroom and how do students respond to their pedagogy? Sub-questions that were investigated included: 1) Which LGBTQ topics do these teachers explore with their students and why? 2) What resources and materials do these teachers use to support this work and why? 3) What challenges do these teachers face in enacting their commitment to challenging heteronormativity through their teaching, and how do they respond to these challenges? 4) What range of factors, resources, and experiences support these teachers’ commitment and teaching practice for challenging heteronormativity in the classroom? 5) From these teachers’ perspectives, what does heteronormativity look like in schools? 6) Why do these teachers believe that it is important to challenge heteronormativity in schools?
1.3 Background of the Researcher

I have chosen to conduct research on the topic of challenging heteronormativity in classrooms for a number of reasons. As someone who identifies as a lesbian, I feel strongly about integrating LGBTQ topics into the curriculum. I am acutely aware of the internal struggle that takes place within an individual who is trying to understand their sexual orientation. It is hard enough to do so without the added complications of feeling unsafe, unsupported, or unrepresented at school. I did not put much thought into the topic of my sexual orientation until I was in university. However, I do have a friend who knew that he was gay in high school and did not feel able to come out until he was well into university. At our high school, there was no mention of a gay-straight alliance, no discussion of LGBTQ issues in sex education or any other classes, and only one ‘out’ teacher at the school. Perhaps my friend would have been able to open up about his sexuality without fear of being rejected or bullied if a dialogue of positivity and acceptance towards LGBTQ people were introduced at school.

If there was little mention of LGBTQ topics in my high school, my previous education was even more lacking. Throughout my elementary school experience, there was absolutely no mention of LGBTQ people or issues. It was as if they did not exist. The curriculum was completely heteronormative. I can only imagine how difficult this must have been for students who were questioning their sexual orientation at this time, probably feeling confused and invisible. I often wonder what would have happened if LGBTQ topics were part of the curriculum when I was growing up. Perhaps I would have had an earlier awareness and acceptance of my sexuality, instead of the years of confusion and internal struggle that I experienced throughout university and after. I can imagine that a curriculum infused with
LGBTQ topics would have allowed me to have a more fully developed sense of self and to accept myself more. As a teacher, I want to be able to help all of my students grow as individuals and develop their sense of self by providing the necessary tools.

Throughout my time working within the field of education, I have encountered educators who have confided that they would not teach about LGBTQ topics unless they explicitly knew that a student in the class had LGBTQ parents. However, as I mentioned previously, there are several students in every class who either have LGBTQ family members or are LGBTQ themselves. And these students do not always disclose this information (Taylor & Peter, 2011). As a result, many students’ needs are not being met by the education system. I realize that some teachers feel uncomfortable starting a dialogue about this topic because it is seen as controversial and they do not want to do it unless absolutely necessary. They may also fear encountering resistance from parents, religious groups, other educators, or the administration, who feel that the topic is inappropriate to discuss with elementary school students. However, it is paramount that all students feel supported, represented, and validated within the classroom. If this does not happen, students cannot focus on learning and will not reach their full potential. I will not allow myself to become the kind of teacher who ignores the needs of any of my students, even if these needs are not explicitly stated. I want all of my students to thrive. It is necessary for all educators to put their students first, ahead of their own discomfort or uncertainty. Nobody deserves to feel invisible or to be the victim of bullying.

1.4 Preview of the Whole

To respond to the research questions, I have conducted a qualitative research study. I conducted semi-structured interviews with four educators to discover how they start a dialogue about LGBTQ issues with their elementary school students, how they integrate LGBTQ topics
into the curriculum, and what challenges they may face when doing so. In chapter two I review
the literature in the areas of current policy and curriculum, as well as the currently available
research on and recommended strategies for integrating LGBTQ topics into the curriculum. In
chapter three I elaborate on the research design and methodology of the current study. In chapter
four I report my research findings and their significance in relation to the literature. In chapter
five I discuss the implications for educators, including myself as a future teacher.
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas of homophobic and transphobic bullying, curriculum and heteronormativity, reading literature with LGBTQ themes and characters, and other methods, besides reading LGBTQ literature, that can be used to introduce LGBTQ topics in the classroom. I start by reviewing literature in the area of homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools. I begin by giving a brief introduction of this type of bullying and then I consider type and prevalence of bullying, effects of bullying, and factors that promote/moderate bullying. Next, I review the literature on curriculum and heteronormativity and I provide an introduction to heteronormativity. I then outline the situation in schools, teachers’ beliefs and apprehensions about teaching LGBTQ topics, systemic barriers to providing LGBTQ inclusive education, and inclusion of LGBTQ topics in teacher’s college curriculum. From there, I move onto research on the topic of reading literature with LGBTQ themes and characters. I consider why this type of literature should be read with students, some recommendations for teaching LGBTQ literature, and some of the results of reading LGBTQ literature with students. Finally, I look at research on other methods of introducing LGBTQ topics in the classroom. I start with the use of dramatization to bring LGBTQ identities into the classroom and conclude with a look at the many methods used by teachers in the documentary It’s elementary, as well as the impact these experiences had on the students being filmed.

2.1 Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying

2.1.1 A Brief Introduction

In their National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools, EGALE Canada defines homophobia as, “Fear and or hatred of
homosexuality in others, often exhibited as name-calling, bullying, exclusion, prejudice, discrimination, or acts of violence” (Taylor & Peter, 2011, pg. 37). Though EGALE Canada does not define transphobia explicitly, they found that it was exhibited in the same way as homophobia (Ibid). The Survey divides homophobic and transphobic bullying into three main categories: verbal harassment, physical harassment, and sexual harassment, but mentions that students experience homophobic bullying in many other forms as well, such as having their property stolen and vandalized and the spreading of mean rumors and lies through graffiti, texting, and Facebook (Ibid). Homophobic and transphobic bullying within schools has a wide variety of negative impacts on victims, both while they are in school (Almeida et al, 2009; Birkett et al, 2009; Bontempo and D’Augelli, 2002; Mishna et al, 2009) and in their future adult lives (Greene et al, 2014; Rivers, 2004; Russel et al, 2011). These include high levels of drug and alcohol use, suicidality, sexual risk behaviours, depression, and anxiety (Almeida et al, 2009; Birkett et al, 2009; Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Greene et al, 2014; Mishna et al, 2009; Rivers, 2004; Remafedi et al, 1998; Treadway & Yoakam, 1992).

2.1.2 Type and Prevalence of Bullying

Homophobic and transphobic bullying takes place in both elementary and high school (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011). In 2012, the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conducted a climate survey of elementary schools in the United States, in which they surveyed 1,065 students and 1,099 teachers (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2012). They found that 45% of the students surveyed reported hearing the word ‘gay’ used in a negative way, through comments such as ‘that’s so gay’ and ‘you’re so gay’ sometimes, often, or all the time; 49% of teachers surveyed reported hearing these comments sometimes, often, or very often (Ibid). As well, 26% of teachers and 26% of students surveyed
reported hearing students make homophobic comments such as ‘fag’ or ‘lesbo’ at least sometimes (Ibid). While the GLSEN survey of elementary schools only uncovered incidents of homophobic bullying in the form of verbal harassment, as previously mentioned, the EGALE Canada survey of high school students found that homophobic and transphobic bullying took the form of verbal, physical, and sexual harassment (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Verbal harassment was experienced by 37% of students with LGBTQ parents, 32% of female and 20% of male LGB students, and 37% of transgender students (Ibid). 70% of all students surveyed reported hearing negative expressions such as ‘that’s so gay’ every day in school, and 48% of students reported hearing comments such as ‘faggot’, ‘lezbo’ and ‘dyke’ every day; some of these remarks were made by teachers (Ibid). 27% of students with LGBTQ parents and 21% of LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed (Ibid). LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ parents also reported being sexually harassed while at school (Ibid). The results of these climate surveys clearly indicate that although many school boards have LGBTQ-inclusive safer schools policies and curriculum, homophobic and transphobic bullying continues to take place. The data show that in high school there is an increase in the number of students who report hearing homophobic and transphobic comments and hearing the word ‘gay’ used in a negative way. In high school, students also report experiencing diversified types of bullying that were not reported in the elementary climate survey. This could be because at the elementary level the bullying only took the form of verbal harassment, or because the survey did not ask questions that revealed that other forms of harassment were taking place. Either way, the results paint a troubling picture of how, without widespread intervention from teachers and administrators, homophobic and transphobic bullying only worsens as students move throughout their school careers.
2.1.3 Effects of Bullying

LGBTQ youth who experience a high amount of victimization exhibit substantially higher health risk behaviours than their peers who are not victimized; they also experience higher health risk behaviours than non LGBTQ youths who experience a high amount of victimization (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002). These health risk behaviours include substance abuse, suicidality, and sexual risk behaviours (Almeida et al, 2009; Birkett et al, 2009; Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Mishna et al, 2009; Remafedi et al, 1998; Treadway & Yoakam, 1992). These studies were conducted over the course of almost two decades and the results show that students who are victims of homophobic and transphobic bullying today experience the same health risk behaviours they did in the 1990’s. These victims also experience high rates of truancy (Birkett et al, 2009), homelessness, internalized homophobia, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and a feeling of isolation from peers and the community (Almeida et al, 2009; Mishna et al, 2009). Students who experience homophobic bullying are at risk of leaving school early and even leave their community because of a school climate in which they feel victimized, isolated, and lacking the proper support and resources to help them deal with these issues (Safe Schools Action Team, 2008).

Even after victims of homophobic and transphobic bullying leave school, the negative effects of the bullying experience can continue on. Greene et al (2014) found that experiencing this bullying throughout school significantly contributed to the prediction of continued victimization of LGBT adults. They also found that the recollection of being bullied by peers at school predicted fear of negative evaluation in adults (Greene et al, 2014). Adults who were bullied based on their sexual orientation were found to exhibit symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Rivers, 2004). These symptoms include intrusive or distressing
memories of school victimization, feelings of psychological distress when events remind them of their time at school and the bullying they experienced, having dreams or nightmares about being bullied at school, and experiencing ‘flashbacks’ or the feeling of re-experiencing bullying events while awake (Ibid). The adults in Rivers’ study who reported experiencing symptoms of PTSD also reported high levels of depression (Ibid). A small number of participants also reported using prescription or non-prescription drugs or alcohol to help them cope with memories of the bullying they experienced during their school days (Ibid). A study of young-adults who were bullied as adolescents for being LGBT found a strong link between this bullying and risk of HIV and other STIs in young adulthood, as well as elevated levels of depression and suicidal ideation (Russel et al, 2011). The mental and physical health risks of homophobic and transphobic bullying, that occur not only during the school years but in adulthood as well, illustrate the pressing need for teachers to work towards the elimination of this type of bullying.

2.1.4 Factors that Promote/Moderate Bullying

School climate has been defined as, “…the learning environment and relationships found within a school and school community” (The Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, pg. 29). There is a positive school climate when all members of a school community feel safe, included, and accepted and work to encourage positive behaviours and interactions (Ibid). Students, regardless of their sexual orientation, report the lowest levels of depression/suicidality, the lowest levels of alcohol/marijuana use, and the lowest levels of truancy when they are in a positive school climate and not experiencing homophobic teasing (Birkett et al, 2009). Russel et al (2011) conclude that school climate clearly matters when it comes to the well-being of LGBTQ students. The findings of these two studies suggest that many of the negative outcomes
associated with being an LGBTQ student may be prevented with a positive school climate that is free of bullying.

However, there are numerous factors that stop this ideal situation from occurring, including a lack of commitment to creating safe school climates for LGBTQ students through such mechanisms as equity policies that include attention to sexual orientation, as well an absence of accountability measures in place even where these policies technically exist (Mishna et al, 2009). Research has found that schools that enact equity and anti-harassment policies that include LGBTQ students have strong negative correlations with suicidality among their students (Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006). When policies are not in place not only are students at risk of bullying and the related negative outcomes, but some staff members fear reprisal for standing up against homophobic bullying because they feel unsupported by their administration (Mishna et al, 2009). Staff may also feel that they are missing the skills and knowledge to deal with incidents of homophobic bullying, and/or lack the training and necessary resources to do so effectively (Mishna et al, 2009; Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). When staff members stand by and let homophobic bullying occur, this sends a bad message to students. Lack of bullying intervention by staff members is not only a missed opportunity to educate students about equity and inclusivity in schools; it also sends the message that the bullying is acceptable (Ferfolja, 2007; Mishna et al, 2009; Treadway and Yoakam, 1992). Intervention against bullying may also be difficult because students may feel uncomfortable disclosing incidents of homophobic bullying with teachers (Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). Finally, many schools do not run anti-homophobia student programs (Ferfolja, 2007). Even if teachers do intervene and tell students that bullying is wrong or not to use certain words in negative ways, deeper education about homophobia and bullying is necessary to make lasting changes to school climate (Ibid).
2.2 Curriculum and Heteronormativity

2.2.1 What is Heteronormativity?

According to queer theory, heteronormativity is the construction of heterosexuality as being normal and natural and non-heterosexuality as deviant, abnormal, and unnatural (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008). Heteronormativity assumes that all individuals are heterosexual unless they overtly state that they are non-heterosexual (Smith, 2004). When heteronormative teaching practices are applied in a school, there is an assumption that all parents and students are heterosexual and those who reveal themselves to be non-heterosexual are labelled as deviant and oppressed (Ibid). Heteronormative teaching practices oppress LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ relatives, friends, etc., through silence and exclusion of LGBTQ people, topics, and issues (Ibid).

