Creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations -
A study exploring strategies elementary school leaders employ
for LGBTQ inclusion

By

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Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to explore specific strategies that inclusive-minded elementary principals use to create more inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations, which continue to be underrepresented in different facets of school community life. Qualitative interview data was collected across different school districts from thirteen elementary principals who actively promote the inclusion of LGBTQ populations in Ontario schools. The data suggests that, despite the number of barriers that principals face in their efforts to create more inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations, school leaders employ many strategies to strategically and intentionally facilitate school environments that are welcoming, respectful, and inclusive for individuals who identify as LGBTQ. The findings of this research have implications for the urgency for this work as well as the possibilities to realize school communities which are inclusive of LGBTQ communities. The findings also have implications for professional learning for leaders in the area of inclusion and social justice. In addition, supports and appropriate resources that are needed to enhance the work of LGBTQ inclusion in schools are highlighted.

Keywords: inclusion, inclusive leadership, inclusive schools, queer populations, safe and caring schools for LGBTQ persons, LGBTQ professional learning, LGBTQ inclusive curriculum
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Chapter One: Introduction

The discrimination and persecution of people because of their sexual orientation is as unjust as the crime of racism. Homophobia is a crime against humanity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2007)

This study uses the lens of inclusive leadership to explore strategies that inclusive-minded elementary principals use to create more inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations. This chapter includes a brief overview of my interests as a researcher in this topic as well as some background information on the barriers LGBTQ persons face in North America in order to underscore the importance of creating inclusive schools for this population and set the context for the study. The chapter concludes with the statement of the significance of the study and research questions. Throughout the thesis, the terms gay, queer, and LGBTQ are used interchangeably.

Location of Self within the Research

I grew up in a household that faithfully followed Catholic religious rituals. My parents adhered to religious observances, espoused the beliefs of the Catholic Church and Catholic doctrine, and brought us to mass regularly. Despite some of the controversy surrounding one or two of the priests at their local church, my parents defended their faith and continued to support their community church by attending events and donating money.

In grade two, as soon as a Catholic school was built in our neighbourhood, I was transferred out of the public system and, from this point onward I attended Catholic educational institutions, including university. After graduating from Teacher’s College, I began my teaching career in the Catholic board. I spent approximately seventeen years with the Catholic board, ten as a school administrator. Growing up Catholic buffered me from being exposed to different
belief systems or appreciating social diversity. Our Catholic churches and schools professed one way of life - the heteronormative one. The ideals of abstinence, procreation and images of the Western nuclear family were entrenched in our teachings, programs and religious celebrations. Since being gay or homosexual did not align with the church’s beliefs, the voices of LGBTQ persons were either silenced or ignored.

It was during my first principalship that I became troubled by some of the exclusionary practices inherent in the Catholic school system. I felt very conflicted when I could not allow families from different faith communities to register even when they were willing to be exposed to Catholic teachings. I remember vividly having to deny admission to one single minoritized mother who wanted her sons at the Catholic school so that they could be given a fresh new start. When she was not allowed to register her children, to my surprise, she had them baptized Catholic in order to be accepted into the system. I also began to witness how different churches and priests within the Catholic faith had dissimilar views or practices. For instance, during school masses, depending on which priest presided over the mass, certain children belonging to orthodox faiths were either permitted or not permitted to participate in the Eucharist. It became very apparent to me that many Catholic churches and schools promoted contradictory and/or exclusionary practices.

These experiences, coupled with a growing interest in public education, prompted me to apply to the coterminous public board. Since gaining employment with my current board, I have been fortunate to work in highly diverse school communities and witness the benefits of a system that embraces inclusion of all diversities, regardless of religious beliefs, disabilities, ethnicity, cultural backgrounds or sexual orientation. Although it was a huge learning curve for me, I became more confident in my ability to lead in highly diverse school communities. Even more
profound, however, was my system level equity work around creating Positive Spaces for LGBTQ populations. It was through my committee work, interactions with LGBTQ people, communication with various organizations and reading in this area that my interests to explore the creation of more inclusive schools for sexual minority groups solidified for me. I am particularly interested in inclusive leadership in elementary settings because I truly believe that young children need to learn about biases, prejudices and barriers that marginalize certain populations early on in their educational journeys. It is my hope that by creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ people at the elementary level, these students can challenge the myths and misconceptions associated with sexual minority populations, champion equity work for LGBTQ inclusion, and transfer their perspective into the larger society.

A Call for Inclusive School Environments for LGBTQ Populations

Understanding and embracing diversity is the cornerstone of a civil society. Educational institutions are a microcosm of the larger secular society and are powerful vehicles in stopping the perpetuation of exclusionary practices that marginalize certain populations. In this vein, the past few decades have seen progress in efforts to ensure that students from minority populations continue to succeed both academically and socially. Although this journey is by no means complete, we need to recognize that the efforts educators have put forth in improving learning conditions for minority students is noteworthy. Despite these gains, students belonging to the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning) community (see Appendix D for definitions) often face discrimination from those belonging to dominant heteronormative regimes (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Murray, 2011).

Educators have a moral obligation to ensure that student well-being is nurtured and that all students are afforded equal opportunities to thrive. Teachers and school leaders also have the
potential to redress the inequities that define LGBTQ students’ lived experiences by creating and sustaining inclusive school environments (Bertram, Crowley, & Massey, 2010; Glaze et al., 2012; Macgillivray, 2000). The literature is rife with research pointing to the benefits of creating and sustaining caring, welcoming, respectful and safe school cultures for all children. Such inclusive environments create conditions that enable students to participate meaningfully in all aspects of school life (Dei & James, 2002; Lupart, Irvine, Loreman, McGhie-Richmond, 2010; Ryan, 2012). Creating inclusive schools, however, is a daunting task for educators, particularly in light of the complexities of student needs in our increasingly diverse school communities. The term “inclusion” as it relates to education is complex, and is difficult to define.

Ainscow (2005) describes four key components of inclusion that have important implications for educators charged with creating and sustaining inclusive school environments. First, inclusion is a process that continues to respond to the changing world society. It entails moving beyond superficial attempts to inclusion such as celebrating or tolerating diversity to more authentic inclusionary acts such as respecting, accepting and appreciating differences (Ainscow, 2005). Second, inclusion endeavors to identify and remove barriers for students and engage educational stakeholders in creating improved conditions for marginalized populations. Third, Ainscow (2005) states that inclusion focuses on the “presence, participation and achievement of all students” in the daily activities of school life (p. 118). Finally, inclusion involves the constant monitoring of students at risk by educators who have a moral obligation to take the necessary steps to protect these student groups.

Additionally, concepts of inclusion are inextricably linked to equity and social justice (Dei & James, 2002; Ryan, 2006b; Ryan 2012). Each of these terms – inclusion, social justice and equity – should be considered in discussions regarding actions to improve conditions for
marginalized and disenfranchised populations (Ryan, 2006b; 2012). It is noteworthy that inclusion does not mean treating everyone the same. Instead, social justice and inclusion are achieved in our schools and society when all individuals are treated equitably:

A social justice/inclusive perspective explicitly values diversity. By this I mean that various differences among people should be celebrated and valued, not quashed, ignored or assimilated…Instead, social justice perspectives advocate that individuals and groups ought to be treated according to need; that is, they should be treated equitably…Advocates for social justice and inclusion do not seek a world where everyone is treated in the same way in order to achieve identical ends, but one that is fair, that is, equitable for everyone (Ryan, 2012, p. 9).

Many scholars also note that power and privilege continue to play a significant role in excluding marginalized populations (Dei and James, 2002; Ryan 2006b; Ryan 2012). For LGBTQ students, schools are typically heterosexual institutions that continue to replicate systemic prejudices, power and privilege of the dominant group. Heterosexism, which is “the attitude that heterosexuality is the only natural and acceptable sexual orientation,” is entrenched in our cultural fabric and plays a critical role in sustaining the hegemony of the dominant population (Herek, 1991 as cited in Schneider & Owens, 2000, p. 349).

Exclusionary experiences, which can be either personal or institutional/systemic, deny individual differences, which disadvantage and marginalize students intellectually, physically, psychologically, emotionally and academically (Dei & James, 2002; Savage & Harley, 2009). Personal exclusion operates at the student level (Dei & James, 2002) and, for LGBTQ students this translates into hostile treatment, and exclusion from clubs and activities (Savage & Harley, 2009). Institutional or systemic exclusion permeates the structures of schooling – such as relationships among stakeholders; curricula; and language usage (Dei & James, 2002). Schools contribute to the invisibility of LGBTQ students in their structures when they exclude LGBTQ-positive images, stories, and language (Savage & Harley, 2009).
Although the journey for LGBTQ inclusion in schools and in society may be an arduous one, we must remain aware that effective strategies are available that school community stakeholders can implement to realize inclusion. In order to better understand the context of this work, first, I will provide an overview of some of the legislative and policy frameworks that currently shape the experiences of LGBTQ people in today’s society. Secondly, I will speak to some of the significant barriers in society that need to be considered if the full inclusion of this population is to occur in today’s schools.

**Legislation, case law and policy frameworks**

Various legal and policy frameworks are poised to enhance inclusion for LGBTQ populations within Canada and the United States, which can significantly shape the experiences of our queer youth in North American schools. Yet, it is apparent that different states in the US and regions in Canada are on different continuums. Moreover, the examples that follow illustrate that the existence of such laws and frameworks does not guarantee full inclusion. For instance, the United Nations has documented the atrocities of sexual minority populations around the globe, including being imprisoned, beaten, tortured, and even killed. Their recent publication informs state leaders globally of the rights of sexual minorities to be protected from discrimination in society such as workplaces, medical facilities, and schools; an obligation also outlined in Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d.). Not all countries abide by this code, however, and even within countries that do abide by the code there are varied responses to human rights issues involving queer individuals. Nevertheless, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscores two fundamental mantras of “equality and non-discrimination” that are captured in
the key belief that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d.).

In Canada and the United States, while significant strides in protecting the rights of LGBTQ persons have occurred, much work still needs to be done as LGBTQ populations continue to be subjected to hostile treatments in schools and society. In the United States, despite three decades of anti-discrimination laws such as Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments, Sears (2005) observes that legislation and policy “can be judged as weak to moderate in their coverage and impact [upon the health and safety of queer youth]” (Sears as cited in Murray, 2011, p. 215), with approximately thirty states failing to fully protect LGBTQ students from homophobic harassment and, in some severe cases, even physical torture or death (Murray, 2011). Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights does not acknowledge verbal assaults on sexual orientation as a form of sexual harassment under Title IX (Murray, 2011). This leaves many students vulnerable to hostile school environments, especially since sexual minority rights are excluded from nondiscriminatory legislation and polices (Meyer, 2010).