2.2.2 The Situation in Schools

Using curriculum practices that challenge the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm from which LGBTQ individuals deviate is critical to eradicating homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools. This can create a positive school climate in which everyone’s differences are respected and valued. However, numerous researchers have discovered that teachers are not, for various reasons, working towards challenging heteronormativity in their schools. In their 2012 elementary school climate survey, GLSEN found that only 18% of students surveyed reported having learned about families with gay or lesbian parents (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Research has found that while teachers tend to have a sympathetic attitude toward LGBTQ students and issues, few are willing to make changes to how and what they teach, including incorporating lessons about LGBTQ people and families into the curriculum; this change to the
curriculum is what is really necessary to alter how students view LGBTQ people (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Puchner & Klein, 2011; Thein, 2013). All of these researchers came to the same conclusion: teachers generally reinforce the heteronormative silence about non-heterosexuality. One example is that of Puchner & Klein (2011), who interviewed fifteen middle school Language Arts teachers about discussing LGBTQ topics and issues with their students. Virtually all the teachers acknowledged that the topic of same-sex sexuality was one that was important to their students; however, when these topics were brought up by students in the classroom, the teachers used a variety of strategies to avoid and redirect discussion of the topic, such as telling students that health class would be a more appropriate place to discuss that issue, or discouraging students from creating gay characters for class assignments (Ibid). Through their words, these teachers are sending the messages that LGBTQ topics are not appropriate to discuss in an everyday classroom setting; they are clinical or sensitive issues that cannot be spoken about naturally.

Studies have found that the manner in which LGBTQ topics are being integrated into the curriculum is rushed and ineffective (Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). In their survey of Ontario teachers and students, the Safe Schools Action Team (2008) discovered that when LGBTQ topics such as homophobia were discussed, they were often simply added on to already full course schedules and were not effectively integrated and reinforced throughout the curriculum. This will not make effective changes to heteronormative school culture. LGBTQ topics are positioned as non-normative if they are only discussed during one day or one unit (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). If these topics were discussed throughout the school year in relation to a variety of units, it would challenge the notion of what is considered normal (Ibid). My research will shed light on the ways in which committed teachers challenge
heteronormative school culture by bringing LGBTQ topics into their classrooms throughout the school year.

There are a variety of reasons why teachers choose not to include LGBTQ topics in their curriculum. An overview of some of the main reasons discovered by researchers is outlined in the following subsections.

2.2.3 Beliefs and Apprehensions

Teachers’ beliefs and apprehensions about teaching LGBTQ topics and issues greatly affect their choices about integrating these topics into the curriculum. Teachers are apprehensive about introducing these topics into their classrooms because non-heterosexuality has been constructed by society as hyper-sexual (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). At the same time, sex has been constructed as irrelevant and even dangerous for children (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Thein, 2013). DePalma and Atkinson go on to challenge this belief, saying that heterosexuality involves sex as well, but nobody would assume that a story about a family with a mother and father would be about what they do in bed (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). Other authors discuss how some teachers believe that children are pure and innocent and need to be protected from homosexuality; they would not be able to understand or handle these issues (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003) and must be directed towards a heterosexual lifestyle (Flores, 2014; MacDonald, 2006). I am confident that my research will demonstrate that teachers can include LGBTQ topics in their curriculum at a developmentally appropriate level and in a way that students can understand, without talking about sex.

Teaching of LGBTQ issues also depends on individual teachers’ acceptance of LGBTQ issues and their comfort level with discussing them in class (Bellini, 2012; Schneider & Dimito,
2008). Some teachers would not discuss LGBTQ issues with their students because they feel personally opposed to them (Bellini, 2012). Schneider & Dimito (2008) surveyed 132 heterosexual and LGBTQ teachers about their comfort level with teaching LGBTQ topics. Only 30% of respondents indicated that they would be very comfortable teaching about these topics and only 50% indicated that they would feel somewhat comfortable doing so (Ibid). There are numerous reasons why teachers would feel uncomfortable. Some teachers are uncomfortable teaching about LGBTQ issues in schools because there is a belief that only non-heterosexuals would be interested in this topic; those teachers who are afraid of being labelled as gay or lesbian avoid publicly showing any interest in LGBTQ issues (Ferfolja, 2007). Others feel like they lack the inherent ability to do so (Thein, 2013). Cumming-Potvin and Martino (2014) found that many teachers are uncomfortable talking to their students about families that have same-sex parents because such families constitute a minority in schools.

### 2.2.4 Systemic Barriers to Providing LGBTQ Inclusive Education

Many researchers have found that teachers avoid talking about LGBT issues with their students because parents might protest against their children learning about these issues, for moral or religious reasons (Bellini, 2012; Bower & Klecka, 2009; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimo, 2008; Thein, 2013). However, none of the cited researchers indicated what teachers believe would happen if parents protested. Perhaps the administration would ask them to stop teaching about these issues, perhaps they simply do not want to offend parents, or perhaps they fear losing their jobs as a result of the protesting. Teachers have also stated that they are afraid of offending colleagues and the administration (Bellini, 2012; Bower & Klecka, 2009). Some have expressed fear over losing their jobs if they taught about LGBTQ issues (Schneider & Dimo, 2008; Thein, 2013). Again, there is no clarity
about why teachers would feel in danger of losing their jobs. Perhaps they fear the administration would be opposed to the teaching and fire the teachers, or parents would complain to the administration and the same thing would happen.

While these may be barriers in other provinces or countries, this should not be the case in Ontario public schools. In their 2014 document *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools*, the Ontario Ministry of Education outlines their curriculum policy; the policy states that curriculum in Ontario must support “…respect for and acceptance of diversity in Ontario’s schools” (pg. 23). In accordance with this policy, revised curriculum documents now include sections on anti-discrimination and equity and inclusive education. The social studies, history, and geography curriculum document states, “In an inclusive education system, all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, so that they can feel engaged and empowered by their learning experiences” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, pg. 45). Curriculum documents for other subjects have similar curriculum policy expectations. So, in Ontario today, curriculum policy explicitly states that all students should see themselves reflected in the curriculum. This means that LGBTQ people, topics, and issues must be taught in the classroom. Therefore, teachers should not fear protest from parents, colleagues, or the administration when teaching about LGBTQ topics, nor should they fear being fired for doing so. If Ontario schools are following the curriculum policy, these things are only perceived barriers to teaching LGBTQ topics.

Although teachers in Ontario are required to teach about LGBTQ people and issues, this does not mean that parental backlash does not exist. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the public release of the new Ontario sexual education curriculum, which will introduce the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity in grade 3, was met with resistance from parents who think
this is not appropriate. The purpose of discussing these topics is to foster respect for all individuals. Specific expectation C3.3 states:

Students will describe how visible differences (e.g., skin, hair, eye colour, facial features, body size and shape, physical aids or different physical abilities, clothing, possessions) and invisible differences (e.g., learning abilities, skills and talents, personal or cultural values and beliefs, gender identity, sexual orientation, family background, personal preferences, allergies and sensitivities) make each person unique, and identify ways of showing respect for differences in others (The Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, pg. 124).

Despite the goal of creating a positive school climate where all students are treated respectfully despite their differences, parents have been protesting. Rallies have been held across Toronto since the curriculum was released; parents are asking the Liberals to stop the changes (Mangione, 2015). One Scarborough parent, who attended an information meeting at a Scarborough high school, said, “Why are you as a government teaching my children about…same sex marriage? That it’s okay for your brother to wear a dress?” (Ibid). This discussion of LGBTQ topics would be a big step in challenging heteronormativity in schools and creating a positive school climate, but this does not seem to be a goal that everyone supports. It will never be reached if the Liberals do what the concerned parents want and “…scrap the changes” (Ibid).

Another cited barrier to providing LGBTQ inclusive education is that teachers feel ill-prepared to teach about these topics because they have received no professional development on the topic (Ferfolja, 2007; Thein, 2013). Professional development is necessary if teachers are to understand LGBTQ issues and properly address them through their teaching (Dewitt, 2012). All school boards in Ontario are expected to provide opportunities for teachers to participate in professional learning and training on antidiscrimination topics, which included LGBTQ topics
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Lack of professional development on LGBTQ topics should
not be a barrier to teaching these topics in Ontario schools if the school boards are
following the policies set out by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Other teachers have said that
it would be difficult to teach about LGBTQ topics in their schools because librarians or
administrators restrict the books that are coming into the schools and they therefore do not have
access to LGBTQ themed books (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Ferfolja, 2007). If this is
indeed the case, there are other ways to discuss LGBTQ people and topics besides reading and
discussing books, such as discussing the contributions of LGBTQ people to society or talking
about families with lesbian or gay parents as part of a larger unit on families. I am confident that
my research will demonstrate that there are many diverse ways of adding LGBTQ topics and
people into the curriculum.

2.2.5 Teacher’s College Curriculum

Teacher education programs struggle with deciding which diversity topics should be
prioritized since time is an issue (Jennings, 2007). The danger of making some diversity topics
priorities while excluding others is that pre-service teachers may follow suit, considering some
forms of diversity to be worthy of attention while ignoring others (Ibid). In a survey of 142
public elementary and secondary U.S. teacher education programs, 67.2% of programs listed
sexual orientation as the least emphasized form of diversity taught to pre-service teachers and
8.6% of programs said they ignored the topic of sexual orientation completely (Ibid). In another
study of 65 public elementary teacher education programs across the U.S., Jennings and Sherwin
(2008) found that only 55.6% of programs addressed sexual orientation topics within the official
program curriculum. Bellini (2012) interviewed Canadian teachers who attended teacher
education programs in Canada between 1984 and 2004. All of the interviewed teachers felt that
There was a, “...total lack of regard given to gay and lesbian issues in pre-service programs” (Bellini, 2012, pg. 390). These U.S. and Canadian teacher education programs were not making it a priority to teach LGBTQ topics and issues and thus are running the risk of causing pre-service teachers to believe that it is not important to teach about these topics in their classrooms.

Also, as mentioned above, they may not feel they have the skills to do so even if they have the desire, because their education has not taught them how. This is indeed a barrier to challenging heteronormative teaching practices in schools.

2.3 The Teachers who Challenge Heteronormativity

DeJean (2007) found that teachers who actively challenge heteronormativity in their classrooms wish to foster students’ understanding of their own identities and beliefs as well as an awareness and respect for the identities and values of others. For ‘out’ teachers, their desire to be ‘out’ to their students and to teach LGBTQ topics stems from the recollection of who they were and how they felt as students (Ibid). Teachers in DeJean’s study noted that a supportive administration alleviates stress for teachers when they are faced with challenges in their teaching of LGBTQ topics (Ibid).

2.4 Reading Literature with LGBTQ Themes and Characters

2.4.1 Why should it be done?

It is important that all students see their own life experiences reflected in the books that they read (Rowell, 2007). When students with LGBTQ parents, family members, or friends, or who are LGBTQ themselves read books with LGBTQ characters and themes, they are provided with a mirror of their own experiences and these experiences are validated (Rowell, 2007; Smolkin & Young, 2011). For students who are not LGBTQ and who do not have LGBTQ
family members or friends, these books serve as a window into the lives of another group of people they might not know a lot about and may have misconceptions about; this is important for the development of empathy and understanding towards LGBTQ people (Ibid). Reading these books is also an opportunity to break the heteronormative silence around LGBTQ people and issues that are often prevalent in schools (Smolkin & Young, 2011). Books with LGBTQ characters can be used across all subjects to introduce and reinforce a variety of concepts (Rowell, 2007). For example, the children’s book *And Tango Makes Three*, which features two male penguins raising a baby penguin in the Central Park Zoo, can be used in science to help children learn about penguins, habitats, and different seasons, as well as different family structures (Ibid). The book *1, 2, 3: A Family Counting Book* features families with gay and lesbian parents participating in different family activities; this book can be used in math to teach children numbers and counting (Ibid).

### 2.4.2 Further Recommendations for Teaching LGBTQ Literature

It is clear that reading LGBTQ literature with students is essential. With this knowledge in mind, Clark & Blackburn (2009) ran a two-year book discussion group with high school students in which they selected, read, and discussed LGBTQ themed literature. Based on their experiences running this discussion group, Clark and Blackburn make recommendations about how to best use LGBTQ literature to challenge heteronormativity in schools. They stress the necessity of using books featuring LGBTQ characters throughout the school year within different units (Ibid). This is the only way to challenge the notion that LGBTQ people and issues are abnormal, which is the impression that is given when the books are only read during a single day or unit (Ibid). They recommend that teachers position students as LGBTQ or straight allies, instead of presuming all students to be straight and homophobic; this challenges students to live
up to the expectation of being supportive of LGBTQ rights and people (Ibid). Finally, they recommend that teachers use high-quality, pleasurable literature and include students in making the choice of what literature to read; this will make them more interested in reading the books and they will enjoy the experience more (Ibid). These recommendations can help teachers effectively use LGBTQ literature in the classroom.

2.4.3 Results of Reading Books Featuring LGBTQ Characters with Elementary Students

Teachers and researchers have tried reading LGBTQ literature with elementary school students. Schall and Kauffmann (2003) conducted a study of how elementary school students would respond to books featuring gay and lesbian characters. As part of the study, they brought a variety of these books into Kauffmann’s fourth/fifth grade classroom (Ibid). The experience involved discussing the students’ views and preconceptions about gay and lesbian people, reading one of the books as a class, having time for students to read these books individually and in groups, and then having small group discussions about the experience. From their discussions preceding and following the reading of the books, they found that the students wanted their teachers to tell them the truth about LGBTQ people and topics; they did not feel like the material was inappropriate for them to be learning and they stressed their ability to handle and benefit from such topics that some teachers find to be sensitive (Ibid). The students examined and reflected upon their beliefs and attempted to set aside their biases in order to understand and accept a more informed view on gay and lesbian people (Ibid). The experience allowed students to become more comfortable taking about LGBTQ issues and acting on their new knowledge and beliefs (Ibid). From this research we can see that overall, students are ready and willing to broaden their understandings about what it means to be LGBTQ and modify their behaviour to
reflect these new understandings. Bringing LGBTQ books into the classroom is an excellent way to facilitate this growth.