Some researchers argue that Canada is more socially responsible and inclusive than the US (Meyer, 2010; Schrader & Wells, 2004). Similar to the US, however, Canada moved along slowly in granting legal protection for sexual minorities. For instance, in 1975, the Canadian government legally instituted multiculturalism in education but left sexual orientation out of the equation (Snider, 1996). Likewise, in 1985, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms became the country’s “supreme law” whereby “the right of all persons to be treated equally was given constitutional status,” thereby protecting many minority groups, sexual minorities being a notable exception (Meyer, 2010, p. 90). Despite this significant omission by the federal
government, some provinces, like Quebec in 1977 and Ontario in 1986, included sexual orientation into their own human rights legislation (Meyer, 2010; Schrader & Wells, 2004). Over a decade later in 1998, the Canadian government followed suit by including sexual orientation as a protected class under Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Grace & Wells, 2005; Meyer, 2010). As a result, many Supreme Court of Canada cases dealing with sexual equality challenges have ruled in favour of sexual minority people (Schrader & Wells, 2004). After many decades, sexual minority groups in Canada can relish the fact that same-sex equality has become legally sanctioned, but this does not translate into immediate legal protections. Nevertheless, it does provide educators with the legal foundation to move the inclusivity agenda for LGBTQ students forward.

Significant case law in North America has also heightened the importance of sexual minority rights in educational contexts. This jurisprudence, although reactionary in nature, can positively influence policy development that can mandate publically funded educational institutions to ensure that LGBTQ youth be afforded the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts. For example, Schrader & Wells (2004) cite two landmark judgments that have forced districts to implement programs to proactively deal with homophobia. In 1996, Jamie Nabozny of Wisconsin was awarded 1 million dollars for being victimized; and in 2004, six lesbians were awarded 1.1 million dollars for the abuse they had endured. In Canada, many cases set legal precedence, which also impacted the way school boards and their employees make decisions. In Chamberlain v. Surrey School District (Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36, [2002] 4 S.C.R. 710), the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the school board’s decision to ban the use of books containing references to same-sex parents from an
elementary setting (Schrader & Wells, 2004). This case sent a clear message to all educational stakeholders:

Learning about tolerance is therefore learning that other people's entitlement to respect from us does not depend on whether their views accord with our own. Children cannot learn this unless they are exposed to views that differ from those they are taught at home... Tolerance is always age appropriate (Schrader & Wells, 2004, at para. 66, 69).

A British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal also ruled that the board must not only deal with anti-gay harassment but must ensure proactive measures are put in place to educate school communities about homophobia and discrimination (Meyer, 2010; Short, 2010; Taylor, 2008). This was in response to the case of Azmi Jubran (School District No. 44 [North Vancouver] v. Jubran, 3005), a student who endured inhumane harassment for a period of five years including being spat on, urinated on, pushed into lockers, and having his shirt set on fire. This case communicated that reactionary measures in dealing with anti-gay bullying is not sufficient to allow a student to pursue an education free from harassment. Accordingly, the courts ruled that the school board needs to proactively deal with these types of infractions through ongoing anti-homophobia programs, as well as education that fosters positive images and dispositions of LGBTQ populations.

The Marc Hall case (Hall v. Powers, 2002), was another significant case which sent an important message to Catholic institutions in Ontario regarding their exclusionary practices. In that instance, the Ontario Superior Court ruled that a gay student should not be excluded from bringing a same sex date to the prom; religious beliefs cannot supersede the rights of homosexuals as human beings (Grace & Wells, 2005). Likewise, in Doe v. Brockton School Committee (2000), the courts upheld a transgendered student’s right to dress in female clothing, although this student was biologically male (Macgillivray, 2009).
assumptions about school events and gender identity can now be legally scrutinized and challenged if discriminatory practices are permitted.

Teachers who practice homophobic beliefs are also not protected under the law. In Kempling v. British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT) (2004), Chris Kempling, a teacher and guidance counselor, was suspended as a result of writing defamatory comments about homosexuals in local publications (Meyer, 2010; Wells, 2006). The B.C. Supreme Court reiterated that a teacher’s public image is held to high standards; hence public school teachers can be held legally accountable for professing bias views. This case underscores the moral and ethical obligation that educators have to ensure all students are provided with learning environments that are inclusive and respectful of each individual’s dignity and self-worth.

These examples of case law confirm that legal redress has supported LGBTQ populations in protecting their rights, although the process can be time consuming, financially costly and personally draining. School leaders and teachers also need to be aware that there are legal consequences of overtly excluding LGBTQ students and populations in schools. Concomitantly, policy – defined by Joshee as “the ensemble of statements, actions, and inactions related to a particular ‘problem’” (Joshee, 2007, p. 174) – must espouse components of inclusion for sexual minorities who have been traditionally excluded from policy dialogue (Macgillivray, 2004; Murray, 2011). Policy analysts and developers must also facilitate broad-based participation of various stakeholders so that dominant policy narratives are minimized and marginalized voices are heard.

Currently, in some Canadian provinces, such policies either exist or have been created as a result of unpleasant events. For example, as a result of the court decision on the Jubran case, the Vancouver School Board put forth an aggressive, comprehensive policy that moves beyond
an anti-homophobia mandate (EGALE, Canada, 2011; Taylor, 2008), incorporating ongoing training for educational staff and board employees to help them combat discriminatory practices against LGBTQ populations. In addition, the district established an LGBTQ Advisory Committee to ensure that policy directives, priorities and implementation processes are consistent. The Vancouver School Board’s policy also speaks to curriculum integration, Gay Straight Alliances in all secondary schools, and employment equity and community outreach to ensure schools forge partnerships with LGBTQ communities and organizations.

There are many instances, however, when competing rights come into play. In Ontario, the recent publication *Policy on Competing Human Rights* (2012) strengthens the notion that people have the right to freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination and provides organizations, decision makers, individuals and litigators with frameworks on how best to resolve these conflicts. For example, one teacher claimed that posting stickers and posters that displayed support for LGBTQ communities infringed on her personal religious beliefs. The Human Rights Commission found that simply posting this information does not create “any burden or disadvantage on religious rights” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2012, p. 25).

These legal and policy frameworks can offer educators ethically sound and legally supported ways of establishing and protecting LGBTQ inclusion in our schools. They lead the way for educators and policy developers to ensure schools are safe for LGBTQ students, support the use of diverse resources that are reflective of all marginalized populations, and ensure same-sex equality for youth participating in school events and activities. Although many ministries of education and jurisdictions in Canada and the US have introduced bills, acts and policies reinforcing that those of diverse sexual orientation or gender identity must be protected from discrimination and harassment, studies continue to point to a significant lack of consistency in
how LGBTQ issues and topics are dealt with in Canadian and American schools (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Macgillivray, 2004; Macgillivray, 2000; Short, 2010). In other words, legislation and policy alone are not enough to legitimize LGBTQ inclusion. In particular, schools need to be cognizant of the many barriers that continue to impede progress. These barriers are detailed below.

**Barriers to LGBTQ inclusion**

The Ontario Ministry of Education defines barriers as:

An obstacle to equity that may be overt or subtle, intended or unintended, and systemic or specific to an individual or group, and that prevents or limits access to opportunities, benefits, or advantages that are available to other members of society (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a)

Studies continue to confirm that our schools are unsafe and unwelcoming for LGBTQ youth. More so, LGBTQ youth have suffered significant harassment causing students to drop out of school, suffer mental health issues and even commit suicide (Kosciw et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). Significant barriers continue to persist for sexual minority populations in our schools and society. Despite the gains made in protecting some LGBTQ rights though policy and legislation, unique barriers create additional challenges to the creation of schools that are inclusive of this diverse population (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Macgillivray, 2004; Short, 2010). Simply tolerating or protecting LGBTQ persons is not enough to prevent their social exclusion as a result of the dominant heterosexual discourse. In the educational context, putting polices in place to safeguard LGBTQ youth is a necessary first step. However, educators who are inclusive minded and want to make a difference for these youth must navigate through various barriers including political roadblocks; cultural and religious prejudices; ignorance and lack of knowledge; and heteronormative practices and rituals.
**Political roadblocks**

Politically, the inclusion of LGBTQ populations in schools can be highly controversial, and many politicians and school authorities have been reluctant to move this agenda forward for fear of igniting public debate and outrage (Macgillivray, 2004; Taylor, 2008). Some school districts in Winnipeg and elsewhere were trailblazers in this area in the late 1990’s; nevertheless, to appease conservative faith groups, school authorities cautiously introduced this work under the auspices of “anti-homophobia” programming as opposed to LGBTQ programming (Taylor, 2008). In 2009, the Alberta government finally included sexual orientation in its provincial human rights legislation (Meyer, 2010; Wells, 2006). However, the Alberta government took conservative measures to appease parents by providing them with the option to have their children opt out of lessons around sexual orientation. This bill passed in spite of major resistance from the Alberta Teachers’ Association, Alberta School Boards Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, and the Alberta School Councils Association (Meyer, 2010). Thus, it is evident that political roadblocks can stymie the work of policy activists and educators who want to make positive changes for sexual minority groups. Politics can also consume significant amounts of time and energy needed to support students. Regardless of this, critical analysis and reflection on the experiences of these school boards is necessary in order to learn what to do and what not to do in creating inclusive schools for queer youth and to be confident that the political battle to support this marginalized population will one day lead to favourable outcomes.
Cultural and religious prejudices

Many cultural and religious groups, citizens and educators espouse homophobic beliefs (Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2008). Studies have shown that principals and teachers may not always deal with homophobic bullying or infuse LGBTQ topics and symbols into their classrooms and schools because it goes against their own personal beliefs (Goldstein et al., 2008; Macgillivray, 2004). Although human rights legislation does not imply that the teaching of LGBTQ topics constitutes an infringement on the rights of educators in their religious beliefs, there are those teachers who may choose to eliminate such topics from their programs. Even those educators who feel a moral obligation to disrupt the dominant hegemony of sexual/gender orientation, may find themselves dealing with backlash from political and/or religious anti-gay activists, and be silenced by it (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008).

Ignorance and lack of knowledge

Researchers have also noted that ignorance and lack of knowledge also create barriers to LGBTQ inclusion. Many people possess misconceptions that homosexuality is a deviant behavior, a disease or mental illness that can be cured, even though medical authorities from the Canadian and American psychological associations denounce these misconceptions (Wells, 2006). Others believe that teaching about homosexuality may influence students to become homosexual (Macgillivray, 2000). Studies have additionally shown that educators themselves are not sufficiently educated on LGBTQ populations and, therefore, find it difficult to discuss these topics in class or respond appropriately to questions others may have about sexual diversity (Goldstein, et al., 2007; Taylor, 2008). Within this context, there is a desperate need to address LGBTQ content in staff training and ongoing professional development.
**Heteronormative practices**

Significant gains have been made in creating more inclusive schools for visible minorities and students with disabilities (Glaze et al., 2012; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009); yet sexual minorities continue to be underrepresented in various facets of school life. Curriculum resources (texts with positive role models of LGBTQ populations) and visible manifestations of these populations (posters of same-sex parents, gender neutral washrooms) are absent in many schools (Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000; Murray, 2011). Students continue to advocate for their right to bring same-sex partners to their proms or other social activities and often challenge the status quo and school authorities at significant personal, financial and emotional costs. As discussed earlier, Marc Hall (Grace & Wells, 2005), was denied permission to take his boyfriend to the prom and, in a similar instance, a lesbian student in Indiana was denied the opportunity to wear a tuxedo to her prom (Murray, 2011). These barriers to inclusion need to be challenged by dismantling systemic and heteronormative practices and fully accept and include queer youth in all facets of school life.

**The Role of Leadership**

When policy writers, community members, educators and school leaders fully understand the unpleasant and hostile lived realities of our sexual minority students and populations, they can better comprehend the urgency for the work; be motivated to seize the legal and ethical authority to move the agenda forward; and more readily navigate through the multitude of barriers impeding LGBTQ inclusion.

Studies have shown that districts and schools that enact equity policy and adopt comprehensive programs for the inclusion of LGBTQ communities, achieve some positive change for LGBTQ youth (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz,
Boesen, Palmer, 2012; Macgillivray, 2004). We need to emphasize the moral imperative of this work and explore best practices and consistently adopt these into all our districts across Canada and the United States. In this way, policy and programs for LGBTQ persons are integrated into the equity and social justice work already begun in Canadian and American jurisdictions.

Within this context, however, meaningful inclusion of LGBTQ populations appears to be possible through the efforts of inclusive minded principals who work to restrict the perpetuation of exclusionary practices and its associated marginalization. For the purposes of this study, the terms principals, administrators, school leadership and school leaders are used interchangeably.

In that vein, this study aims to explore inclusive leadership as a critical component to the advancement of the inclusion agenda for LGBTQ populations in Ontario public schools. The next sections will outline the significance of this research specific to the larger body of equity research for LGBTQ, inclusive leadership and the research questions for this study. In the remainder of this thesis, I build upon inclusive school leadership and how the inclusive school leaders in this study employed a variety of strategies to promote LGBTQ inclusivity.

**Significance of the Research**

A variety of studies have examined diverse facets of LGBTQ exclusion including the negative impact school climates have on LGBTQ youth (Kosciw, et al, 2012; Taylor et al, 2011), the lack of meaningful and purposeful professional learning around LGBTQ topics and the absence of inclusive curriculum resources in schools (Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000; Murray, 2011). However, it is difficult to create truly authentic and inclusive school environments if each of these elements is addressed in isolation. This study proposes to examine how inclusive principals have attempted to address all three of these areas: *safe and caring*
school climates, ongoing professional learning and inclusive curriculum - and, in doing so, is poised to offer insights on the potential for meaningful inclusion when these areas are addressed in tandem.

Various leadership theories exist such as transformational, distributive, emancipatory, instructional, democratic and inclusive. Inclusive leadership provides a sense of hope for disenfranchised populations. Its visions align with the principles of critical theory and critical pedagogy that challenge the status quo and work to improve the unjust conditions for marginalized groups. For the purposes of this study, I use Ryan’s (2013) inclusive leadership framework. Ryan (2013) proposes a variety of strategies that can support inclusive leaders who undertake inclusive school practices. In their pursuit of inclusion, inclusive leaders adopt various strategies such as fostering school community relations, communication strategies, critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy (Ryan, 2013).

Within this context, this study will contribute to an emerging body of literature around creating inclusive school environments for LGBTQ students and populations that sustains healthy and safe schools, facilitates ongoing professional learning for staff around LGBTQ topics and ensures LGBTQ curriculum materials are infused within the school program. In addition, this study will extend the existing scholarship through its examination of inclusive principal leadership at the elementary level. The principals interviewed for this study describe a wide variety of strategies they used to facilitate inclusive schools for LGBTQ students and populations. These inclusive leadership enactments further complement and contribute to Ryan’s inclusive leadership framework and add to our growing understanding of principals’ influence in developing inclusive schools for LGBTQ communities. Understanding how elementary principals with inclusive perspectives go about creating supportive and welcoming
environments for LGBTQ students and populations may also provide insights to governments, policy writers, boards of education as well as other administrators who are aiming to improve sexual minority experiences in their schools. Moreover, this work is important and timely given the exclusionary and hostile school conditions that exist for LGBTQ students in our schools.

It is my hope that our students, our future citizens, will transfer values of respect and acceptance for all people into society so that we can continue to collectively promote inclusivity for all. As educators and school leaders, if we are to realize our moral imperative for student achievement and well-being, we need to understand that a student’s sexual orientation and gender identity must never be a barrier to his or her success.

**Research Questions**

This study explores how inclusive-minded elementary principals in Ontario public schools create inclusive school environments for queer populations. The proposed research will be guided by the main research question:

How do inclusive-minded principals understand and address issues related to creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations?

This phenomenon will be explored through the following sub questions, which are grounded in the conceptual and theoretical frameworks for this study:

1. How do principals understand issues of inclusion for LGBTQ populations?
2. How do principals go about facilitating inclusive schools for LGTBQ populations?
3. How do principals navigate barriers while creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations?
4. What supports do principals report that they need when creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations?

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter two reviews existing literature on approaches to LGBTQ in schools. First, it outlines different facets of LGBTQ exclusion in our schools in relation to three specific areas: creating safe and caring schools for this population, promoting professional learning and inclusive curriculum around LGBTQ themes. This section discusses some of the challenges and barriers to creating inclusive environments for this population in the aforementioned areas. Strategies for inclusion are also discussed. The potential for inclusive oriented leaders in creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ students and people in elementary settings is also discussed.

Chapter three discusses the critical theoretical framework and Ryan’s conception of inclusive leaders which guide this study. I use different facets of critical theory as a framework to examine and unveil the current marginalization of LGBTQ individuals. Since inclusive leadership aligns with the principles of critical theory, I borrow from Ryan’s (2013; 2014) concept of inclusive leadership for my conceptual framework to explore the strategies inclusive oriented leaders use in creating inclusive school environments.

Chapter four describes the methodology employed for this study. The study employs a qualitative methodological approach. This strategy is effective in providing the principals participating in this study with a voice to share their insights, experiences, knowledge and expertise.

The fifth chapter explores how the school leaders in this study understood issues surrounding LGBTQ inclusion. Participants revealed both personal and professional experiences
that motivated them to commit to LGBTQ inclusive efforts. The sixth chapter describes the barriers principals perceived that hindered their efforts to create welcoming and safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and persons, promote learning around LGBTQ needs and integrate LGBTQ topics in the curriculum. Participants described system level and school level barriers that can impede LGBTQ inclusive efforts.

The seventh chapter details various strategies school leaders enacted in order to navigate through barriers to move the LGBTQ inclusivity agenda forward. In this chapter, I borrow from Ryan’s conception of inclusive leadership to describe the strategies participants employed to promote LGBTQ inclusion through fostering school community relations, communication practices, critical learning strategies and exercising strategic advocacy. By employing various strategies, school leaders in this study effectively enhanced LGBTQ presence by creating safe and inviting school environments, by promoting professional learning around LGBTQ themes and by ensuring curriculum materials reflected LGBTQ topics.

The eighth chapter provides participants’ insights into what additional resources and supports are needed to assist school leaders in their endeavours to include sexual minority populations. Although participants experienced different levels of success in creating safe and caring schools, encouraging professional learning around LGBTQ topics and incorporating inclusive curriculum, participants also expressed that additional supports are required in order to sustain inclusive school environments for queer communities.

The ninth chapter provides an overview of the three major themes that were weaved throughout this thesis. I borrow from previous research to further explain the findings generated from this study. In the tenth chapter, I provide concluding remarks, implications for educators’ and school leaders’ practice and further research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

In Chapter One, I outlined the significance of moving forward with more robust efforts aimed at enhancing LGBTQ inclusion within school communities. I also discussed the potential for inclusive leadership to positively impact on LGBTQ inclusivity endeavours. Although the journey of equity and inclusion for LGBTQ populations has begun, there is a long way to go both locally and internationally before the objective is achieved. The following literature review explores three key interrelated and interconnected tenets of the LGBTQ inclusivity agenda: safe and caring school climates, ongoing professional learning to meet the needs of LGBTQ students and populations, and inclusive curriculum resources. Each of these areas can independently affect some form of positive change for sexual minority students and LGBTQ populations within the school community. This literature review, however, explores the need to address each of the three areas in tandem for a more authentic and meaningful inclusion for LGBTQ populations.

The potential for inclusive leadership to enhance the lived experiences of LGBTQ persons is also presented. Ryan’s inclusive leadership framework (2013) puts forward various strategies that can support inclusive oriented principals who undertake inclusive school practices such as fostering school community relations, communication strategies, critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy.

Promoting Inclusivity through Safe and Caring School Climates

The success and well-being of sexual minority students depend upon access to schools where they are welcomed and included, treated respectfully, feel safe from harassment and violence, and where barriers to inclusion are identified and removed. As a result, this often translates into higher student outcomes and healthier feelings of self-worth (Bertram, Crowley, &
Massey, 2010; Bishop & Casida, 2011). While various studies have outlined the many benefits of sustaining healthy school climates where LGBTQ individuals can learn in an environment free from exclusionary, discriminatory and harassing behaviours (Bertram, Crowley, & Massey, 2010; Bishop & Casida, 2011; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Heinze & Horn, 2009; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Lee, 2002), a multitude of research indicates that schools often remain hostile breeding grounds for queer youth. The following sections will explore the mainstream literature outlining the impact of unhealthy school climates on sexual minority students’ academic success, social and emotional well-being, and unpack some of the barriers to maintaining safe school environments for LGBTQ communities. The final section offers strategies that can be used to create more inclusive school environments by sustaining safer schools for LGBTQ students and LGBTQ school community members.