2.5 Other Ways to Introduce LGBTQ Topics

2.5.1 Lesbian Cinderella – Using Dramatization to Introduce LGBTQ Identities into the Classroom

Not only do students benefit from reading LGBTQ literature, they also benefit from learning about LGBTQ people and issues through other methods such as dramatization. In their article *Lesbian Cinderella and other stories: telling tales and researching sexualities equality in primary schools*, Cullen and Sandy (2009) discuss what happened when Sandy, as part of a unit on alternative fairy tales, introduced a non-straight identity into her classroom in the form of a lesbian Cinderella character named Cindy. Sandy, who is a lesbian in real life, dressed up as Cindy and told a version of the Cinderella story in which Cindy goes to a house party and dances with a girl but at midnight she rushes home, leaving one of her boots behind; the girl eventually finds Cindy and they move out to go to university together and live happily ever after (Ibid). After the dramatization, the students asked Cindy many questions, such as ‘Did you really love her?’, ‘Did you get married?’, and ‘Are you really gay?’ (Ibid). Cindy answered the question about being gay in the affirmative (Ibid). Following the dramatization, Sandy’s students were assigned the task of creating their own alternative Cinderella story, and some of the students elected to write about lesbian Cinderellas as well (Ibid).

The dramatization of Cindy introduced the possibility of gay/lesbian people and relationships and temporarily disrupted the heteronormativity of the primary school classroom, which is a positive step. However, the authors caution that this one-time encounter was not enough to create a lasting change in her students’ thinking about normative sex/gender identities.
(Ibid). Echoing the sentiments of Clark & Blackburn (2009), they seem to suggest that in order to challenge what is seen as normal, LGBTQ people and topics must be continually inserted throughout the curriculum over the course of the entire school year.

2.5.2 It’s Elementary

In the documentary *It’s elementary: talking about gay issues in school* (1996), Debra Chasnoff and Helen S. Cohen film elementary and middle school teachers in 6 public and private schools as they start a dialogue with their students about gay and lesbian people and topics and work to combat homophobia in schools. The documentary shows the teachers using a variety of methods to discuss these topics with their students, which include: having students brainstorm the ideas that come to mind when they hear the words ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ and talking about where they got these ideas and the dangers of being misinformed about gay or lesbian people; talking about famous people who are gay or lesbian; creating a class book that warns about bullying people who are or are suspected to be gay or lesbian; having students talk about instances in which they were teased and how it felt and tying this into teasing gay or lesbian students; talking about stereotypes in general and stereotypes of gays and lesbians; bringing in gay and lesbian guest speakers; talking with students who have gay or lesbian parents; having students write about their feelings towards gay and lesbian people, etc. These methods are also recommended by institutions and organizations such as the Toronto District School Board and the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (Elementary Teachers; Federation of Ontario, 2004; Toronto District School Board, 2002, 2011). The documentary showed that it is possible for teachers to talk about gay issues in the classroom in an age appropriate way and that students are fully able to engage in and benefit from these conversations.
The sequel to the documentary, called *It’s still elementary* (2008), features interviews with some of the students who were featured in *It’s elementary*. The students reflect on how their experiences talking about gay issues in the classroom positively affected how they think, how they act, and their comfort with themselves and others. Their statements emphasize how important and useful these experiences are to students and challenge many of the objections teachers have to talking about these issues with their students.

Many teachers and parents believe that it would be wrong to teach about gay issues because children are innocent; they think that students will not be able to handle the subject or that they need to be steered toward a heterosexual lifestyle (Flores; 2014; Macdonald, 2006; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). There are many who believe that having LGBTQ discussions will promote homosexuality or even cause students to become gay (Flores, 2014). In her interview, Chloe Moushey challenges these beliefs. She says,

> The fact that people think that if someone’s educated about gay issues they’re more likely to become gay is absurd to say the least. I mean I’m straight. I have a boyfriend who I’m very happy with. And I think that learning about these things that people don’t usually talk about have given me tools to ask questions about other issues. Education is never wrong if you present the facts and you allow someone to think about it for themselves. I don’t think that there are very many downsides of that.

Raimol Cortado’s grade 8 teacher brought in gay and lesbian university students to speak to his class. Raimol says this about his experience,

> That was the first time that I ever heard like them having stories about gay people in the class. To be honest, I think I had a lot of stereotypes towards gay people. That particular lesson helped me understand more. It touched me at that moment. You know what I mean. I really remembered, like, the different struggles they went through being labelled as stuff. I think it really broke through a lot of barriers. Kinda helped me to understand other people more. I learned to respect people more.

This experience listening to and asking questions to gay and lesbian people challenged Raimol’s stereotypes and helped him understand more about what it is like to be a gay or lesbian person.
He learned to respect groups of people who are different from himself. These were the experiences of two heterosexual students. Brandon Rice now identifies as a gay man. He says,

When I was being filmed it started to sink in this may be who I am, you know, and I think I really started to kinda figure myself out a little bit… I remember it was soothing to hear teachers and faculty at school letting me know that it’s ok. Just to know that I had that support, I think they really lifted a burden off my shoulders.

Brandon’s words really emphasize the importance of challenging the invisibility of LGBTQ people and issues in the classroom. When Brandon heard staff members in the school not only talking about gay people but doing so in a positive manner, he both began to figure out his identity and was comforted in knowing that this identity was both legitimized and supported by teachers and other faculty members at his school. These two documentaries show that no matter how it is done, talking positively about LGBTQ topics with students is paramount in challenging homophobia and heteronormativity is schools.

2.6 Conclusion

While writing this literature review, I learned a lot about homophobic and transphobic bullying, curriculum and heteronormativity, reading literature with LGBTQ themes and characters, and other methods, besides reading LGBTQ literature, that can be used to effectively introduce LGBTQ topics in the classroom. I also learned about the positive outcomes of challenging heteronormativity in schools such as a reduction in bullying and the associated negative outcomes, a deeper understanding of and respect for LGBTQ people and other minority groups, a greater acceptance of the self, and the validation of the identities of students who are LGBTQ or have LGBTQ family members or friends. While writing this review I also discovered a number of gaps in the literature. Firstly, the literature mentions that teachers fear the loss of their jobs if they teach about LGBTQ issues (Schneider & Dimito, 2008; Thein, 2013); however
it does not say why teachers have this fear. It is important to know why teachers are afraid that they will lose their jobs if they teach about LGBTQ issues and what they believe will happen if parents protest the teaching of these issues; if this is known then either these teachers could be directed towards equity and inclusivity policies that allay their fears or illuminate where these types of policies are missing and need to be created. Secondly, much research has focused on the reasons why teachers are hesitant to introduce LGBTQ topics into the curriculum, but not a lot has been done to discover what challenges teachers face when they actually begin to do so. Thirdly, little research has been done on the factors, resources, and experiences that aid teachers who are committed to challenging heteronormativity in the classroom. It is an important area to research, as it can help school boards and administrators to support teachers in challenging heteronormativity and creating a more positive and inclusive school climate. Finally, the literature reviewed in these last two sections has revealed many ways to introduce LGBTQ topics into the classroom. However, I feel that there should be more literature available that discusses how practicing teachers do exactly this. I am confident that my research will serve to fill these gaps in the existing literature.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the research methodology. I begin by outlining my research procedures and instruments of data collection. I then describe participant sampling and recruitment before moving on to explain the data analysis procedures used in the study. After that, I review the ethical considerations that are relevant to my study. After that, I identify the study’s methodological limitations as well as its numerous methodological strengths. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a brief overview as well as a summary of the key methodological decisions and their rationale given my research questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This study was conducted as a qualitative research study that involves reviewing relevant literature and conducting semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research involves the study of a research problem through the collection of data in a natural setting and through data analysis that determines themes within the data (Creswell, 2013). The final product includes the voices of the research participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the research problem, and the research’s contribution to the existing literature (Ibid). This research study draws on characteristics from narrative research. A narrative approach to qualitative research involves collecting stories from a small number of individuals about their lived and told experiences (Ibid). Narrative research often takes the form of an oral history: collecting personal reflections of events and their causes and effects (Ibid). In this study, I
gathered personal reflections from elementary school teachers about the experience of challenging heteronormativity in their classrooms.

Qualitative research is an important form of research because it allows for the deep exploration of a problem or issue (Ibid). Qualitative researchers commonly talk directly with participants and use open-ended questions that allow participants to tell their stories in detail (Ibid). Researchers also commonly design these questions specifically for their studies, rather than using questionnaires developed by other researchers (Ibid). These methods allow qualitative researchers to develop a complex understanding of the specific issue being studied and to identify variables that cannot be easily measured through quantitative research (Ibid). This process can be strengthened when researchers and their participants collaborate during the process of designing interview questions, analysing data, or interpreting data (Ibid). Qualitative research is important because it can empower individuals to have their voices heard; these voices can lead to important changes in the lives of many people (Ibid).

The purpose of my research was to gain insight into the experiences of elementary school teachers who work to challenge heteronormativity in their classrooms and schools. My research questions were designed to investigate the topics these teachers explore with their students, the resources and materials they use, the challenges they face, the supports they rely on, and student response to their pedagogy. Given my research purpose and questions, a qualitative research approach is the most fitting. I conducted face-to-face interviews with participants using open-ended questions that I have designed specifically based on my research purpose and problem. I was able to gain a complex, detailed understanding of the experiences my participants have with challenging heteronormativity in elementary schools and my new insights are a valuable contribution to the existing literature.
3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary method of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews involve asking questions that are guided by identified themes (Qu & Dumay, 2011). I formulated my research questions based on themes that I discovered through a review of the existing literature on the topic of heteronormativity in schools. During the interviews I asked 32 questions that were written to address: teachers’ backgrounds; the nature of heteronormativity in schools; the LGBTQ topics they address with their students; the resources and supports that help them challenge heteronormativity in their classrooms; the challenges they face; the responses to their pedagogy from parents, students, and colleagues; and their future goals for challenging heteronormativity in the classroom. The attached appendix (Appendix B) provides a complete list of interview questions. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes and were audio recorded.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because this method benefits both the interviewer and the interviewee. The semi-structured interview has its basis in conversation and allows the interviewee to modify aspects of the interview such as the style, pace, and order of questions to elicit the fullest possible responses from the interviewee (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Semi-structured interviews also allow interviewees to provide responses in their own terms; this is important if researchers want to understand how their participants see the social world that is being studied (Ibid). Semi-structured interviews are flexible and comprehensible and are an effective way of gathering information (Ibid).

Qualitative research interviews have been shown to have positive effects on the interviewees. Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson (1994) found that participants who took part in
 qualitative research interviews reported: a sense of relief that seems to come in part from having an engaged listener, a validation of the self as an individual of worth, feeling good about providing important information that may be shared with others, feelings of empowerment, gaining a new perspective about their experiences, and a feeling of being ‘healed’. Similarly, Wolgemuth, et al (2015) found that qualitative research interview participants experienced numerous benefits including the opportunity to: talk to someone, self-reflect, emotionally cleanse, become knowledgeable about a topic of personal or professional interest, connect with a larger community based on shared experience, advocate for a community or cause, and help someone else down the road.

3.3 Participants

In this section I outline the sampling criteria I created for participant recruitment and the avenue I selected for participant recruitment. I have also included a section where I introduce each of the participants.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

The goal of this study was to collect data regarding teacher practices for challenging heteronormativity in the elementary classroom. In order to collect the desired data, it was crucial to interview exemplary teachers who are actively committed to integrating LGBTQ topics into the curriculum and have experience doing so. Interview participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They have been including LGBTQ topics into the curriculum at the primary/junior level for at least 5 years
2. They have demonstrated leadership, commitment, and/or expertise in the area of challenging heteronormativity in schools (e.g. they have led or participated in professional development on this topic, developed curriculum materials, conducted graduate studies in this area etc.)

Teachers needed to be including LGBTQ topics into the curriculum at the primary/junior level for at least five years because I wanted to interview teachers with experience in this area who will have likely used a variety of resources, encountered different responses from students, parents, co-workers, and administrators, responded to different types of challenges, and modified their pedagogy based on their experiences. I hoped to develop a complex understanding of what it is like to challenge heteronormativity in the elementary classroom and I deemed that interviewing teachers with experience was the best way to do so. As I stated above, it was important to me to interview exemplary teachers. Teachers who are exemplary at challenging heteronormativity in their schools will have made an impact that can be noticed by others in the school. Thus, by interviewing teachers who had demonstrated leadership, commitment, and/or expertise in the area of challenging heteronormativity in schools, I was able to ensure that I was interviewing exemplary teachers.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures and Recruitment

In this study I applied convenience sampling and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling involves the selection of the most accessible participants (Marshall, 1996). Purposive sampling involves selecting a sample that will be the most productive for answering the research question (Ibid). My study adopts both convenience and purposive sampling procedures.
At the start of my search for participants, I used convenience sampling. I began by speaking to teachers at an elementary school in which I was completing a practicum placement. I informed them about the purpose of my research as well as my sampling criteria. This can be contrasted with a method of purposive sampling which involves contacting specific school board representatives with my list of sampling criteria. As a result of my inquiry, I was pointed towards Shelly (pseudonym), one of the teachers at the school, who fit the criteria. I spoke to Shelly about my research and informed her that I was searching for participants. She was interested in becoming a participant and elected to pass along an overview of my study and the participant sampling criteria to educators who she knows to be exemplary at challenging heteronormativity in their elementary schools. This is a subset of purposive sampling known as snowball sampling, which occurs when individuals who have been selected to participate in the study recommend others who might be useful (Marshall, 1996). Shelly passed on my study overview, sampling criteria, and contact information to other educators; they felt no pressure or obligation to participate in my study. This is how I found two more participants, Peter (pseudonym) and Jason (pseudonym). My final participant, Amanda (pseudonym), was also found through convenience sampling. She was a classmate’s associate teacher and he passed my study information on to her. She was interested in participating in my study and I contacted her to set up an interview. I informed participants that they would be able to drop out of the study at any time throughout the process without consequence to ensure that only participants who genuinely wanted to be part of the study would be included.
3.3.3 Participant Bios

Shelly

At the time of the interview, Shelly was a teacher at a York Region District School Board school. She taught grade eight homeroom and a grade seven and eight visual arts rotation. She also did prep-coverage for three kindergarten classrooms, during which time she taught drama and dance. She had been teaching for fifteen years and had been at her current school for fourteen years. Shelly ran the school’s Equity and Inclusivity Club. She also ran Voices for Africa, which is a group where students drum and dance to raise money for the Stephen Lewis Foundation. Shelly identified as straight.