**Impact of negative school climates on LGBTQ students**

School environments can be demoralizing and exclusionary for students who belong to sexual minority groups (Grace & Wells, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000; Murray, 2011; Short, 2010). In Canada, a survey administered to over 3,700 youth by EGALE Canada (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) unveiled some of the harsh realities for LGBTQ students in the country, with seventy percent of participating students hearing homophobic epithets like “That’s so gay!” on a daily basis while 48% stating that they are hearing remarks like “faggot” and “dyke”. Ten per cent of students also reported hearing homophobic comments from teachers daily or weekly; 51% reported being verbally harassed; 60% felt unsafe at school; and 45% of youth with LGBTQ parents reported being verbally harassed, 27% physically (Taylor et al, 2011). In the United States, the GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) survey of 8584 students aged 13 to 20 yielded similar results. Furthermore, when compared with data from past GLSEN
surveys, current results indicate that conditions for these populations have not improved significantly over the years (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Internationally, large-scale survey results from the United Kingdom mirror those of the GLSEN and EGALE, and also highlight higher levels of victimization in faith-based schools than in other schools (Noret & Rivers, 2008). Other studies corroborate that queer youth experience higher rates of bullying than their heterosexual counterparts, and as a result, are at higher risk for maladaptive tendencies, social problems and academic difficulties (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2012).

Even within the LGBTQ population, students experience varying degrees of exclusion and victimization in school settings. For instance, studies have shown that male and questioning students are subject to more bullying than other students belonging to sexual minority groups (Birkett et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012). McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell’s (2010) mixed method study also indicates that transgender youth have unique needs and may require differentiated help and specific strategies to support them. In particular, the study points out that transgender youth face additional harassment when school staff make unfair assumptions or demands on them, such as using their “birth names” rather than “preferred names”; forcing them to use male/female restrooms rather than generic ones; and “coaching” them to act according to their biological self.

Intersectionality is also an important consideration for understanding how certain individuals undergo varying degrees of oppression and victimization because of multiple identities. Intersectionality, which is gaining attention in the scholarship, refers to:

‘particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that all oppressions work together in

For example, LGBTQ youth may be bullied because of their ethnicity or sexual orientation or both which intersect to intensify their harsh experiences of oppression (Blackburn, & McCready, 2009; Daley et al, 2008). According to Noret & Rivers (2008), research is needed to explore the complexities of intersections of race, class, ability, ethnicity and so forth among LGBTQ youth (Noret & Rivers, 2008) so that school officials and staff can better understand the impact of bullying on intersecting diversities. This means that using an “intersectional perspective” can help educators better assess the supports that diverse LGBTQ populations need who experience intersecting forms of marginalization (Daley et al, 2008, p. 24). In this vein, Blackburn and McCready (2009) contend that considerations for intersectionality need to influence policy, training programs, co-curricular and extracurricular programs.

Given the negative experiences many sexual minority students face daily in their school environments, it is not surprising that the literature provides evidence to suggest that these youth are at risk for absenteeism, leaving school early, anxiety, violence, depression, suicide, low academic results, and low post-secondary aspirations (Glaze, et al., 2012; Grace & Wells, 2009; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012; Murray, 2011; Schrader & Wells, 2004; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015; Taylor et al., 2011). Gold and Drucker (2008), for instance, found that, relative to the national average, LGBTQ students were three times more likely to drop out of school than their heterosexual peers. McDaniel, Purcell & D’Augelli’s (2001) study provides evidence that queer youth are at higher risk than other student populations for mental health problems, substance abuse disorders, and suicide attempts. In another study evaluating emotional stress among 9th to 12th graders, LGBTQ respondents indicated elevated
risks of self-harm and suicidal ideation – despite anti-discrimination policies at their schools (Almeida, et al, 2009). Finally, in some extreme situations, sexual minority youth have been tortured and even murdered because of their sexual orientation (Conoley, 2008; van Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

According to the literature, the adverse effects of harassment can be exacerbated by the lack of social support from family and friends. Some students may find that suppressing their identity by remaining closeted is the only way to avoid rejection by family and friends and, thereby, guarantee their acceptance at home and safety in schools (Bertram et al., 2010; Macgillivray, 2000; Schneider & Owens, 2000). Some studies also substantiate that students are identifying earlier, which places them in difficult and unsafe situations at a younger age (Macgillivray, 2000; Taylor, 2000). Coping strategies highlighted in the literature include pretending to be straight, convincing themselves that their condition is only a passing phase, denying their same sex attractions, and resorting to unhealthy lifestyle choices involving drugs and alcohol (Kosciw et al., 2012; Macgillivray, 2000; Taylor, 2000), further supporting the urgency for school communities to address these harmful conditions by taking proactive and interventionist stances to combat forms of homophobia and harassment.

**Barriers to promoting safe school climates**

Despite the robust evidence that draws attention to the realities of LGBTQ students and the toll unhealthy school environments take on their academic, mental health and well-being, the literature identifies a range of barriers that continue to impede progress towards creating safer school climates. These barriers are detailed below.
Lack of staff support

A study by Zack et al. (2010) lists responses of teacher candidates to homophobia into four categories: “avoiders, hesitators, confronters and integrators” (p. 108). The avoiders remained silent; the hesitators were unsure of how they should act; the confronters challenged homophobic rhetoric; but the integrators found ways to address biases and incorporate LGBTQ themes into their programs in the hope of changing prejudices in school culture (Zack, Mannheim, & Alfano, 2010). Indeed, these four categories can be applied to all educators. If new and tenured teachers and leaders become confident integrators of LGBTQ topics, they can help change significantly the adverse school conditions for these youth. Yet, some studies indicate that homophobic epithets like “gay,” “fag” and “dyke” have become so entrenched in the common vernacular that school staff are accustomed to hearing and ignoring them, or choosing not to report them when they believe they lack administrative support (Conoley, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000). Survey results for both GLSEN and EGALE reveal that many LGBTQ students did not report bullying incidents to school officials, because they believed that officials would take little or no action to rectify the situation.

School locations and contexts

Some studies indicate that the level of harassment, bullying and hostility can depend strongly on geographic locale and school context. For instance, according to Kosciw et al. (2009), school communities in rural areas or in communities with low adult educational attainment are more hostile to LGBTQ students. In fact, studies confirm that students who “come out” in rural communities experience more victimization than youth who come out in urban communities (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). Additionally, many conservative faith-based schools hold strong beliefs that homosexuality is neither normal nor moral. Bishop & Casida (2011) comment that LGBTQ students in these contexts are subject to more pronounced
forms of exclusion where their behaviours are considered abnormal and deviant. Although all schools should accommodate the needs of sexual minority youth, district and school personnel need to more closely monitor these students who attend schools with the characteristics just discussed.

**Exclusionary practices**

Exclusion of LGBTQ students in schools can take different forms and create barriers to enhancing their sense of safety, feelings of acceptance and being welcomed and included. Although many school jurisdictions across Canada and the United States have policies and guidelines in place to support school administrators and staff in upholding and maintaining safe schools, Robinson & Espelage (2012) note that there are still vast inconsistencies across districts and schools in how they effectively oppose visible forms of homophobia, which continues to perpetuate the construction of barriers for inclusion. For example, school districts in Alberta have established anti-homophobia polices; however, the Alberta government still takes conservative measures aimed to appease confrontational parents by providing parents with the option to have their children opt out of lessons that discuss sexual orientation (Meyer, 2010; Wells, 2006). In the United States, school boards in Tennessee and Missouri have anti-bullying policies in place to safeguard queer youth, but to quell public protest, they disallow LGBTQ content integration in classrooms (Robinson & Espelage, 2012). These realities continue to send contradictory messages about consistently including and treating all human beings with dignity and respect and as equal partners in education.

Another barrier to creating safe and welcoming school environments takes the form of social exclusion. Dominant heteronormative structures and practices are powerful forms of exclusion, making LGBTQ students feel like outliers as they are socially excluded and
underrepresented in many facets of school life (Macgillivray, 2000; Schrader & Wells, 2004). Daily reminders of marginalization are seen through the acceptance of heterosexual traditions such as dating, homecoming king and queen, proms where male and female partners are considered the customary, and the teaching of students in early grades that the Western nuclear family is the norm in society (Grace & Wells, 2005; Macgillivray, 2000; Murray, 2011). These monolithic heteronormative social structures further stigmatize LGBTQ populations as abnormal, negatively impact their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, while enhancing power and privilege for the dominant group.

**Strategies to promote safe school climates**

As outlined above, creating safe school environments for LGBTQ communities is not an easy feat. Yet, sustaining safe school environments, where queer persons are not subject to harassment, homophobia and exclusionary practices, is a powerful way to create the conditions for inclusionary school settings that they require and deserve. Indeed, studies confirm that negative climates for queer communities are preventable (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). In fact, attitudes over time have become more positive toward sexual minorities (Hicks & Lee, 2006). To this end, the following section will highlight the literature that explores strategies school communities can implement to create school climates that are safe, welcoming, and supportive of sexual minorities.

**Policies**

Studies show that strict anti-homophobic policies that outline clear consequences for perpetrators as well as for bystanders result in reduced harassment in schools (Cooper –Nicols &
Bowleg, 2010; Goldstein, Collins & Halder, 2008). In this vein, generic bullying policies need to incorporate explicit anti-homophobic policies that address all forms of homophobic epithets and banter so that a clear message is communicated that this form of harassment will not be tolerated (Kosciw et al., 2012; Murray, 2011). Vancouver School Board in Canada is one of the few boards that have trail-blazed ahead to create a comprehensive policy that moves beyond an anti-homophobia mandate by incorporating professional learning for all staff, inclusive curriculum, community outreach programs, equitable hiring practices and an LGBTQ Advisory Committee to ensure that policy directives continue to support LGBTQ populations (EGALE, Canada, 2011; Taylor, 2008). According to Schneider & Owens (2000), district vision and mission statements also need to espouse the principles of equity and inclusivity for all dimensions of diversity, including sexual orientation, so that a climate of respect is upheld for all individuals.

**Role of school staff**

School staff members play a critical role in ensuring LGBTQ students feel safe and supported (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014). Studies have also shown that LGBTQ students will most likely ask for support from school staff and administrators they can trust (McGuire et al., 2010; Noret & Rivers, 2008). As McGuire et al. (2010) explain, for transgender students, trusting an adult who is more sensitive to their needs significantly contributes to their feelings of safety:

The focus group participants explained issues of trust eloquently in describing the actions of principals, teachers and nurses who offered refuge and safe spaces in the form of private bathrooms, secrecy about students’ legal names, freedom from exposing locker room environments and advising in other academic matters. These sorts of supports are likely especially important for transgender youth who face considerable safety concerns if forced into vulnerable situations (p. 1187).
Staff visibility is another strategy to ensure safe school climates for sexual minority students. Conoley (2008) has shown that staff visibility in specific areas such as hallways during transition times or near washrooms and change-rooms can reduce homophobic incidents. Educators and school leaders also need to consistently address the use of homophobic epithets such as “that’s so gay,” so that a clear message is communicated to others that this form of harassment will not be tolerated (Kosciw et al., 2012; Murray, 2011). The number of homophobic incidents can be reduced when staff members deal with all forms of homophobic harassment, whether verbal, physical and psychological, on a regular basis (Conoley, 2008; Greytak & Kosciw, 2014).

Integration vs. segregation

Some districts designate specialty schools solely for LGBTQ students, such as the Triangle Program in the Toronto District School Board or the Harvey Milk School in New York. Although these schools provide support and safe refuge along with qualified staff and inclusive curricula, some critics argue that these approaches provide mere band-aid solutions instead of dealing outright with the issues of homophobia prevalent in many of our schools and society at large (Russell, 2006; Schieble, 2012). Rather than segregate these students into specialty schools designed to protect them, research on intergroup contact theory supports the integration of LGBTQ students into the mainstream. For instance, in their study examining intergroup contact with gays and lesbians, Heinze & Horn (2009) observed that heterosexuals who befriend LG peers are more apt to accept them and protect them from harassment. Such studies outline key considerations for educators in deciding whether safety measures need to promote opportunities for integrating students into the mainstream or segregating students into special programs.
**Differentiated approaches**

Another consideration is that within the queer community, students undergo varying degrees of victimization – male, questioning and transgender students experience higher levels of bullying (Kosciw et al., 2009; McGuire et al., 2010). As indicated in the literature, school context and location also play a role in creating safe, or unsafe, conditions for these students (Kosciw et al., 2009). This crystallizes the need to ensure that programs must reflect the individual needs of LGBTQ students in their local school communities as a one-size-fits-all approach to safety may not protect all sexual minority students.

**School climate surveys**

When school jurisdictions conduct surveys on school learning climates, all students are afforded the opportunity to respond anonymously to questions about equity and inclusivity. To assess realities for queer youth specifically, districts need to include survey questions pertaining specifically to sexual minority students. In this way, students can voice an opinion on whether, and how well, their own school is providing an inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, Kosciw et al. (2009) suggest administering school climate surveys with specific questions for each of the distinct groups belonging to the LGBTQ community. In this way, system and school leaders alongside staff can analyze the data to determine specific approaches required for the unique needs of students within the LGBTQ population.

**Clubs**

Despite rocky beginnings, controversy from conservative faith traditionalists, and resistance from some school community members, clubs such as Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) continue to build momentum across Canada and the United States (Lee, 2002; Macgillivray, 2009). The number of GSAs in the United States alone has increased from 100 in 1997 to over
4000 in 2010 (Bishop & Casida, 2011). According to Savage & Harley (2009), these clubs have provided a forum for students of all sexual orientations to come together:

GSAs are intended to function as a space where students of all sexual orientations can interface in a safe and welcoming environment… They have as their goal increasing understanding about the various needs and challenges that arise from differences in sexual orientation, often taking on a tone of advocacy and social action to improve school climates for all students (p. 7).

Studies examining the positive impact of GSAs are plentiful, underscoring their role in improving school environments for LGBTQ students. In these studies, students attending GSAs indicated they felt less likely to be harassed when supported by their allies and peer networks, and experienced a sense of individual and collective empowerment and enhanced self-esteem as a result of this form of youth activism (Cooper-Nicols & Bowleg, 2010; Lee, 2002; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009).

**School events, scholarships and parent outreach programs**

Anti-homophobia events and awareness campaigns such as “National Day against Homophobia,” “Pink Day,” and “Gay Pride History Month” provide opportunities for LGBTQ voice and presence to become part of the whole school ethos (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Savage & Harley, 2009; Schrader & Wells, 2004). Some American schools have also established special scholarship programs aimed at supporting youth in overcoming obstacles to staying in school so that they can pursue their full potential and educational aspirations (Pace, 2007). Studies have also shown that LGBTQ students are more likely to overcome tendencies for drug abuse or falling into depression when their parents are supportive of their sexual orientation and gender identity (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008). Thus, it is also incumbent on schools to be involved in outreach programs to educate parents about LGBTQ issues as well as acknowledge, affirm and involve parents who identify as LGBTQ or have
children who belong to queer populations (Bower & Klecka, 2009a). Schools can also be vehicles to link parents to community agencies and organizations, such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which can provide parents with invaluable learning, support and resources for themselves and their children (Cooper-Nicols & Bowleg, 2010; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010).

The role of Inclusive Leadership in creating safe and caring school climates

Evidence in the literature points to toxic school environments that negatively impact on LGBTQ student achievement, well-being and mental health. Bielaczyc underscores the impact principals have on creating positive school climates for all diversities: “Clearly, the tone set by the administrator can have a great effect on the culture and attitude of the school population” (Bielaczyc as cited in Dewitt, 2012, p. 17). Research also confirms that inclusive minded principals are well positioned to ensure that school community members feel welcomed and included through the use of various strategies (Ryan, 2006a; 2006b; 2013).

Inclusive leaders communicate and model a school ethos that is respectful of and embraces all diversities to ensure that different voices are heard and represented (Ryan 2006a; 2013). Inclusive leaders challenge the status quo and break down barriers to meaningful involvement in school life, thus improving experiences for marginalized populations (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006b). Inclusive principals forge relationships with different stakeholders, agencies and partners to learn about the needs of their school community and foster the conditions for their involvement (Ryan 2013).

In this vein, inclusive oriented principals have the potential to facilitate more inviting, safe and welcoming schools for queer populations by challenging the status quo created by
overpowering heterosexual structures, confronting misconceptions about LGBTQ communities and quashing homophobic banter (Dewitt, 2012). Through open, genuine and inviting communication strategies, inclusive principals can build relations with and learn about the experiences of LGBTQ people to better support them. By forging relations with LGBTQ communities and their advocates, inclusive leaders can promote LGBTQ representation and visibility in different facets of school life.

**Summary**

Sexual minority students continue to face challenges and barriers as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many perceive their future prospects as citizens in society as bleak and uninviting and as a result, leave school, suffer depression, consider or commit suicide. Cultivating unhealthy school climates will only continue to alienate and further exclude these students from participating in all facets of school life. However, creating safer school environments are possible. Providing students with an adult they can connect with; making counseling available; providing adequate supervision; organizing ongoing anti-homophobia programs; facilitating clubs such as Gay, Straight Alliances (GSAs); and inviting input regarding safe school practices from representatives of diverse groups are all steps that principals and teachers can take to support LGBTQ students so that they can thrive socially, emotionally, physically and academically. Inclusive leadership plays a critical role in changing the lived realities of LGBTQ individuals by challenging the status quo and misconceptions associated with this population.

Harassment, however, does not stop at the school – it overflows into our societies since prejudice and bias can be entrenched in a person’s belief system. Studies have shown that ensuring safe school initiatives, whether in districts or school communities, is not enough
(Almeida et al., 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Although these initiatives are required and are largely effective, creating a safe school compromises only one part of the school inclusivity equation. The next section will explore the literature pertaining to the importance of ongoing professional learning that incorporates dimensions of sexual orientation and gender identity and the contribution of that learning to the inclusivity and equity agenda for LGBTQ populations.

**Promoting Inclusivity through Professional Learning**

Educators and school leaders have a moral obligation to redress the negative conditions in schools to help all students feel safe. Ideally, teachers and school leaders should espouse values, beliefs and attitudes that are inclusive of all populations, but studies indicate that this is not always the case (Meyer, 2010; Wells, 2006). The following sections will discuss barriers that impede professional learning for LGBTQ inclusion and outline effective professional development strategies that can be used in all of our schools for all staff and school community members.

**Barriers to professional learning**

The plethora of studies delineating how antagonistic school climates negatively impact LGBTQ academic, social and emotional growth sanctions the urgency for professional development in this area. Hostile school climates for LGBTQ students may propel the moral purpose needed to do the work; however, educators also need the requisite knowledge and abilities to effectively create inclusive classrooms for LGBTQ students. However, as in creating safe and caring school environments for queer populations, a number of barriers impede progress in the related area of professional learning.
Lack of meaningful and purposeful professional learning

A professional learning program that does not compel school staff to challenge the status quo of heterosexual structures is also a barrier to creating inclusive school environments for LGBTQ youth. Existing literature suggests that teachers require specific training – which is often not readily available or institutionally supported – so that they can critically reflect on language and practices that continually marginalize sexual minority groups and acquire the knowledge they need to address challenges such as parental complaints or community protest (DePalma, 2009; Dewitt, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2009; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010). When queer students perceive their school environments as framed merely within male-female binary categorizations, heterosexuality is affirmed for them as the norm, which further overshadows different forms of diversity (Macgillivray, 2000). This form of exclusion impacts both LGBTQ students and LGBTQ parents, in addition to parents and staff who identify as queer. These systemic exclusionary practices take on various forms: school documents that assume students have a heterosexual mother and father; traditions such as Mother’s and Father’s Days; homecoming king and queen; proms and dances promoting partnerships between female and male students, among others (Bower & Klecka, 2009b; Macgillivray, 2000).

Inconsistencies in the delivery of professional learning opportunities

Additional studies have highlighted that professional learning about LGBTQ topics is inconsistent across districts and universities for teacher candidates, practicing teachers and school leaders. For instance, some studies have shown that teacher-training programs seldom include sexual orientation as part of their diversities education (Bower & Klecka, 2009b; Garrett, 2012; Horn, Konkol, McInerney, Meiners, North, Nunez, & Sullivan, 2010). In these pre-service programs, LGBTQ themes are excluded either intentionally through choice, or unintentionally when program coordinators are unsure of how to proceed or whether such topics are even
permissible (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). Capper, Theoharis and Sebastian’s review of social justice leadership training programs stressed that such topics as race, ethnicity and social class are addressed effectively by educators; however, programs incorporating topics around sexual orientation are limited (Allen, Harper, & Koschoreck, 2009).