Peter

Peter was a former teacher who taught at a number of Toronto District School Board and York Region District School Board Schools. He taught grade seven and eight for twelve years before becoming a vice-principal and then a principal at YRDSB schools. At the time of the interview, Peter held another position with the YRDSB. During his time as a teacher, Peter coached various sports teams and ran choir programs. Peter identified as gay.

Jason

At the time of the interview, Jason was a principal at a York Region District School Board school; it was his second year in this role. Before that he was the principal of another school in the YRDSB. Prior to that, he was a teacher at YRDSB schools for eight years. During this time he taught grades seven and eight and was also an instrumental and general music
teacher. Jason had taught everything from kindergarten to grade twelve/OAC. Jason identified as gay.

*Amanda*

At the time of the interview, Amanda taught grade one at a Peel District School Board school. Amanda had also taught kindergarten and grade two and had been teaching for thirteen years. She had been at her current school for three years. Amanda was also working as her school’s health and safety designate and was on a number of school committees, including the social committee and Day of Pink committee. Amanda identified as a lesbian.

3.4 Data Analysis

Following the interview process, I transcribed the interviews using the audio recordings. After the interviews were transcribed, I read the transcripts numerous times. Agar (1980) endorses reading entire transcripts multiple times and immersing oneself in the details; it is important to get a sense of the whole interview before breaking it down into parts. Next I coded the transcripts, using both In-Vivo and descriptive codes. Following this, I combined similar codes together to make them more succinct. I then looked at the codes across participants and grouped similar codes into categories using a table. After that, I grouped related categories according to shared themes and synthesized themes where appropriate. I used my research questions and the existing literature as an interpretive tool to guide me through this process. Finally, I interpreted the data, which involved finding its larger meaning (Creswell, 2013). In this case, making meaning from the data consisted of looking at the identified themes and how the teachers spoke about them and discussing why this matters to the topic of challenging heteronormativity in elementary schools, given what I learned by conducting a review of the
literature. I also looked at null data (what the participants did not talk about) and why this matters to the field. I report the research findings in chapter four.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Prior to taking part in the interviews, all participants were sent a letter of consent (Appendix A) that they were required to sign. This demonstrates the participants’ willingness to be interviewed and audio recorded. The letter provided an overview of the study, addressed ethical implications, and specified expectations for participation. Participants were informed that they would be assigned pseudonyms and that any identifying markers related to their school or students would be kept confidential. I let them know that there were no known risks to participating in this study. Participants were aware that they would be able decline to answer specific questions and withdraw from the study at any time, even if they had already given consent. After the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and clarify or retract any statements before the data was analyzed. All data collected from the interviews, including audio recording, are saved on my password-protected laptop and the only people who will have access to the data are me and my course instructor. The data will be destroyed after five years.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

I recognize that due to the methodology and design of this study, it has some limitations. Due to the MTRP guidelines, I was only able to interview teachers. I was unable to interview or send surveys to students or parents. This would have helped me form a broader understanding of how these groups react to the pedagogy of the teachers interviewed. Conducting classroom observations would have also allowed me to see teachers actually teaching LGBTQ topics to
their students. I would be able to see these teachers using resources in the classroom and responding to students’ questions. I would also be able to see first-hand how students react to the lessons being taught. The sample size for this study is also quite small; I was only be able to interview 2-3 teachers. The results of the study only reflect the insights and practices of these teachers when there are so many other exemplary teachers who could provide insight into the experience of challenging heteronormativity in elementary schools. Finally, the results of this study cannot generalize the experiences of all elementary school teachers who are working to challenge heteronormativity.

This study does have its strengths. Its use of semi-structured interviews has numerous benefits, as discussed previously. Teachers were able to tell their stories in-depth and in their own words. This allowed for a more complex understanding of the topic than would have been possible if another method, such as conducting a closed survey, was used (Creswell, 2013). Participating in these interviews validated the teachers’ voices, views, and experiences and allowed them to reflect upon their practices as teachers (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994). Also, they provided information about a topic that they were passionate about and this information were able to help many other teachers and students; this can make them feel good about making a difference in the lives of other (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994; Wolgemuth et al, 2015). As well, it has been acknowledged that this study is only based on interviews with a small number of participants and the results cannot be generalized. But the purpose of the study is not to generalize about the population at large; it is to investigate exemplary practices of teachers who are challenging heteronormativity in schools and further inform the topic beyond what is already available in the literature. Thus, the methods and design of the study achieves its purpose.
3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained that this study is a qualitative research study that used semi-structured interviews to uncover the insights and practices of exemplary teachers who were challenging heteronormativity in the elementary classroom. The information gathered will make an important contribution to the existing literature. Interview participants were required to meet two main criteria: 1. they had been including LGBTQ topics into the curriculum at the primary/junior level for at least five years and 2. They had demonstrated leadership, commitment, and/or expertise in the area of challenging heteronormativity in schools. Interview participants who met these criteria were found using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling, beginning by informing other teachers and Masters of Teaching students about the study and sampling criteria. Two study participants were found using convenience sampling and two were found through the use of snowball sampling. The names and identifying characteristics of all interview participants have been kept confidential. Participants had the right to refuse to answer any question posed during the interview and had the ability to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Due to the methodology of the study it has some limitations including an inability to conduct classroom observation or collect data from parents or students, a small sample size, an inability to generalize the results to the larger population. Whatever its limitations, a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews allowed for a complex understanding of the topic of challenging heteronormativity in elementary schools and will also be beneficial for participants. Next, in chapter 4, I will report the research findings.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I report and discuss findings from interviews I conducted with four elementary school educators, three of whom work for the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) and one of whom works for the Peel District School Board (PDSB). Shelly is a grade seven and eight teacher who identifies as straight; Peter is a former intermediate teacher, vice-principal, and principal who identifies as gay; Jason is a former intermediate teacher and a current principal who identifies as gay; Amanda is a grade one teacher who identifies as a lesbian. The goal of conducting these interviews was to answer the question, ‘How are elementary school teachers challenging heteronormativity in the classroom?’ Upon reviewing the responses of the participants to my interview questions, seven main themes arose. I have organized my chapter according to these themes, which are: 1) teachers believed that heteronormativity in school oppresses and marginalizes staff, students, and parents 2) diversity among staff, students, and families leads to teachers’ commitment to challenging heteronormativity in schools 3) teachers identified a range of LGBTQ topics that they teach in their classrooms 4) one aspect of how these teachers challenge heteronormativity in the classroom involves not just focusing on the topic but on teaching methods 5) to support their teaching of LGBTQ topics, teachers use books, media, family photographs, online resources, and board-vetted resources 6) when working to make schools less heteronormative, teachers encounter challenges in the form of colleagues, administrators, parents, students, their own approaches, and the nature of the work itself 7) in order to effectively challenge heteronormativity, teachers need the support of colleagues and administration.

4.1 Teachers believe heteronormativity in schools oppresses and marginalizes staff and students
4.1.1 Heteronormativity assumes that everyone is heterosexual and cisgender

When asked to describe, in their own words, what heteronormativity means, three out of four participants spoke about how heteronormativity is centred on the assumption that everyone, including children, is heterosexual and cisgender (having a gender identity that matches the sex they were assigned at birth). As Peter put it,

Heteronormativity means…that we have…an assumption or a bias that kids come from families that have a mother and a father, it makes assumptions that…they will date the opposite gender…it assumes that they’re not struggling with their gender identity, that they see and identify themselves with their biological sex.

Further, Jason mentioned that heteronormativity positions anyone who is not heterosexual and cisgender as being abnormal. He said, “…heteronormativity to me is…an assumption or belief that heterosexuality…is the…quote on quote normal sexual orientation and thereby…identifying all other domains of sexual orientation or expressions of sexual orientation to fall outside of the norm.” This is in line with Robinson and Ferfolja (2008), who write that heteronormativity is the construction of heterosexuality as being normal and natural and non-heterosexuality as deviant, abnormal, and unnatural. Amanda described what she associates with the word ‘heteronormativity’. She said, “I think about people seeing only one way and kind of ignoring the other.”

As the research participants outlined, heteronormativity assumes that everyone is straight and cisgender. It positions heterosexuality as normal and everything else as abnormal. It recognizes one group of people while ignoring the other. These facets of heteronormativity, when played out in schools, make it difficult for both teachers and students to be ‘out’ at school.

4.1.2 Heteronormativity makes it difficult to be ‘out’

Peter, Jason, and Amanda all identified as being homosexual. They each spoke about their experiences as gay teachers in an elementary school. Both Peter and Amanda have come
out to their students. Peter no longer taught in the classroom, but he recalled what it was like to be an ‘out’ gay teacher at a number of GTA schools. He said, “…at…a few of my schools I had a very homophobic, very hetero, uh, normative learning environment where being an out teacher was very difficult.” When elaborating on these experiences, Peter discussed how students used gay slurs when talking to him and how students would fall away from activities he ran due to the influence of their peers. In his words: “I was often struggling to…maintain relational trust and respect with students.” Peter sadly recalled that he did not have administrative support in challenging the homophobia that he was experiencing. The homophobic bullying of teachers by students is an area that is largely absent from the existing literature.

Amanda talked about the fear she experienced when she decided to come out to her first grade students by telling them that she was marrying her female partner. She said,

…I let them know I was getting married and they would ask about it and… I felt at first that I was worried about the ramifications… I was working at a school where another teacher was ousted accidentally to the kids and the parents of the kids in her class, many of them were in an outrage, wanted their kids removed…

Though homophobic parents did not turn out to be a problem for Amanda, the experience of the other teacher she worked with is an example of what could happen when teachers come out at school. Many researchers have found that teachers often avoid talking about LGBTQ issues because parents might protest (Bellini, 2012; Bower & Klecka, 2009; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimito, 2008; Thein, 2013). However, as I mentioned in chapter 2, these researchers do not commonly elaborate on what form these protests might take. The experience of Amanda’s colleague offers some insight into how parents may react if their children are exposed to LGBTQ issues against their wishes.
As for Jason, although he was committed to teaching about LGBTQ topics, he never came out to his students while he was a classroom teacher. Jason described why many people, such as himself, would choose to display a ‘heteronormative expressed identity’:

…the gay community will, because either they see that either it’s work promotions, less push-back from parents, maybe, you may prescribe to what could be seen to be a heterosexual identity or a…heteronormative expressed identity in order to achieve an outcome, feel less push-back, or whatever it may be. So members of the LGBTQ community will often behave in ways which could be deemed heteronormative for personal reasons.

All four teachers spoke about LGBTQ elementary students struggling with coming out at school. Peter recalled when two intermediate students came out to their peers, “…we had two students that had come out and were being bullied and marginalized in the school.” The bullying at school, as well as not being accepted by their parents, caused these students to run away from home. Jason recalled, “…there was a period where ‘that’s so gay’ was the buzzword, the standard put-down on the yard.” The homophobic bullying of elementary school students is not surprising. GLSEN reported that 45% of American elementary students surveyed reported hearing the word ‘gay’ used in a negative way and 26% reported hearing homophobic comments from their peers (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2012). Though a similar survey has not been conducted in Canada, these teachers provide evidence that homophobic bullying exists in Canadian elementary schools as well. If teachers fail to educate students about LGBTQ people and issues, this bullying will escalate at the secondary level (Taylor and Peter, 2011).

LGBTQ students are not the only ones affected by heteronormative school culture. Students who have LGBTQ parents often find it difficult to be ‘out’ about their families because they are not shown that this type of family is normal and okay. As Shelly put it, “All the stories we read have a mommy and a daddy. All the…imagery we see has a mommy, daddy, and children.” Amanda recalled, “…one year I heard a teacher say “oh that’s so gay” in front of all of
his kids.” Peter outlined the effect that this type of heteronormative school culture has on young students. He said,

…it makes it hard for the child who’s in a same-sex family to share comfortably what they did on the weekend…they have to write in their journals…how many kids are gonna feel safe and respected for saying, you know, “Mumma and Mummy and I and our sister went to the movies” right?

All four teachers stressed that heteronormativity in elementary schools makes it difficult for LGBTQ teachers, LGBTQ students, and students who come from LGBTQ families to be ‘out’ at school.

4.1.3 These teachers believe that it is still common for classroom teachers to use heteronormative classroom materials and teaching practices

A common thread woven throughout the responses of all participants was their observations of colleagues using heteronormative classroom materials and teaching practices. Peter stated that teachers typically choose heteronormative stories for read-alouds and guided reading. This observation is shared by Smolkin and Young (2011) who report that the lives of students who are LGBTQ or have LGBTQ family members are, “…seldom mirrored in the books they find in schools” (pg. 217). Shelly spoke to this as well, adding that the language and images teachers use assume that none of the students in the class or their families are LGBTQ. She said, “All the resources. All the imagery. All the language. Make the assumptions.”

Amanda voiced her concern about how teachers’ practices are perpetuating potentially harmful gender binaries:

…often I see, you know, let’s do a pattern of boy-girl-boy-girl. You know, that’s what we see in our classrooms…I see it all the time in kindergarten, I see it in grade one…I think to myself, well what about that young boy or girl who just doesn’t feel like what we’re labelling them as?

Amanda stressed that she avoids dividing her students according to gender because this can be emotionally harmful to some students. She recommended that if teachers are, for example,
looking for ways to divide students into groups or slow down their movement within the classroom, they can use what students are wearing or something else not tied to the gender identity of the student. This is a simple change that teachers can easily incorporate to make their classrooms less heteronormative.