**Staff as barriers**

Staff themselves can be barriers to professional learning for LGBTQ inclusion. Educators’ personal biases, religious beliefs, and fear of repercussions from colleagues, parents and school administrators all contribute to the unwillingness of some educators to partake in this learning (Garrett, 2012; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010). According to Larrabee and Morehead (2010), teachers may also be reticent to partake in this sort of professional development because it competes with other curriculum content areas needing attention. It becomes important, therefore, that this dimension of equity training be integrated with other social justice learning through critical pedagogies so that the program is not perceived as additional work or a mere add-on. In this sense, staff’s reluctance and lack of confidence to embark on topics about sexual orientation and gender issues legitimizes the need for this training (DePalma, 2009; Garrett, 2012; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Smolkin & Young, 2011).

**Strategies to promote professional learning**

This lack of critical, purposeful, consistent, ongoing staff professional development within a K to 12 continuum continues to create barriers to professional learning for LGBTQ inclusion. This learning is crucial to enable educators to debunk many of the myths and assumptions surrounding sexual minority populations. Concomitantly, professional learning can help staff gain the confidence and knowledge they need to explore these themes with students.
The following sections detail various strategies that have been identified in the literature as aiding in staff professional learning with respect to LGBTQ inclusion.

**Ongoing staff professional development**

The creation of specific staff development programs that address the importance of policies and procedures around student safety and the importance of intervening against all homophobic epithets and harassment, can be paramount in creating inclusive environments (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Macgillivray, 2000; Macgillivray, 2004). Some researchers have suggested using personal narratives and anecdotes of LGBTQ students in professional learning sessions to enable school staff to better comprehend and appreciate the importance of acting on all homophobic incidents (Garrett, 2012; Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2008).

Additionally, educators need training to enable them to look beyond anti-homophobia in order to understand the heteronormative discourses so deeply entrenched in their daily work that exclude LGBTQ voice. This type of professional learning is one way to help school staff unpack how queer students are excluded from day-to-day activities and to address heteronormative forms of social exclusion that relegate these individuals to the margins. Moreover, providing educators with the tools to critically reflect on and dismantle predominant heteronormalizing social discourses can provide the stimulus needed to move teachers out of their comfort zone to explore more inclusive language for sexual minorities such as ‘partner’ or ‘special person’ instead of ‘boyfriend’ or ‘girlfriend’; ‘permanent relationship’ instead of ‘married’; or ‘family’ instead of ‘mom and dad’ (Burt, Gelnaw, & Lesser, 2010; Underwood & Black, 1998).

In addition, ongoing professional development could help teachers identify and reflect on inherent biases in existing curriculum resources as many of schools lack appropriate LGBTQ resources (Goldstein et al., 2008; Murray, 2011). This means scrutinizing the curriculum
through the lens of critical theory and pedagogy, and engaging in critical conversations to unveil the taken-for-granted assumptions we make about heterosexuality (Schieble, 2012). Staff can be encouraged to develop a “critical consciousness” that will help them to “recogniz[e], acknowledg[e] and critiqu[e] many of these taken-for-granted patterns [which are] necessary to turn things around for those who are routinely excluded” (Ryan, 2006b, p. 114). These opportunities can involve job-embedded collaborative work sessions, team teaching, co-planning and co-reflecting, observation of colleagues, participation in action research sessions, and sharing of best practices (Garrett, 2012; Ryan, 2006b; Savage & Harley, 2009). Promoting critical reflection to dismantle hierarchies of power and oppression in discourse and curriculum resources can help develop a cadre of critical practitioners who can assess inequities in their practice to create more inclusive environments for LGBTQ students:

Critical reflection can thus aid educators in becoming more responsive to the needs of their LGB students. (Cochran Smith, 2004; Freire, 1998; Little, 2001; Mathison, 1998) and attenuate their fear of teaching about the "isms." (Larrabe & Morehead, 2010, p. 38)

Accordingly, as studies have shown, ongoing critical learning can help educators challenge their own personal biases, misconceptions and assumptions about LGBTQ stereotypes (Bower & Klecka, 2009b; DePalma, 2009). These professional development strategies can have significantly positive outcomes for LGBTQ students; students can experience greater success in our school systems when they know staff members care about their needs, and want to learn how to meet their needs by embedding more inclusive practices (Larrabe & Morehead, 2010).

**Pre-service training programs**

Research has shown that providing teacher candidates with specific knowledge about LGBTQ topics and issues results in reduced prejudices and biases toward LGBTQ populations as
well as demystifies common assumptions made about them. In a study of fifty-two pre-service teachers at one Canadian university, learning about sexual minorities not only reduced biases, but also increased teachers’ commitment to helping these students (Dowling, Rodger, & Cummings, 2007). Additionally, entry-level training for teacher candidates contributed to fostering healthier attitudes and feelings towards queer populations (Garrett, 2012; Zack, Mannheim, & Alfano, 2010).

**Training for support staff**

School leaders and teachers are not the only individuals who are responsible for creating inclusive school environments for queer students – other support personnel such as child and youth workers, educational assistants and guidance counselors can also support LGBTQ students and their families, as well as act as a resource for school staff and parents of LGBTQ youth. Like practicing and pre-service teachers, support personnel require training on how to effectively deal with homophobia, support students who are questioning their sexuality or experiencing depression, and learn about community agencies and programs that can benefit LGBTQ students and their families (Underwood & Black, 1998). For instance, support staff can learn about suicide prevention programs so that they can support staff and students in identifying individuals who are at risk for depression and suicide (McDaniel et al., 2001). They can also serve as a wealth of information for school communities, and provide preventative and interventionist support in addition to timely professional counseling for students (McDaniel et al., 2001).

Guidance counselors in particular can serve in an important capacity in meeting the social and emotional needs of LGBTQ youth. Training for these counselors needs to extend beyond their traditional responsibilities, which typically center on academic and career counseling.
Training programs could also encompass components of student social and emotional wellness so that they can be prepared to deal proactively with LGBTQ student issues and concerns such as truancy, absenteeism, depression, dropping out and suicidal ideation (van Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

**The role of Inclusive Leadership in promoting professional learning around LGBTQ topics**

For schools to become truly accepting and inclusive, it is important for school community members to learn about each other in a safe, non-judgmental environment (Ryan, 2013; 2014). Ongoing learning can infuse new knowledge and understandings about diversity and acceptance of differences. However, as discussed in this section, professional learning infusing LGBTQ topics is lacking for educators and school leaders (Dewitt, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2009). Providing the correct information is needed in order to debunk many of the myths that undermine LGBTQ existence and identity (Dewitt, 2012; Dowling, Rodger, & Cummings, 2007). Professional learning, therefore, can help educators understand the plight and needs of sexual minorities in addition to re-examining oppressive heterosexual structures that minimize LGBTQ presence.

Inclusive leaders play a significant role as a lead learner and lead teacher for diversity in order to expand stakeholders’ understandings about others (Ryan, 2013). Despite the dearth of professional development in the area of LGBTQ equity, inclusive leaders employ critical learning strategies (Ryan, 2013) needed to unveil inequities and exclusionary school practices that define LGBTQ experiences (Schieble, 2012). By nurturing a “critical consciousness” through critical learning (Ryan, 2006b; 2013), inclusive leaders can unveil the harsh realities faced by queer communities in hopes of inciting activism to improve conditions for this population. In today’s society, anti-gay epithets such as “That’s so Gay!” have become so common place and ingrained in common vernacular that people may not even recognize their
derogatory connotations. Inclusive minded leaders who foster critical learning skills can help staff, students and parents realize the negative impact such language has on the well-being of gay minorities. Inclusive leaders are also strategic in how they go about changing attitudes in others through critical learning. Through strategic advocacy (Ryan, 2013), inclusive minded principals can persuade others into accepting LGBTQ inclusive initiatives. For instance, sharing school data that points to unfavourable conditions for LGBTQ youth or having LGBTQ students share their hostile experiences are just some strategic ways that may influence staff to become more open to learning about how to support LGBTQ populations (Taylor, 2008).

**Summary**

School leaders, teachers and support staff can all play a part in helping LGBTQ students feel confident that their needs can be met. In order to facilitate this, meaningful and purposeful professional development is needed to help school staff members to better understand and challenge heteronormative structures that create barriers to LGBTQ inclusion. Research clearly supports the fact that teachers, school support staff and school administrators require explicit learning around LGBTQ topics within the broader equity and social justice work. Linking this professional learning to the broader training for diversities education helps practicing teachers to connect with the initiative rather than view it as additional work. Inclusive leaders play an important role in promoting critical skills and learning that unveil injustices and underscore the urgency to support marginalized populations like LGBTQ. An important consideration, however, is that professional learning needs to be accompanied by inclusive resources and curriculum material that incorporate sexual diversity topics in order to support educators in
transferring their professional learning into praxis for LGBTQ inclusion. The literature exploring this facet of LGBTQ inclusion is outlined in the next section.

**Inclusive Curriculum**

Taylor’s (2008) in depth study of a ground breaking anti-homophobia program implemented in the Winnipeg School District (WSD) concluded that although this program, supported by federal and provincial legislative frameworks, provided mandatory training for all employees, full inclusion of LGBTQ persons was still not achieved. In this sense, professional learning needs to be supplemented with resources in order to support staff in their ongoing efforts to create inclusive environments. Without resources and curriculum to infuse LGBTQ themes into the classrooms, student and staff engagement to promote anti-homophobia remains in the halls of the school rather than entering in the classrooms where learning about LGBTQ needs to happen. In the case of the WSD, Taylor (2008) notes:

> Until WSD mandates a truly inclusive curriculum and provides teachers with the resources to develop professional competence in it, teachers can take advantage of teachable moments simply by intervening whenever homophobic incidents occur during class, while doing hallway and cafeteria monitoring, and at other times during the school day. Every one of WSD’s 5,200 employees has been taught how to do that in the Human Rights/Anti-Homophobia workshop. They can relay the information—news to many students—that homophobia has no place in a respectful community and will not be tolerated. But without a system-wide anti-homophobia curriculum in place, students will still be learning from their pointedly silent teachers that homophobic bullying is not all that bad, because “Human Rights” does not, after all is said and left unsaid, mean “Anti-Homophobia” (p. 170).

Additionally, inclusive curriculum resources are needed that enable students to see themselves represented in the curriculum so that topics are not treated as tokenistic. When students see themselves as part of the resources, they feel included, feel part of the school community, and as a result, feel an increased sense of belonging (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; Glaze et al., 2012; Ryan, 2006b; Ryan 2012; Savage & Harley, 2009).
The following section will detail literature that explores the barriers to inclusive curriculum, which serves to only further perpetuate LGBTQ invisibility, myths and stereotypes around LGBTQ people by providing either no information or the wrong information. Inclusive curriculum strategies are also discussed to show the powerful impact of the integration of LGBTQ content in creating inclusive school environments.

**Barriers to inclusive curriculum**

There are more studies confirming barriers to LGBTQ topic integration in Canada and the US than there are studies pointing to inclusive approaches (Cooper –Nicols & Bowleg, 2010; Temple, 2005). Barriers to curriculum inclusion come from various sources: lack of consistent content integration, lack of appropriate portrayal of queer populations and the censorship of existing resources.

**Lack of consistent content integration**

Although significant gains for curricular inclusion have been made for many diverse populations, studies show that LGBTQ curriculum representation remains invisible in many North American classrooms (Burt, Gelnaw, & Lesser, 2010; Dewitt, 2012; Macgillivray, 2000; Macgillivray, 2009). LGBTQ content continues to be overshadowed by heterosexual themes and activities (Dewitt, 2012), thereby perpetuating “the process whereby positive role models, messages, and images about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are publicly silenced in schools” (Friend, 1993, as cited in Macgillivray, 2000, p. 311). Moreover, the literature identifies many reasons for the lack of consistent content integration in our schools including parental requests to ban books with LGBTQ content, lack of resources appropriate to the grade level, lack of access to resources, and reluctance of educators to integrate resources into their lessons (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Dewitt, 2012; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Macgillivray, 2000). Blackburn and
Buckley (2005), for instance, found that very few schools in the USA incorporate literature around same sex populations in English language arts. Their findings also revealed that because of personal biases, many teachers would not use LGBTQ materials while other teachers noted lack of policy to support content integration. Similar studies in Canada also found teacher reluctance, lack of resources and parental protest as factors impeding fair and equitable content integration (Temple, 2005). Additionally, prescriptive policy that may be reflective of dominant societal norms can limit certain topics from being integrated into the curriculum (Pinto, 2012), hence the lack of LGBTQ content integration.

**Lack of appropriate portrayal of LGBTQ populations**

Although studies point to inconsistent LGBTQ content integration in our schools, it becomes even more challenging to portray these populations in a positive light when LGBTQ topics are not represented fairly in the curriculum or are taught in isolation. For instance, Macgillivray’s and Jennings’ (2008) study highlights that American foundational teacher texts used in pre-service classes omit LGBTQ themes, place them within topics dealing with sexually transmitted diseases, and fail to acknowledge the intersectionality of LGBTQ with race, ability, social economic class, and so forth. Consequently, when exposed to such myopic information, teacher candidates are predisposed to view LGBTQ populations in a negative or narrow manner.

Students are also exposed to negative images of queer communities, as Young’s and Middleton’s (2002) US study confirms. Their review of student texts substantiates the information that topics about sexual orientation are infused in sections dealing with deviance, immorality and AIDS. Temple (2005) conducted a similar study in Quebec, a province considered one of the more liberal regions regarding sexual diversity – Quebec was the first province in 1977 to add sexual orientation to its Human Rights Code. Her extensive review of
how high school textbooks from different subject areas discussed sexuality and relationships found that 95 percent of pages made no reference to sexuality or same sex relationships while 80 percent of the references that were made were highly negative. More recently, Smolkin’s and Young’s (2011) examination of current top-selling children’s literature found that only a handful dealt with LGBTQ themes. Perhaps more revealing, all of the materials examined - whether student texts or school library reading material - lacked representation of content that portrays positively LGBTQ populations.

**Censorship of LGBTQ resources**

Resources exploring the wide range of collections containing LGBTQ topics are also underrepresented in schools and in public libraries, particularly in rural areas and conservative communities (Dewitt, 2012; Schrader & Wells, 2004). Rothbauer and McKechnie (2000), for instance, scrutinized favourable journal reviews of over 158 prominent gay and lesbian fiction titles which also included “cautions” and “warnings”, unfairly censoring these resources (as cited in Schrader & Wells, 2004). Schrader and Wells’ (2004) review of public library LGBTQ collections exposed many of the barriers patrons, children or youth face in trying to access LGBTQ materials such as the absence of subject headings in mainstream cataloguing; misleading subject headings such as “female friends” instead of “lesbians”; prejudicial terminology restricting access to relevant materials; and internet filtering designed to block key words commonly associated with sexual orientation. All these tactics continue to stigmatize LGBTQ topics as unsuitable or, in some cases, taboo. As well, limiting or restricting access to related material creates obstacles for individuals interested in exploring the topics. On the other hand, for those schools or public libraries interested in enhancing their LGBTQ collections, other factors come into play. For example, publishers may be reticent to publish material they deem
too political or controversial, further reducing LGBTQ representation in texts (Smolkin & Young, 2011). Pinto (2007) further underscores this problem in her research on the state of textbook production in Ontario. Many textbooks reflect a filtered view of the dominant groups and ideologies (Pinto, 2007), thereby limiting possibilities for topics about LGBTQ people to be included.

**Strategies to promote inclusive curriculum**

Inclusive curriculum materials can offer many benefits such as providing heterosexual youth with much more realistic and accurate knowledge of sexual orientation and allow LGBTQ students to see themselves represented fairly and openly in their classrooms and libraries. To facilitate this, curriculum integration of LGBTQ subject matter and resources needs to be part of the whole school approach where topics are infused in various subject areas and activities such as English language arts, social studies, character education and assemblies (Dewitt, 2012). For parents, students and staff members who oppose LGBTQ topic integration, policy and human rights legislation can provide the foundation to support the work. However, districts, schools and school leaders should also ensure that the purpose of the work is clearly communicated – that this work is not about “imposing” a particular population’s proclivities on others (Ryan, 2006a; 2012). Rather, educators should focus on building school communities where notions of respect and affirmation for individual differences are part of the whole school ethos. This section will explore literature that outlines various strategies schools can use to enhance inclusivity of sexual minorities through the integration of LGBTQ topic and themes.
**Promoting critical reflection and dialogue around curriculum resources**

Some literature suggests that teachers can encourage students at appropriate grade levels to engage in critical debate on inclusionary and exclusionary practices by creating safe forums for critical dialogue and questioning in their classrooms. In Schall and Kauffmann’s (2003) study, for instance, fourth and fifth graders responded positively to LGBTQ content introduced through literature, broadening their understanding of diversity. According to the authors, “children are capable of reading about and discussing sensitive social issues such as homosexuality when the children are a part of a classroom community that values dialogue and critical thinking” (as cited in Blackburn & Buckley, 2005, p. 209).

Other literature indicates that, as students become older, school staff should continue to promote more sophisticated levels of critical inquiry and debate as a springboard for discussions about inequity and injustice that exclude others’ voices and realities. Bullock et al. (2006) conducted a study with pre-service teachers who examined curriculum resources through a critical lens, and this strategy can be used also with students, who can be encouraged to explore resources to examine how they legitimize a dominant culture or form of social life. Students can examine those voices that are missing, and point out power dynamics and different kinds of oppression (Bullock, Freedman, D'Arcy, Easley, & Mbindyo, 2006; Elia & Eliason, 2010).

**Access to classroom materials and current resources**

Although it is important for educators to help students examine existing resources through critical, equity and social justice lenses, schools and districts also need to ensure that appropriate, up-to-date LGBTQ material and resources are available to staff and students in libraries and classrooms. Research emphasizes that students of diverse backgrounds and academic abilities perform well when exposed to culturally relevant curricula in inclusive
environments (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; Glaze et al, 2012; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Ryan, 2006b). Some literature also suggests that LGBTQ themes and topics be infused fairly and equitably into curricula in early grades (DePalma, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000; Schrader & Wells, 2004; Short, 2010). For instance, books incorporating different dimensions of family diversity, such as same sex parents, expand notions of family beyond the traditional nuclear family (Hardie & Bowers, 2012). Additionally, educators can purposefully integrate LGBTQ topics and information in different areas of the curriculum to highlight the many contributions of LGBTQ populations. For example, they can talk about accomplished LGBTQ historical figures, musicians, scientists, artists; discuss LGBTQ discrimination and oppression; and explore gay rights movements alongside civil rights movements (Burt et al., 2010; Taylor, 2000). Other literature points out that it is also important that districts ensure policies and curriculum guidelines define appropriate age levels for inclusion as some educators cite they need prescriptive curriculum guidelines to provide them with direction on the age appropriateness of different LGBTQ topics (Garrett, 2012; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011).

**School wide inclusive practices**

Curriculum encompasses more than textbooks and teaching strategies. Rather, the appearance of the school building as well as the kinds of activities and practices that go on within the building are indicative of what scholars like Giroux, Apple and Freire refer to as the “hidden curriculum”, which espouses certain messages about social norms and the inclusivity of the school. In terms of promoting LGBTQ inclusion, some authors suggest that school buildings can become more welcoming environments by displaying inclusive poster images and artifacts depicting the multi-dimensionalities of sexual minority populations:
[when] books on shelves, posters on walls and pamphlets in the racks include mention of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, then inclusiveness is promoted. The message, while subtle and powerful, helps to build an inclusive learning community that recognizes multiple voices (Friend, 1997, as cited in Temple, 2005, p. 289).

In this vein, same-sex parents may feel more welcomed in a school building if they see images of diverse families posted at the school, or books about family diversity in classrooms and libraries (Schrader & Wells, 2004). School documents might also be written in a way that is inclusive of diverse sexualities. When parents enroll their children in programs, for instance, the registration document asks them to indicate “mother” or “father”; a more inclusive language, however, would simply ask whether they are the “parent.” In addition, deeply entrenched traditions such as Mother’s Day and Father’s Day isolate those children of same-sex parents and those without a mother or father at home. These special days can be referred to as Family Day to be more inclusive of all family configurations (Schrader & Wells, 2004). Within the classroom, educators could employ practices that avoid structuring curriculum activities within male-female binaries. Teachers can encourage students to explore all activities rather than direct them to only male- or female-oriented ones depending on their biological sex – for example, girls can play with cars and blocks, males can consider nursing careers (Burt et al., 2010).