Amanda also lamented that in many grades and subject areas, LGBTQ topics are not in the curriculum and therefore teachers are not talking about them. This experience is shared by Jason, who recalled, “…all of the years that I taught in the classroom…I believe I was the only one that was inclusive of LGBTQ experiences, identities, and society.” There are several possible explanations for this. Ferfolja (2007) found that some teachers fear being labelled as gay or lesbian if they discuss LGBTQ issues; Cumming-Potvin and Martino (2014) noted that teachers feel uncomfortable talking about students with LGBTQ parents because they constitute a minority in schools; finally, Thein (2003) reported that teachers simply do not know how to teach about LGBTQ issues. The reasoning behind Thein’s finding will be discussed in detail in the following sub-section.

4.1.4 Participants believed that most classroom teachers are not educated about heteronormativity

During his interview, Jason brought up an important point:

I think a lot of the people that I worked with, a lot of the people that I worked for, wouldn’t actually have an understanding of what heteronormativity is… and how their behaviour, actions, conduct, whatever it may be…either supports or further ingrains a heteronormative mindset.

According to Jason, there are not many teachers who actually understand what heteronormativity is. If they do not understand it, they cannot change it. Upon speaking with the participants, the reason behind this lack of understanding became clear. When asked if LGBTQ inclusive education had been part of their education during teacher’s college, all four participants stressed
that it had not. Peter said, “Absolutely not…nothing. There was zero.” Shelly said, “It was not.” Amanda said, “Not really…” and Jason said, “No. It was not…I don’t even recall it being specifically referenced in any fashion.” This is not abnormal. As mentioned in chapter 2, Bellini (2012) interviewed Canadian teachers who attended teacher’s college between 1984 and 2004. Teachers stated that there was a, “…total lack of regard given to gay and lesbian issues in pre-service programs” (pg. 309). Many of the teachers in elementary school classrooms today, including all four of my participants, attended teacher’s college during that time. This lack of instruction may have sent the message that LGBTQ education is not important. And for those that do believe it is important, they were not taught the skills to implement it. This is a barrier to challenging heteronormative teaching practices in elementary classrooms.

Each participant stressed that in order to effectively challenge heteronormativity in schools, teachers need to be educated about the issues. They all recommend professional development for teachers so that they can develop an understanding of heteronormativity in schools and learn the skills to begin changing things. When asked about his future goals for challenging heteronormativity Jason, an elementary school principal, said, “I wanna return to very vigorous, professional development for staff.” Amanda believed that principals need to receive this type of professional development as well.

4.2 Diversity among staff, students, and families leads to teachers’ commitment to challenging heteronormativity in schools

4.2.1 Teachers’ personal experiences and connections to the LGBTQ community led to their commitment to challenging heteronormativity in schools

When asked how they became interested in and committed to challenging heteronormativity in schools, participants cited personal experiences and connections to the LGBTQ community. As outlined previously, Peter was faced with homophobia when he was
‘out’ to his students in a number of GTA schools. He challenged heteronormativity so that other teachers do not have the same experiences as he did. Amanda said, “…I’m a lesbian myself. I’ve been out for over twenty years…and it’s really informed everything I do about education in terms of educating generally…about queer issues…” Jason remembered feeling different and isolated from his peers:

This is a personal journey for me…as a child and youth that was raised in rural Ontario, I grew up feeling that I was the only little gay kid in my community…I really firmly felt well into my late teenage years and into my undergraduate studies in university that I was one of a kind…I was very well aware of my degree of difference.

These findings agree with those of DeJean (2007) in his study of California teachers who are ‘out’ in the classroom. For many of those teachers, remembering who they were and how they felt as children motivated them to help students feel comfortable being themselves (Ibid).

Although she identified as straight, Shelly had a close connection with the LGBTQ community. She explained, “…ever since I can remember… most of my friends… identify or are members of the LGBTQ community.” Shelly was aware of the struggles of the LGBTQ community and strived to make life better for them and all marginalized communities. All four teachers became interested in challenging heteronormativity because of a personal connection to the LGBTQ community.

4.2.2 These teachers’ knowledge that their schools have students who are LGBTQ or come from LGBTQ families supports their belief in challenging heteronormativity

EGALE Canada reported that every high school class has LGBTQ students or those with LGBTQ family members (Taylor and Peter, 2011). The same is true in elementary schools. During their interviews, participants spoke of these students, who may be wondering if their lives are normal. For Peter, another factor that kept him committed to challenging heteronormativity in schools was, “…children who are in the process of questioning or coming out…” Shelly said,
“…there’s going to be students in the classroom that identify. And they may be wondering where they fit in. They may be wondering [if] what they’re going through is normal.” Amanda spoke about transgender students: “…we’re seeing more and more…kids younger and younger are recognizing that their internal image does not match their external image.” Jason considered the diverse nature of his current school. He said, “… just as we’re ethno culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse, we have the same level of diversity when it comes to sexuality and gender expression and gender identity.” Interviewees also spoke of students in their schools with LGBTQ family members. As Peter explained, “…we have students who are…sexually straight but culturally queer. They come from same-sex families, they may have LGBTQ members in their extended family and have close contact and relationships with them…”

Shelly and Amanda discussed normalizing LGBTQ identity through education. According to Shelly, teachers must assure students that their families are normal. Amanda explained that students will only feel safe coming out if being LGBTQ is seen as normal: “…whether they’re coming out as trans, whether they’re coming out as gay or lesbian, whatever, we need to make it safe for them and the only way to make it safe is if it becomes normative, normalized, I think.” Shelly also stressed that LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ families will hide at school unless they feel safe. As mentioned previously, homophobic bullying exists in elementary schools and is one of the reasons why students hide their identities (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2012). Like Shelly and Amanda, Ferfolja (2007) notes that the only way to make schools safe for LGBTQ students is through education about LGBTQ people and issues.

Amanda also explained that normalizing LGBTQ identity lets students know that it is okay to be different. She said, “… some schools are talking about it in terms of it’s okay to feel different and it’s okay to love people of the same gender.” An example from the literature that
supports Amanda is a quote from *It’s still elementary*. Brandon, a student who realized that he may be gay during the filming of the first documentary, said, “I remember it was soothing to hear teachers and faculty at school letting me know that it’s okay” (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2008). Talking about LGBTQ people and issues helps students accept themselves as normal.

All the interviewees also emphasized the importance of ensuring that students see their lives represented in the classroom in terms of subject matter and materials. They spoke about how this validates both LGBTQ students and those with LGBTQ families. Shelly said, “For those students who…identify, what they’re going through is validated.” Amanda stressed that, …it’s important for kids to know that families can look different. It’s just as important for the kids of divorce, or for the kids with a single family, or the kids with two moms or two dads, or…the kid whose parent has died and now lives with grandma and grandpa, because kids generally need to know that they’re okay and that their type of family is just as valid as that I have a mom and a dad…

These comments agree with those of Rowell (2007) and Smolkin and Young (2011), with regards to validating students by providing them with mirrors into their own experiences.

4.2.3 These teachers believe that challenging heteronormativity is important because learning about LGBTQ topics and people teaches students to accept everyone regardless of difference

When asked how students benefit from LGBTQ topics, the participants emphasized how this teaching would make students more accepting of difference. Amanda spoke about her grade one students and how it is important for them to know that families can look different. Jason framed this in terms of fostering a sense of understanding around the LGBTQ community. He explained,

…we are preparing our children to live in the twenty-first century. And the reality is that our society includes a large number of LGBTQ persons that they will work with, that they will live with, that they will be neighbours to, that they will see at community centres, that they will go to school with, and so to me, it fosters a sense of understanding the people that you will experience, and it fosters a sense of understanding around the community…
Shelly extended this acceptance to all people who are different. She said, “…it just spreads awareness about differences and encourages…including all, regardless of differences.” Peter encourages his students not only to accept differences but to celebrate them. In *It’s still elementary*, one student shared his experience of hearing gay and lesbian college students speak to his grade eight class. He recalled, “I think it really broke through a lot of barriers. Kinda helped me to understand other people more. I learned to respect people more” (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2008). The testimony of students in *It’s still elementary* lends support to these teachers’ belief that learning about LGBTQ topics makes students more accepting of difference.

4.3 Teachers identified a range of LGBTQ topics that they teach in their classrooms

Interviewees identified a range of LGBTQ topics that they taught in their classrooms. Amanda, a grade one teacher and former kindergarten teacher, taught her students simpler topics than Peter, Jason, and Shelly, who predominantly taught grade seven and eight. In her classrooms, Amanda had focused on different types of families, gender norms, and gender identity. Amanda said,

…we talk about families, how families can be different, that your family is who you love, no matter what their gender, race, whatever. We talk…a fair bit about the idea of boy versus girl. Is there a way to be a boy? Is there a way to be a girl? Do you have to follow…any specific gender rules or gender roles? You know, we talk about it in terms of, can a boy wear pink? Can a girl wear black or blue? You know, can a boy play with dolls in our house centre?

Peter has covered a number of topics with his intermediate students, including: types of prejudice, dating, personal identity, coming out, and gay-straight alliances. He also had his students create persuasive writing pieces about LGBTQ topics, public service announcements on LGBTQ topics, and informative fliers on LGBTQ topics to send to community agencies. Shelly and Jason both taught their students about the different terms in the LGBTQ acronym. Jason
explained that his inclusion of LGBTQ topics was often “…around direct teaching in terms of what LGBTQ means, just doing an LGBTQ 101.” Jason also spoke about centering his teaching around politics, popular culture, civil rights, the Holocaust, oppression, and music history. Shelly has focussed on the difference between sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. She aims to get her students talking by integrating aspects of LGBTQ education into all subject areas. She explained how she might do this when writing a math test:

I might create a question that says ‘Joe went to the convenience store and purchased milk and she...’ …and so the question presents something where…it might spark conversation. “Wait a minute, is Joe, isn’t Joe a guy?”… so in an intermediate classroom there would be questions, and then you get to have this conversation about gender identity in the classroom.

In chapter 2, I noted that there is minimal literature available on topics that practicing teachers introduce into their classrooms. Amanda, Peter, Shelly, and Jason have provided a variety of such topics that interested teachers could use in their classrooms.

4.4 One aspect of how these teachers challenge heteronormativity in the classroom involves not just focusing on the topic but on teaching methods

4.4.1 Participants believe that in order to effectively challenge heteronormativity, lessons must be planned and taught in a purposeful manner

When speaking about teaching LGBTQ topics, Peter, Jason, and Shelly expressed that this teaching should be done in a purposeful manner. Peter said, “…it needs to be purposeful. It needs to be well planned.” Jason said, “…in my work within the classroom I, specifically, purposefully, and intentionally included LGBTQ experience as part of my… literacy units…” Shelly described having a clear purpose for her lessons so that they would be meaningful for her students. These teachers’ strategies demonstrate the importance of careful planning and consideration when introducing LGBTQ topics. Contrastingly, it has been reported that much teaching of LGBTQ topics is done in a rushed and ineffective manner (Clark & Blackburn, 2009;
Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). Teachers must make a plan with clear learning outcomes and take the time to teach it well so that these lessons make a lasting impact.

**4.4.2 Participants stressed a need to weave in LGBTQ topics throughout the curriculum**

All interviewees discussed the need to integrate LGBTQ topics throughout the curriculum. In his advice to new teachers, Peter advised that they embed LGBTQ topics throughout the curriculum. When asked where in the curriculum she located her work on LGBTQ issues, Shelly simply said, “Everywhere.” Amanda mainly introduces LGBTQ topics to her grade one students through the books she reads. She explained, “I think for me it’s just woven in throughout the year. Any time I pick a book off my shelf that’s one of those great literacy books…that talks about feeling different and being okay about that…” For Jason, weaving LGBTQ topics throughout the curriculum meant never teaching them in isolation. He explained, “I never taught LGBTQ…on its own. I never taught a unit on LGBTQ community or LGBTQ identity. It was always infused with the broader understanding around…identity considerations and issues.” Jason also mentioned that he included LGBTQ content in all subject areas and grade levels. These teachers’ recommendations are supported by the findings of Clark and Blackburn (2009), who write that in order to effectively challenge heteronormativity in schools, LGBTQ topics must be integrated and reinforced throughout the curriculum. If this is done, it will challenge the notion of what is considered normal. (Clark and Blackburn, 2009).

**4.4.3 These teachers believe that LGBTQ topics must be taught at an age-appropriate level and according to student readiness**

Three of the teachers I interviewed spoke about the need to teach LGBTQ content in age-appropriate ways. Peter stressed that the resources used to support teaching should be relevant to students’ ages and development. Amanda noted the importance of answering students’ questions about LGBTQ topics, but doing so in an age-appropriate way. She also talked about explaining
her marriage to her students; she said, “…when the kids said…you can’t marry a girl I just was honest, yes, in Ontario…a girl can marry a girl…I kept it developmentally appropriate for the kids as well.” Jason said, “I would infuse LGBTQ content into all subject areas and grade levels as age-appropriate.” Researchers have found that some teachers believe their students are unable to understand or handle learning about LGBTQ issues (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). Others have found that non-heterosexuality has been constructed as hyper-sexual (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). However, as my interviewees have outlined, it is possible to teach elementary students about LGBTQ issues in a developmentally appropriate way without talking about sex.

Jason and Shelly also considered students’ level of understanding around LGBTQ issues when deciding which topics to tackle. Jason recalled,

I always started with a diagnostic assessment of where the class is at in terms of understanding around the LGBTQ community…I would throw out the word ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘trans’, ‘queer’ and I would get a sense of well, what do they know?…What sorts of things come to mind? What has been your experience? …we would tease that out and then that diagnostic assessment would form the basis of…where I was going…

If Jason’s class did not understand the terms in the LGBTQ acronym, his first step would be to define them. It would be ineffective to teach about LGBTQ people if students lacked the terminology. Shelly echoed Jason’s sentiments. She said,

…if I’m about to share a story, then I might quickly ask…about the LGBTQ community, do we know what those letters stand for, and give them a basic foundation…you want to make sure that there’s a level of understanding that you can work from…

Shelly also talked about her familiarity with students and only giving them as much information as they could understand at their current level. She explained that some groups of students are ready for more complex information while others are not.
4.4.4 Participants stress that treating LGBTQ topics like any other topic will cause students to see them as normal

Both Shelly and Amanda talked about not over-emphasizing LGBTQ topics. They explained that in order to make these topics seem normal, they must be treated like any other topic. When asked about how she introduced LGBTQ topics, Shelly said, “…it’s important to make it a natural thing. Versus an overt ‘here it is!’ because it is part of our community’s fabric.” Amanda commented on how she introduces LGBTQ books to her students: “I don’t usually have a great big, “today we’re gonna talk about…” I don’t usually do any of that…let’s take these great books and treat them like any other books.” If teachers treat LGBTQ topics as normal then students will see them as normal. This is an important step in challenging heteronormativity.

4.4.5 Participants found that simply starting a conversation with students about LGBTQ topics is a way to begin the process of challenging heteronormativity in schools

Jason, Shelly, and Amanda stressed that much of their teaching has been done through starting conversations with students about issues that are not normally talked about in school. As Jason put it, “…in all of my experience I really think that all I really offered in this domain is that I started a conversation which I don’t believe had previously happened with other teachers.” As mentioned previously, Shelly used a traditional boy’s name with the pronoun ‘she’ on a math test to get students talking about gender in the classroom. Amanda views LGBTQ topics as, “…a normal part of our everyday discussions…” These teachers show that challenging heteronormativity does not have to be complicated; it just requires introducing something new.

4.4.6 Students respond positively to these teachers’ pedagogy around teaching LGBTQ topics

Interviewees answered differently when asked how their students have responded to their pedagogy with regards to LGBTQ topics. However, their students’ responses have all been positive. Jason said simply, “I have only had positive experiences with students around LGBTQ
issues.” Shelly discussed how her students are open to learning about LGBTQ topics and explained that she had been met with very little misunderstanding around these topics. Amanda observed that students typically respond to her discussion of LGBTQ topics with questions. She answers them honestly and appropriately and her students are satisfied. Peter spoke about the students he taught in his later years of teaching, when support from colleagues and the administration allowed him to teach LGBTQ topics. He said,

   Our students responded well…they always…responded well…they would check themselves and even check me sometimes when I would say things like, “Don’t forget to ask your mom and dad,” you know, and I’d have Rebecca turn to me and say, “Or mom and mom”, right?

In response to his teaching, Peter’s students began taking the responsibility of challenging heteronormativity in their schools into their own hands. This response is in line with what Schall and Kauffmann found after they introduced LGBTQ books into the classroom and had students read and discuss them. Students became more comfortable discussing LGBTQ issues and began acting on their new knowledge and beliefs about the LGBTQ community (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003).

4.5 To support their teaching of LGBTQ topics, teachers use books, media, family photographs, online resources, and board-vetted resources

Participants discussed a variety of resources they have used to facilitate discussion of LGBTQ topics. Both Jason and Peter spoke about using forms of media as part of their units. For a cross-curricular unit on the Canadian Federal Election that included the exploration of LGBTQ related issues and experiences, Jason’s students used newspaper articles, newscasts, the Party websites, and a number of other online resources to support their learning. Peter used video clips from television shows, public service announcements, newspaper articles, and magazines to support his teaching of LGBTQ topics in the intermediate grades. As mentioned, Amanda mainly
used picture books to teach her students about LGBTQ topics. She listed a number of her favourites, including *King and King*, *And Tango Makes Three*, *My Princess Boy*, *Heather has Two Mommies*, and *I am Jazz*. Peter also used picture books to help two kindergarten students explain their two dads to their class. He used the books *And Tango Makes Three* and *Daddy, Papa, and Me*. Peter also used photographs of his own family to help explain having two dads.

Amanda used her own family photographs in her grade one class and had done so in kindergarten classes in the past. One online resource Shelly used was *The Genderbread Person*. This tool helps explain the difference between sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. She also talked about using intermediate level books, but did not mention any by name.

Both Jason and Shelly explained the importance of using resources that have been vetted by the school board. Shelly said,

…it’s important that they’re vetted by the school board so we can just go ahead and use them and then…there’s protection for a teacher who wants to use it…it’s been approved, off you go and use it, there’s no guessing.

Many researchers have found that teachers avoid teaching about LGBTQ topics because parents may protest (Bellini, 2012; Bower & Klecka, 2009; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimito, 2008; Thein, 2013). Using board-vetted resources means that teachers are protected from anyone who tries to complain to the board about a teacher using them. It is therefore important for teachers to know about the LGBTQ resources that are vetted by their school board. Jason has another reason for using board-vetted resources. He said, “I utilize resources like that because they’ve been vetted through various people who’ve also done research in this area.” It was important for him to know that the resources he used had been recommended by people who are knowledgeable on the topic. Some of the vetted resources that
Shelly used were: the EGALE resource toolkit, the GLSEN educator’s guide, Canadian Teacher’s Federation resources, and *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools: an Educator’s Guide*. Jason mentioned using resources from EGALE, GLSEN, and the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The teachers also discussed how they learned about new resources. Peter learned about resources through YRDSB’s Equity and Inclusivity Committee and through the board’s teacher liaison for marginalized communities who shares resources with school administrators. Shelly learned through the school board, through Another Story Bookstore in Toronto, and through the YRDSB Positive Space Working Group, of which she was a member. Jason explained that he learns about new resources through,

…my professional network…I’m connected to our Associate Director of Education, I’m connected through our teacher liaison for marginalized communities…I am a student myself at…OISE UofT. I’m on a number of distribution lists, whether it’s for blogs or academic research journals, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, I acquire a lot online and build a lot online and through my professional networks as well as my personal study on the topic.

Amanda obtained new resources online and sometimes through friends.

My exploration of the literature found that little research has been done into the resources teachers use when challenging heteronormativity in the classroom. These four teachers have provided numerous resources that would be useful for teachers who want to teach about LGBTQ topics. They have also provided a list of groups teachers can contact if they want to hear about new resources or get support with their teaching.

4.6 When working to make schools less heteronormative, teachers encounter challenges in the form of colleagues, administrators, parents, students, their own approaches, and the nature of the work itself

The number one challenge cited by my interview participants was resistance from colleagues, which was discussed by three of the four teachers. Amanda had worked with teachers
who had said that teaching about LGBTQ issues is not their job, or that they are too uncomfortable to teach about them. Peter mentioned a co-teacher who refused to help him teach an inquiry unit on LGBTQ topics due to religious reasons. In his current role, he has also encountered other teachers who refused to teach LGBTQ topics. Shelly has, “…run into some resistance from other co-workers where there’s misunderstanding and ignorance and they simply don’t have the information.” Jason was the only interviewee who did not mention resistance from colleagues. In response to teachers who have refused to teach, Peter had called the superintendents of the schools for support. He had also referred teachers to the YRDSB’s equity and inclusivity plan. Shelly looked internally and found that she was being too forceful and reactive when trying to educate teachers about challenging heteronormativity so she changed her approach. She said, “…I started working with the superintendent, and the administrators, and other teachers, and learned how to do it better. And how to do it effectively and patiently.”

Amanda talked about the PDSB’s inclusivity document called The Future we Want. She referred resistant teachers to this document and reminded them of their responsibility to represent all students in the classroom. She stressed that, “It’s their responsibility to park their discomfort at the door. It’s their responsibility to park their personal beliefs at the door.”

Jason, Shelly, and Peter all described challenging heteronormativity as a slow process, which can be frustrating. Peter spoke about the time required to create an open mindset in schools and how long it took for one of his librarians to introduce LGBTQ books into the library. Shelly said, “…it’s patient work that may take years, or months, or weeks, depending on the issue you’re dealing with…” Jason expressed his frustration at the slowness of the work, but explained why it is necessary:

…I would say the greatest challenge is that the work is slow… I think you have to be slow and strategic. I think although it’s a bit of a pain in the rear end, the reality is that
you have to be slow and strategic… if you barrel through at a hundred miles an hour and bowl everybody down you can’t create sustainable change and you can’t deal with the oppressive realities that you’re trying to avoid.

The goal of challenging heteronormativity is to create sustainable changes in school culture and teachers committed to doing this work must be aware that it is a slow and strategic process that they cannot rush.

Amanda recounted an experience she had wherein a parent called her principal because they did not like that she read an LGBTQ book to the class. Her principal provided her with the *The Future we Want* document so she could justify reading the book. This was the only reported instance involving a parent complaining about LGBT issues being taught to their child. The other teachers either received no response from parents or a positive response. Teachers should not be afraid of pushback from parents, because it does not happen often. And, if it does, Amanda tells teachers to know the board documents that support their teaching so that they can justify their pedagogy.

Peter spoke again about his early experiences in a GTA school where he had an, “…inability to do any teaching or even be LGBTQ staff member…” due to unsupportive students, colleagues, and administrators. In the next theme, I discuss how support from colleagues and the administration is integral to challenging heteronormativity in schools.

4.7 In order to be effective at challenging heteronormativity, teachers need the support of colleagues and the administration

All teachers stressed the need to have supportive administrators and colleagues when working to challenge heteronormativity. Peter found it incredibly difficult to be an ‘out’ teacher at the beginning of his career. He was called homophobic slurs and found it difficult to maintain the trust and respect of his students. His administration did not support him in challenging this
homophobia and though his colleagues were sympathetic, they were also distant and did not help him. At another school, however,

…I had a more supportive administrator and I wasn’t challenged by the community. In fact, I was greeted and supported by members of the community including a trustee who was gay and out, who was also struggling in the community in terms of having a same-sex relationship…

For Jason, the level of support he received from administration influenced the topics he taught in his classroom. He said, “…I needed to understand…the level of support that I had from administration and that would impact…the depth and degree to which we dug into these particular topics.” As mentioned previously, Amanda described how the principal helped her handle a parent who called to complain about the book she read. She also talked about her colleagues. She said, “Occasionally I get colleagues that understand and get it…like the colleague that I have right now…I know that she’s gonna be all up in…Day of Pink with me.” Shelly stressed that what she learned about challenging heteronormativity is that, “…it had to be done well, done properly, and with a team, not just on my own.”

Both Shelly and Jason spoke about how they worked to support other teachers in their schools. Shelly gave other teachers information about finding resources, finding support, what to do in particular cases, and where to go at the board level if they are in a crisis situation. In his role as principal, Jason said that, “I want teachers to feel supported in challenging heteronormativity and…ensuring that equity and inclusion for all communities is on the forefront of our school plan.”

Researchers have found that teachers do not teach about LGBTQ topics because they are afraid of offending colleagues and the administration (Bellini, 2012; Bower & Klecka, 2009). While a principal who shares a different view should not be a deterrent to challenging heteronormativity, teachers should know if they can turn to their principal if they face
challenges. DeJean (2007) found that, “A supportive, encouraging administration alleviates some of the stress and isolation many teachers feel when faced with negative responses” (pg. 68). As these teachers demonstrate, it is important to have colleagues that support the goal of challenging heteronormativity.

4.8 Conclusion

From the interviews I conducted with four elementary school educators, I have gained valuable insight into the nature of heteronormativity in elementary schools and how teachers are working to challenge it. The following is a summary of my key findings and connections to the literature.

Heteronormativity assumes that everyone is heterosexual and cisgender; it positions heterosexuality as normal and marginalizes and oppresses anyone whose sexual orientation or gender identity falls outside the ‘norm’. Schools that employ heteronormative teaching practices create a school culture that makes it difficult for both staff and students to be ‘out’. Through the interviewees’ recollections, I heard stories of homophobic bullying of staff by students, which is largely absent in the literature, as well as bullying of students by their peers, which has been documented by GLSEN and EGALE. Through the experience of Amanda and her colleague, I caught a glimpse of what could happen if parents are upset about their children being exposed to LGBTQ issues against their will, an area which I found to be missing from the existing literature. I learned that it is essential that teachers and administrators become educated about heteronormativity, or else they will be in no position to challenge it.

Though the teachers in this study initially became interested in challenging heteronormativity for personal reasons, they became truly committed because of the students. The teachers stressed how there are LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ families in their
classes, and EGALE Canada’s research confirms this (Taylor and Peter, 2011). Both my participants and the literature agree. Challenging heteronormativity helps LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ family members see their lives represented and validated; it positions being LGBTQ as normal and in turn creates a safer space for all members of the school community; it teaches students to accept and respect everyone, regardless of difference. Students respond positively to LGBTQ topics.

The participants described a variety of LGBTQ topics that interested teachers could discuss in their classrooms, such as different families, prejudice, civil rights, and the difference between sex, sexual orientation gender identity, and gender expression. They also described a variety of materials to support teaching, such as picture books, family photographs, The Genderbread Person, and GLSEN, EGALE, and Canadian Teacher’s Federation resource guides. This also fills a gap in the existing literature. The interviewees stress the importance of using board-vetted resources. I learned that the way LGBTQ topics are taught can be even more important than what is taught: teach in a purposeful manner, weave topics throughout the curriculum, teach at an appropriate level, treat LGBTQ topics as a normal part of the curriculum and, if nothing else, aim to start a conversation about something that is not being talked about.

Challenges can come in the form of students, administrators, parents, colleagues, and the nature of the work itself. Though research has found that teachers fear backlash from parents (Bellini, 2012; Bower & Klecka, 2009; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimito, 2008; Thein, 2013), only one incident of parental complaint was experienced. Teachers must be aware that, in order to create sustainable change, it is necessary to go slowly. It is essential to know the board documents that support this teaching
so that nobody can legitimately challenge it. There is always a knowledgeable teacher or administrator to support teachers in teaching about LGBTQ topics.

Finally, the interviewees have found that supportive administrators and colleagues make it much easier to challenge heteronormativity in the classroom and school. This is supported by Dejean (2007), who found that having a supportive administration alleviates stress for teachers when they are faced with challenges in their work.

In the following chapter, I will speak about the significance of my research for myself as a beginning teacher, as well as for the educational research community. I will then make recommendations for future research based on my findings and for the educational community as a whole.
Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of my research. I begin with an overview of my key findings and their significance. Next, I describe the implications of my research findings for the educational community and for myself as a beginning teacher. After that, I outline my recommendations for the educational community. I then identify areas for further research. Finally, I conclude with a summary of my findings, which includes the implications, recommendations, and significance of my research.

5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance

The interviews I conducted with four elementary school educators from the York Region District School Board and the Peel District School Board provided valuable information about the nature of heteronormativity in elementary schools; how these teachers are working to challenge heteronormativity in their schools and classrooms; and how students, parents, and colleagues respond to these teachers’ pedagogies.

According to the experiences of my participants, heteronormativity assumes that all staff, students, and parents that are part of a school community are straight and cisgender. Heteronormativity positions anyone whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression falls outside the heterosexual ‘norm’ as being abnormal and deviant. Schools that have heteronormative teaching practices and school cultures marginalize and oppress LGBTQ staff, students, and families, making it difficult for them to be ‘out’ at school. They explain that many classroom teachers still use heteronormative classroom materials and teaching practices. Teachers seldom use stories or other teaching materials that include LGBTQ characters or issues;
teachers use language that assumes that none of the students or their families are LGBTQ; 
teachers continue to reinforce harmful gender binaries by dividing up their students according to 
gender. These practices serve to invalidate many students’ identities and experiences (Rowell, 
2007; Smolkin & Young, 2011). My participants stressed that heteronormative teaching practices 
cause LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ family members to hide their identities while 
at school.

My participants also recollected homophobic bullying of staff by students, which is an 
area of research largely absent from the literature, as well as homophobic bullying of students by 
their peers, which has been documented in detail by organizations such as GLSEN and EGALE 
Canada. Homophobic bullying can have numerous negative impacts on students both while they 
are in school and later in life, such as high levels of drug and alcohol use, suicidality, sexual risk 
behaviours, depression, and anxiety (Almeida et al, 2009; Birkett et al, 2009; Bontempo & 
D’Augelli, 2002; Greene et al, 2014; Mishna et al, 2009; Rivers, 2004; Remafedi et al, 1998; 
Treadway & Yoakam, 1992). I also learned that, in these teachers’ experience, classroom 
teachers and school administrators do not have an understanding of what heteronormativity 
means. Many U.S. and Canadian teacher education programs are not making it a priority to teach 
LGBTQ topics and issues (Bellini, 2012; Jennings, 2007; Jennings & Sherwin, 2008). Without 
this understanding, teachers and administrators are in no position to challenge heteronormativity 
in their classrooms and schools. My participants stress the importance of rigorous professional 
development for teachers and administrators; if staff do not become educated and begin 
challenging heteronormativity, the results could be devastating.

One of the reasons why my participants began challenging heteronormativity was their 
personal connection with the LGBTQ community. Two of my participants identify as gay and
one identifies as a lesbian. Their negative experiences with schooling, both as students and as teachers, motivated them to change things for the future generations. My final participant identifies as straight, but she has always had friends who are part of the LGBTQ community. She is aware of their struggles and strives to make life better for them and all marginalized communities. Every class has LGBTQ students or those with LGBTQ family members (Taylor and Peter, 2011). All of the research participants emphasize that, through their teaching, they work to make LGBTQ people and issues normal. Normalizing being LGBTQ helps LGBTQ students, students who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, and students with LGBTQ family members accept their identities. It helps all students feel represented at school. They agree that normalizing being LGBTQ is the only way to end homophobic bullying. This teaching also prepares students to live in a world of difference and accept everyone for who they are.

The existing literature does not provide a lot of information about the various LGBTQ topics that interested teachers can teach about in their classrooms. My participants fill this gap by discussing the LGBTQ topics they have taught. Topics for a range of ages include: different types of families; gender norms; the difference between sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression; types of prejudice; dating as an LGBTQ person; personal identity; coming out; gay-straight alliances; civil rights; types of oppression; LGBTQ issues in politics, LGBTQ people in popular culture; and the Holocaust. They also outlined a number of resources that they have used to support their teaching, including picture books such as *I am Jazz*, *And Tango Makes Three*, *King and King*, *My Princess Boy*, *Heather has Two Mommies*, and *Daddy, Papa, and Me*; family photographs; clips from television shows; public service announcements; newspaper articles; political party websites; The Genderbread Person; and GLSEN, EGALE, and
Canadian Teacher’s Federation resource guides. The teachers recommend using board vetted resources. Since they have been approved by the board, teachers who use them are protected from anyone who tries to complain about their use. Also, these resources have been researched and endorsed by people who are knowledgeable in the area of teaching LGBTQ topics.

One aspect of how these teachers challenge heteronormativity is focusing not just on the topics they teach but on their teaching methods. The literature reports that much teaching of LGBTQ topics is done in a rushed and ineffective manner (Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). In contrast, my interviewees emphasize the importance of careful planning and consideration when introducing LGBTQ topics; if teachers make a plan with clear learning outcomes and take the time to teach it well then the lesson will have a lasting impact on students. The teachers agreed that integrating LGBTQ topics throughout the curriculum has the biggest impact on students. This sentiment is echoed by Clark and Blackburn (2009), who write that to effectively challenge heteronormativity in schools, LGBTQ topics must be integrated and reinforced throughout the curriculum; this will challenge the notion of what is considered normal. My participants stress that LGBTQ topics must be taught at an age-appropriate level and according to student readiness. An easy way to begin challenging heteronormativity in school is to start a conversation with students about LGBTQ issues; this conversation is generally not happening with other teachers. The interviewees found that students respond positively to their pedagogies. Students were open and interested and some eventually began taking the responsibility for challenging heteronormativity into their own hands.

My participants have experienced challenges when working to make their schools less heteronormative. The number one challenge was resistance from colleagues. These colleagues have cited different reasons for not teaching LGBTQ topics, such as religious beliefs, discomfort
with the topic, and the assertion that teaching these topics is not part of their job. When dealing with resistant colleagues, the teachers recommend referring them to the school board’s equity and inclusivity policy or document and reminding them about their responsibility to represent all students in the classroom. Amanda spoke about a parent who called and complained about a book that she read to her students. Amanda directed her to the board’s equity document. My interviewees have found that supportive administrators and colleagues make it much easier to challenge heteronormativity in their classrooms and schools and to overcome obstacles. These is a finding that has been supported by DeJean, in his 2007 study of ‘out’ teachers. Shelly talked about how a challenge for her was being too forceful and reactive when trying to teach colleagues about challenging heteronormativity; she changed her approach and began doing things more patiently. The teachers also talked about how challenging heteronormativity is a slow process, which can be frustrating. However, they stressed that creating sustainable change in schools is a strategic process that cannot be rushed.

5.2 Implications

5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Community

The findings from my research study in combination with findings from the related literature have a number of implications for the educational community moving forward.

All four of my participants stressed that LGBTQ inclusive education was not part of their teacher’s college education. These experiences are supported by the research. Bellini (2012) interviewed Canadian teachers who had attended teachers’ college between 1984 and 2004; all of the teachers found there to be a total disregard for gay and lesbian issues in their pre-service programs. Studies on U.S. teachers programs have been conducted as well. In a study of 65 elementary teacher education programs, Jennings and Sherwin (2008) found that only 55.6% of
the programs addressed sexual orientation topics within the official program curriculum. This lack of focus on LGBTQ topics in teacher’s college leads to numerous adverse effects. During his interview, Jason said that many teachers and administrators do not have an understanding about what heteronormativity is and how their actions support a heteronormative mindset. Because of this, teachers will continue to use heteronormative teaching practices and classroom materials that invalidate students’ experiences and identities and can be emotionally harmful. The lack of emphasis on LGBTQ inclusive education can lead pre-service teachers to believe that they do not need to teach about LGBTQ topics in their classrooms. Thus, they feel free to cite religious reasons and personal beliefs about LGBTQ people and topics to support their refusal to teach these topics, as recounted by my research participants.

As well, lack of education makes it difficult for teachers who want to teach about LGBTQ topics to know where to begin. Teachers need to be guided towards resources and supports that will help them begin challenging heteronormativity. All of my participants recommend professional development for teachers so that they can cultivate an understanding of heteronormativity in schools and learn the skills to begin changing things. Professional development is necessary if teachers are to understand LGBTQ issues and properly address them through their teaching (Dewitt, 2012).

GLSEN and EGALE Canada have found that homophobic and transphobic bullying takes place in both high schools and elementary schools in the U.S. and Canada. My participants have also seen and experienced this type of bullying in their schools. Jason recalled a time when ‘that’s so gay’ was a major put-down among students. Peter talked about two intermediate students who came out at school and were subsequently bullied by their peers, leading them to run away from home. He also recollected how intermediate students bullied him when he first
began teaching, calling him gay slurs and encouraging their peers to stay away from activities he ran. If teachers do not teach about LGBTQ people and issues and begin to normalize being LGBTQ, homophobic and transphobic bullying will continue in schools.

Something Amanda really stressed was that teachers know the equity and inclusivity document that supports their teaching of LGBTQ topics. This way, if any parents or colleagues complain about it, they can be referred to the document. Mishna et al (2009) found that many schools do not have equity policies that include attention to sexual orientation. When policies are not in place, students are at risk of bullying; teachers do not feel like it is mandatory or important to teach about LGBTQ topics and those teachers who want to may fear reprisal from parents or colleagues because they do not have a document that supports their teaching (Mishna et al, 2009).

Lack of education around heteronormativity and an absence of equity and inclusivity documents serve to perpetuate the cycle of heteronormativity in schools. Students’ identities will go un-validated, bullying will continue, and students and staff will continue to hide their true identities.

5.2.2 Narrow: My Professional Identity and Practice

When I begin my practice as a teacher, I will actively seek out professional development opportunities on the topic of heteronormativity and LGBTQ inclusive education. It is true that I have done extensive research into this area, but there will always be more to learn. One thing my participants talked about when I asked them about their future goals for challenging heteronormativity was that they want to learn more. Even though they have been doing this work for years, they stressed that there is always more to learn because things are always changing. I
want to stay up-to-date with the vocabulary, resources, and research so that my lessons are as impactful and informative as they can be.

In my classroom I will have books, posters, and other teaching materials that contain LGBTQ people and characters and deal with LGBTQ topics. These materials provide a mirror for LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ families and validate their experiences and identities. For students for whom being LGBTQ is not part of their identity, these materials provide them with a window into the lives of a group of people they may not know a lot about and may have misconceptions about. These students will develop empathy and understanding towards LGBTQ people. Not only will my teaching materials be representative of LGBTQ people, they will be representative of all the students in my class; they are all unique and different and deserve to see their lives mirrored in their environment and their learning. My classroom will foster respect and acceptance for everyone, regardless of difference. Also, when I use LGBTQ materials or teach about LGBTQ topics, I will not make a big deal about them. If I treat them as normal, my students will see them as normal. As well, I will avoid practices that perpetuate gender binaries and make assumptions about students’ gender identities, such as graphing the number of boys and girls in the class. I will provide a safe space for students to explore and label their own identities. My number one goal as a teacher is to let students know that it is okay to be whoever they are.

Thanks to my interview participants, I am now aware of a variety of LGBTQ topics that I can teach at age-appropriate levels. They also taught me about resources I can use to support my teaching as well as where I can look to discover additional resources. I want to make my colleagues aware that they can come to me if they are looking for resources to use in their
teaching or if they need support. If teachers know that someone else is teaching the same things and facing the same challenges it makes the process easier.

My research has made me aware of the need to know the school board and ministry documents that support my teaching of LGBTQ topics. Wherever I end up teaching, I will have a knowledge of the policies and documents that support my teaching practices. If I am ever challenged by colleagues, administrators, or parents, I will be able to offer an irrefutable defence of my teaching. As well, if I encounter colleagues who believe that teaching about LGBTQ topics is not their job or say that they cannot teach these topics because it goes against their personal beliefs, I can refer them to the policies and documents that state that they need to do that teaching.

Finally, I hope I am able to be ‘out’ to my students. My research has shown me that many LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ family members do not feel safe or comfortable being ‘out’ at school and therefore they censor their lives. If I do not censor my life, hopefully they will see that they do not need to censor theirs either. Hiding who you are is a stressful and painful experience and I want my students to feel free to be themselves. School should be a safe and welcoming place for everyone.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on my research findings, I offer the following recommendations to the educational community:

Ministries of Education:

- Ministries of education must ensure that all staff and students are aware of, and understand, the board’s equity and inclusivity policy as well as the consequences for
violating this policy. If staff and students are not aware of the policy, or do not understand it, they cannot adhere to its guidelines. When equity and inclusivity policies that protect LGBTQ students are not clearly present in schools, LGBTQ students are at risk of bullying and a range of other negative outcomes. As well, ministries of education must ensure that consequences for violating the policy are strictly enforced. When consequences are not enforced, bullies will not be dissuaded.

- Ministries of education must integrate LGBTQ topics into the curriculum documents for every subject area. Revised Ontario Curriculum documents include sections in the front matter that address anti-discrimination, equity, and inclusive education. The social studies, history, and geography document, for example, states that all students must see themselves reflected in the curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader school environment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). This makes it clear that LGBTQ topics, people, and issues must be taught about in the classroom. There is therefore no excuse for Ontario teachers when it comes to teaching these topics. It is part of their job. If all curriculum documents contained explicit directives about including LGBTQ topics in the curriculum, no teacher would be able to say that they cannot or will not do so.

School Boards:

- School boards must ensure that their board has an equity and inclusivity policy that explicitly states that all teachers must teach about LGBTQ topics and that stresses the consequences of homophobic and transphobic bullying.
- School boards must provide professional development around heteronormativity and LGBTQ inclusive education. PD should educate teachers and principals on a variety of
topics, including: what heteronormativity is; homophobic and transphobic bullying (definition, prevalence, consequences, etc.); the difference between sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender expression; LGBTQ+ terminology and definitions; the first-hand school experiences of LGBTQ individuals; where to find LGBTQ-friendly resources for classrooms and school libraries; lesson ideas; explanations of the school board’s equity and inclusivity policies; and using inclusive language and teaching strategies with students. Principals should also receive PD about how to support their teachers in challenging heteronormativity. The PD should start simple and become more complex as staff members develop a sound knowledge base in this area. PD is necessary because many educators do not even know what heteronormativity is. Once they do, it is not enough to just tell educators what needs to be done and expect them to be able to do it. They need to understand who LGBTQ students and staff members are as well as the problems they face in school and life. They need to be given guidance on the best ways to challenge heteronormativity and make everyone feel safe at school. PD should be delivered by anyone who can make an impact, such as professional organizations, educators who have experience with challenging heteronormativity, LGBTQ staff members, former or current LGBTQ students, parents of LGBTQ students, or parents who are LGBTQ themselves. It is important for teachers and principals to get information from a range of sources and connect with a variety of different people who can help them through a challenging process.

Teacher Education Programs:

- Teacher education programs must offer a mandatory course about LGBTQ inclusive education and LGBTQ issues. If teacher education programs do not prioritize LGBTQ
education, then the teachers they train will be unlikely to do so. Just like professional
development for in-services educators, pre-service teachers should be taught about: what heteronormativity is; homophobic and transphobic bullying (definition, prevalence, consequences, etc.); the difference between sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender expression; LGBTQ+ terminology and definitions; the first-hand school experiences of LGBTQ individuals; where to find LGBTQ-friendly resources for classrooms and school libraries; lesson ideas; explanations of the school board’s equity and inclusivity policies; and using inclusive language and teaching strategies with students. The course should be taught by teacher-educators who have experience challenging heteronormativity in schools and classrooms. However, the course should also include visits from professional organizations, LGBTQ teachers, LGBTQ individuals who wish to educate future teachers about their experiences at school, parents of LGBTQ students, and LGBTQ parents. Each individual brings unique perspectives and experiences that need to be considered. It is impossible to provide pre-service teachers with a clear picture of the heteronormativity puzzle without giving them access to all of the pieces.

Principals:

- Principals must ensure that their staff engage in professional development regarding heteronormativity and LGBTQ inclusive education. If their school board does not offer mandatory PD in these areas, principals should include segments about LGBTQ inclusive education and heteronormativity in their monthly staff meetings, which are mandatory for teachers. Principals, teachers, and guest speakers can provide information about all the topics outlined above. This is necessary for heteronormativity to be effectively challenged.
• Principals must engage in professional development regarding heteronormativity and LGBTQ inclusive education, as well as how to support their teachers in challenging heteronormativity.

• Principals must allocate budget resources to purchasing LGBTQ books and other resources for the school library so they can be accessed by staff and students. They must ensure that there are materials that can be used at each grade level.

• Principals must provide teachers with the board documents that support their teaching of LGBTQ topics and issues.

• Principals must defend their teachers if parents complain about how the teachers are teaching about LGBTQ topics and issues.

• Principals must emphasize that teaching about LGBTQ topics is the responsibility of all teachers.

• Principals must actively challenge homophobic and transphobic bullying.

Teachers:

• Teachers must bring books and other teaching materials into your classroom that feature LGBTQ characters, people, and issues.

• Teachers must familiarize themselves with their school’s equity and inclusivity policies. Teachers must avoid grouping students according to gender.

• Teachers must avoid making assumptions about students’ sexual orientations and gender identities and those of their parents and family members.

• Teachers must actively challenge homophobic and transphobic bullying.
• Teachers must seek out professional development opportunities on the topic of heteronormativity and LGBTQ inclusive education.

• Teachers must familiarize themselves with the board documents that support their teaching of LGBTQ topics and issues.

• Teachers must become familiarized with board-approved texts and resources that support their teaching of LGBTQ topics and issues.

• Teachers must communicate with parents about the LGBTQ topics and issues they discuss in class and provide parents with resources they can use to continue the conversation with their children at home.

Parents:

• Parents must initiate and/or continue conversations about heteronormativity and LGBTQ people and issues at home by accessing the resources provided by their child’s teacher or finding their own resources. Educating children about LGBTQ topics is the only way to stop homophobic and transphobic bullying.

5.4 Areas for further research

Based on my findings, I have identified three key areas for future research. The first two involve further research into homophobic and transphobic bullying in Canadian schools. Firstly, during his interview, Peter recalled how being an ‘out’ teacher led to his being bullied by intermediate students at a GTA school. These students called him gay slurs and encouraged their peers to abandon extra-curricular activities that he ran. The literature I read about homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools did not provide any information about teachers who face bullying at the hands of their students because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. It would be interesting to discover to what extent this type of bullying is still
taking place in Canadian schools; the form this bullying takes; the reactions of the teachers, administrators, and students to this bullying; and how school demographics affect the prevalence of this bullying.

Secondly, as mentioned in my review of literature, GLSEN has conducted research on homophobic bullying in American elementary schools. They found that 45% of the students surveyed reported hearing the word ‘gay’ used in a negative way, through comments such as ‘that’s so gay’ and ‘you’re so gay’ and 26% of students surveyed reported hearing students make homophobic comments such as ‘fag’ or ‘lesbo’ (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2012). As of right now, a similar study has not been done on Canadian elementary schools. Perhaps if elementary teachers were aware of homophobic and transphobic bullying taking place in their schools they would be more eager to challenge heteronormativity through their teaching.

The third area of research involves looking specifically at cisnormativity in schools. Cisnormativity assumes that every individual is cisgender (having a gender identity that aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth). In this research paper, I have included transgender issues and transphobia as falling under the umbrella of heteronormativity. However, cisnormativity in schools is an issue in-and-of itself. Transgender students have specific needs and experiences that I was not able to do justice to within the scope of my research. I recommend conducting a study similar to this one that looks specifically at cisnormativity in elementary schools and the experiences and recommendations of transgender teachers and students.

Without these three areas of research, there is not yet a full picture of heteronormativity at work in Canadian schools.
5.5 Concluding comments

The intent of this study was to discover how a subset of elementary school teachers are challenging heteronormativity in their schools and classrooms and how students respond to their pedagogies. I asked teachers about: what heteronormativity looks like in their schools; why it is important to challenge heteronormativity; the topics they cover; the materials they use; the challenges they face; and the range of factors, resources, and experience that support their commitment to challenging heteronormativity in the classroom.

Through my research, I have learned that the cycle of heteronormativity is very much alive and well in elementary schools. This cycle has numerous negative implications. Teachers are not commonly educated about heteronormativity and therefore still use heteronormative teaching practices and classroom materials. Teachers who do want to challenge heteronormativity have not been given the information and resources they need to do so. Many teachers cite personal and religious beliefs as reasons not to teach about LGBTQ topics. The experiences and identities of LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ family members are invalidated and they hide who they are. Homophobic and transphobic bullying makes these students feel unsafe at school. LGBTQ teachers feel the same effects of heteronormativity and find it difficult to be ‘out’ at school. Unless education happens at all levels (administrators, teachers, and students) this cycle will continue to be perpetuated. LGBTQ teachers and students will continue to suffer.

Based on the above implications of my research and the expertise of my interviewees, I offered recommendations for the educational community, including ministries of education, school boards, teacher education programs, principals, teachers, and parents. Ministries of educations must ensure that: all school boards have equity and inclusivity policies; LGBTQ
topics are integrated into the curriculum expectations for all subjects. Every school board must have an equity and inclusivity policy that explicitly states that all teachers must teach about LGBTQ topics and that stresses the consequences of homophobic and transphobic bullying. Principals must: ensure that their staff engage in professional development about heteronormativity and LGBTQ inclusive education; bring LGBTQ inclusive resources for all grade levels into the school; emphasize that teaching about LGTQ topics is the responsibility of all teachers; actively challenge homophobic and transphobic bullying. Teachers must: bring LGBTQ inclusive teaching materials into their classrooms; familiarize themselves with their school’s equity and inclusivity policies; avoid grouping students according to gender; avoid making assumptions about the orientation and gender identity of students and their family members; actively challenge homophobic and transphobic bullying; seek out professional development opportunities on the topic of heteronormativity and LGBTQ inclusive education. Parents should continue the conversation about heteronormativity and LGBTQ issues with their children at home.

I also recommended three areas for future research. The first is the homophobic and transphobic bullying of teachers by students, which is an area missing from the current literature. The second area is homophobic and transphobic bullying in Canadian elementary schools. GLSEN has interviewed teachers and students in American elementary schools about this type of bullying, but no similar study has been done in Canadian elementary schools. The final area of research is looking at cisnormativity in elementary schools and the specific needs of transgender and gender non-conforming students. These three areas of research are needed in order to get a fuller picture of the situation in Canadian elementary schools.
To conclude, the situation in schools right now is less than ideal. Fortunately, my research provides committed teachers with topics, resources, and teaching methods they can use right now to challenge heteronormativity in their schools as well as ways they can respond to challenges in their work. It also provides transformative recommendations to the educational community. If all members of the educational community begin following these recommendations for challenging heteronormativity, being LGBTQ will be seen as normal. The cycle of bullying and hiding will be diminished over time until school becomes a safe and inclusive place for all students and staff members.
REFERENCES


Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (2004). *Imagine a world that is free from fear: A kindergarten to grade eight resource addressing issues relating to homophobia and heterosexism*. Toronto, ON.


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date:

Dear ______________________________,

My Name is Elanna Nussbaum and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on challenging heteronormativity in the elementary classroom. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have demonstrated leadership, commitment, and/or expertise in this area. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elanna Nussbaum

Phone Number: 416-731-1930

E-mail: elanna.nussbaum@mail.utoronto.ca
Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic

E-mail: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

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

I have read the letter provided to me by _____________ and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________________

Date: ______________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this research study. The aim of the research is to learn how exemplary teachers are challenging heteronormativity in their elementary classrooms and schools. The interview should last approximately 45-60 minutes. I will ask you questions concerning your teaching background, your beliefs and perspectives, your teaching practices, the materials and resources that support your teaching of LGBTQ topics, the challenges you face, and your next steps in challenging heteronormativity in the classroom. I want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question. Do you have any questions before I begin?

Section 1: Background Information

1. What grade(s) are you currently teaching?
2. What grade(s) have you taught in the past?
3. How many years have you been teaching?
4. How many years have you taught at your current school?
5. Can you tell me about the school and board that you currently teach in? (size, demographics, program priorities, school climate)
6. Do you fulfill any roles in your school beside classroom teacher? (coach, counsellor, advisor, leader, support worker)
7. As you are aware, I’m interested in learning how teachers challenge heteronormativity in school. To begin, can you tell me more about how you came to be interested and committed to this endeavour? What experiences informed your interest and your confidence in this area?
8. Was LGBTQ inclusive education part of your education when you attended teachers’ college? If so, can you describe what this entailed, and which program you were registered in?
9. Have you observed heteronormativity in the schools at which you have taught? What have you observed? Have you worked in schools wherein the climate actively challenged heteronormativity? If yes, how did you know that they did?

Section 2: Teacher Beliefs and Perspectives

10. What does heteronormativity mean to you?
11. What does this typically look like in schools, in your experience?
12. Why do you believe that it is important to challenge heteronormativity in schools?
13. What do you believe is the role and responsibility of schools and teachers in challenging heteronormativity? Why?
14. Do you believe that your students typically come into your classroom with misconceptions about LGBTQ people and issues? If so, can you provide me with some examples?
15. In your view, how does discussing LGBTQ topics in the classroom challenge heteronormativity in school and society? How do your students typically respond to your attention to these issues?
16. In your opinion, how do students benefit from being taught about LGBTQ topics?

Section 3: Teaching Practice: LGBTQ Topics

17. How do you introduce LGBTQ topics into the classroom? Do you prepare your students in any way for the discussion of these topics? If yes, how do you prepare them? What are some of the strategies and approaches you take when introducing these topics?
18. Which LGBTQ topics do you address in your current classroom? How do you decide which topics to address? (what impacts your decision)
19. Where in the curriculum do you locate this work? (which subject areas and grade levels; formal versus informal curriculum; classroom, playground) What curriculum areas do you use to teach about LGBTQ issues? Why?
20. Can you give me an example of how you have taught about LGBTQ issues in your teaching?
   a. What grade and subject were you teaching?
   b. What were your learning goals?
   c. What opportunities for learning did you create for students to realize these goals? (what were students asked to do)
   d. What resources did you use in this lesson?
   e. Was this a lesson that you planned or a lesson that arose in response to something you observed in the classroom or on the playground?
   f. How, if at all, do you feel the lesson challenged heteronormativity?
   g. How did your students respond? What outcomes of learning did you observe from them?
21. How, if at all, has your teaching of LGBTQ topics changed since you began teaching them?

Section 4: Support Materials and Resources

22. What are 3 resources you have used recently to support your teaching of LGBTQ topics? Why these particular resources?
23. Where do you get these resources?
24. How do you learn about new resources?
25. What other factors and resources support you in this work?
26. Have any particular experiences supported your commitment to challenging heteronormativity in the classroom?
Section 5: Challenges

27. Can you tell me about any challenges or obstacles you have encountered in regards to challenging heteronormativity through your teaching and/or teaching about LGBTQ issues generally speaking?
28. How do you respond to these challenges?
29. How might the education system further support you to meet these challenges?
30. What types of feedback, if any, have you received from parents and colleagues regarding your approach to challenging heteronormativity in the classroom?

Section 6: Next Steps

31. What are your future goals for challenging heteronormativity in the classroom? How do you plan on achieving these goals?
32. What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers who are committed to challenging heteronormativity in the elementary classroom?

Thank you for your time and participation.