Co-curricular school events, presentations and activities can also reflect LGBTQ content (Burt et al., 2010; Elia & Eliason, 2010). For instance, schools can invite special presenters or guest speakers who represent LGBTQ populations or partner with organizations that support sexual minority staff, students, and parents such as Parents Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (EGALE) Canada, and the Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition (Schrader & Wells, 2004). These organizations can supply schools with valuable resources and material for LGBTQ inclusion. Just as many schools
highlight Black History month, Asian Heritage week and other cultural or ethnic events, schools can celebrate LGBTQ week to showcase significant contributions of this population. Schools can also organize special days such as Pink Shirt Day, Day of Silence, and National Coming Out Day, which can be used as teachable moments in the class to reiterate significant messages about the importance of inclusion (Cooper-Nicols, & Bowleg, 2010). These multi-faceted whole-school approaches and co-curricular activities, which extend beyond the walls of the classroom, allow schools to recognize LGBTQ persons as a legitimate and respected diverse group.

**The role of Inclusive Leadership in promoting LGBTQ inclusive curriculum**

Curriculum resources that portray positive images of LGBTQ communities are lacking. In order to accurately and authentically include and represent LGBTQ presence in schools, resources with LGBTQ themes and topics need to be infused in the class and schools (Taylor, 2008). Through critical learning, reflection and critical conversations, inclusive leaders can foster discussions around existing curriculum materials in order to highlight the missing or excluded voices (Ryan, 2013). In this way, school staff members are cognizant of LGBTQ invisibility in resources and find ways to better represent them in their classrooms. Inclusive leaders strategically advocate for inclusive school practices despite resistance from school community members (Ryan, 2013) who contest student exposure to gay topics. In this vein, inclusive leaders strategically hire equity minded staff who embrace inclusive efforts and find ways to network with allies and organizations (Ryan, 2013) who can support their efforts to infuse LGBTQ themes, activities and topics in a more systematic manner. As well, inclusive leaders who exercise strategic advocacy find appropriate ways to persuade others to push different equity agendas forward while being mindful of their particular school context (Ryan,
2013). Through persuasion, principals can impress upon staff that the infusion of LGBTQ themes can significantly enhance lived experiences of gay students who see themselves represented in the classroom (Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; Glaze et al, 2012; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009)

**Summary**

When all diversities are fairly represented in the curriculum, then staff and students can begin to approach curriculum through other lenses, not just a heteronormative one. To this end, LGBTQ topics can be infused into many curriculum areas such as art, history, English, and science within the kindergarten to Grade 12 continuum. With proper support and training, topics exploring family diversity, gay and lesbian civil rights movements, and positive LGBTQ historical figures, celebrities, role models, and same sex partnerships can be integrated into the classroom (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Macgillivray, 2000; Savage & Harley, 2009). Even in the absence of curriculum materials dealing with sexual minority populations, school staff, particularly those who are social justice-minded, can critically explore equity gaps in extant materials and incorporate LGBTQ topics where appropriate. Inclusive leaders can encourage teachers to use a critical lens to highlight how certain voices are marginalized or silenced in various curriculum materials. Nevertheless, studies regarding LGBTQ curriculum integration reiterate the importance of ensuring that resources, books and materials are readily available and that they reflect positive LGBTQ images. The onus is on districts, schools and school leaders to ensure classrooms and school libraries are well resourced in this regard. Although ongoing professional learning concerning LGBTQ topics is a requisite component for inclusion, inclusive
curriculum materials will allow school staff the opportunity to infuse LGBTQ themes in order to deepen their own and their students’ appreciation and understanding of LGBTQ populations.

**Situating the Study in the Literature**

As demonstrated in the literature reviewed above, LGBTQ inclusivity is possible and that students and families will feel included and welcomed in their school communities when schools are free from harassment and bullying, when staff members have the necessary professional learning to acquire knowledge and skills to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth, and when the curriculum reflects LGBTQ contributions and history. Moreover, the literature demonstrates that all of these necessary components to inclusion – *promoting safe schools, professional learning and inclusive curricula* – are interrelated and are equally important in creating and maintaining inclusive school environments and must be interwoven within the fabric of school cultures. Otherwise we run the risk of surface inclusion, which does not authentically and critically confront injustices and inequities perpetuated by heterosexual oppressions ingrained within our school cultures and societies.

However, there are more studies confirming that LGBTQ youth are subjected to hostile environments in schools on a regular basis in North America (Kosciw et al, 2012; Taylor et al, 2011) than studies around LGBTQ inclusivity. LGBTQ youth succumb to exclusionary, discriminatory and harassing treatment regularly. Depending on school contexts and locations, many experience severe verbal and physical abuse by different school community members (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Kosciw et al, 2012; Taylor et al, 2011; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Despite the possibilities for LGBTQ inclusivity, we are still a long way from creating safe environments, promoting learning around LGBTQ topics and infusing LGBTQ
materials into curriculum. Myths and misconceptions about this population in schools and society continue to undermine and pathologize their existence.

Scholarship in the area of education confirms that principals have a key role in positively impacting student success (Leithwood, 2013) and creating inclusive schools for all students (Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006b; 2012). Although inclusive minded leaders face roadblocks in their efforts to create inclusive schools, they forge ahead with this important work. Utilizing various strategies, inclusive leaders can play a critical role in mobilizing staff and school community members to challenge the status quo and create conditions that realize inclusion for all populations (Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006a; 2006b). In that vein, this study aims to explore inclusive leadership as a critical component to the advancement of the inclusion agenda for LGBTQ populations in Ontario public schools.

Principals, therefore, should have the ability to exert considerable influence to change the current realities for queer populations in their school communities. Hence, research indicates that inclusive leadership is critical to building school communities where all stakeholders are welcome, respected and included. Yet, a paucity of research explicitly examines how principals create inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations (Rottmann, 2006), particularly at the elementary level. Studies that do exist around school leadership have typically focused on exploring the challenges LGBTQ administrators face within their own work environments (Hernandez, 2009; Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003). Additionally, studies indicate students can learn about LGBTQ themes at an earlier age (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; DePalma, 2009), which have proven beneficial in broadening students’ and staff members’ understanding and acceptance of this population in elementary settings (Hardie & Bowers, 2012; Koschoreck & Slattery 2010; Kosciw et al., 2012; Short, 2010; Taylor et al, 2011).
In this vein, this study borrows from Ryan’s (2013) inclusive leadership framework. Ryan (2013) proposes a variety of strategies that can support inclusive leaders who undertake inclusive school practices. In their pursuit of inclusion, inclusive leaders adopt various strategies such as fostering school community relations, communication strategies, critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy (Ryan, 2013).

Thus, the proposed study aims to explore the promotion of these three levers: safe and caring schools, professional learning and inclusive curriculum; for the creation of inclusive schools for LGBTQ communities through the framework of inclusive leadership in elementary public school settings.
Chapter Summary

Creating inclusive school environments benefits all children, regardless of their ability, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender. It is abundantly clear that inclusive school environments have significantly positive influences on queer youth experiences. The research has also shown that positive gains in safe school strategies, professional development and curriculum initiatives can inspire school staff to move out of the comfort of acceptance of the status quo and adopt a more proactive stance in support of LGBTQ inclusion. Public education can positively transform the lives of students, and equity work at the system and school levels can have a profound effect on the lives of LGBTQ youth both in school and society. When educators espouse the principles of equity and social justice, they can challenge resistors, and confront the status quo by disrupting heterosexual regimes that are deeply rooted in heteronormative practices in our societies, promoting greater acceptance and respect for sexual minorities in society concomitantly.

Current literature is replete with examples of how school leaders create and sustain effective schools that indirectly support student achievement and well-being (Leithwood, 2013) as well as the positive impact of inclusive leadership practices for different dimensions of diversity (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006a; 2007; 2013). Inclusive minded leaders have the potential to positively change school environments for individuals who are often considered outliers and thus excluded from meaningful participation in school life. When barriers to feeling safe and included are removed and LGBTQ presence and voice are welcomed, then LGBTQ populations can potentially participate more actively in school life.

Within Ryan’s (2013) Inclusive Leadership Framework, principals are poised to influence an inclusive school ethos by employing a variety of strategies: fostering school
community relations, communication strategies, critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy. I briefly describe each of these components in the next section and elaborate on how they can provide the critical lens needed to move forward LGBTQ inclusive approaches when working in different school contexts. In summary, inclusive leadership enactments have the potential to alter the hostile lived realities of queer students and populations. The next sections will address the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to guide this research.
Chapter Three: Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks for the Study

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not “marginals,” are not people living “outside” society. They have always been “inside” – inside the structure which made them “beings for others.” The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become “beings for themselves.” (Freire, 2000, p. 74)

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that inform this research project as well as examine the framework that guides both my data collection and my analysis. In particular, the paper explores my decision to use a critical perspective and different facets of critical theory that relate to my study. Then I present the conceptual framework that will guide my research. Since critical theory is a key component of inclusive leadership, I borrow from Ryan’s (2013; 2014) concept of inclusive leadership to explore the strategies inclusive minded leaders use in creating inclusive school environments.

Theoretical Framework-Using a critical theoretical framework

Using a critical theoretical framework is an effective way of supporting educators in understanding and identifying the injustices faced by LGBTQ populations. Using a critical theoretical approach to examine issues surrounding LGBTQ inclusion is highly appropriate for my study since critical theorists are interested in groups that are subject to deeply rooted biases, discrimination and suffering (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 2005; Wink, 2000). Critical theory also exposes greater issues of human possibility in pursuit of emancipatory goals (Freire 2000; Giroux, 1997). I begin by discussing the key notions of critical theory in general and its influence on the development of critical pedagogy in the field of education. This is
followed by an examination of the application of critical theory and critical pedagogy in
analyzing marginalization and oppression of queer communities in society and in schools.

Social theory helps us recognize the power struggles and power dynamics that help create
more socially just societies (Kincheloe, 2005). Informed by social theories, critical theory
specifically supports individuals in their understanding of issues regarding inequity, power and
oppression (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1997). Many scholars have contributed to this field, which
originated at the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory in the 1940s with the work of Horkeimer,
Adorno and Marcuse (Giroux, 2001; Kincheloe, 2005; 2007). Influenced by the devastations of
World War I and economic disparity, they sought to unpack unjust practices in society and
transform practices that continue to oppress human beings (Kincheloe, 2005; Wink, 2000). In
general, critical theorists contest positivism, which purports that society is governed by truths
based on research and facts. Rather, critical theorists view society as shaped by various realities
and forces and not by one set of truths or knowledge (Kincheloe, 2005; Wink, 2000).

Critical perspectives have been applied to educational institutions to support educational
stakeholders in identifying and opposing oppressive structures and dominant pedagogies that
privilege some groups while marginalizing others (Dei, G. et al. 2000; Duncan-Andrade &
Morrell, 2007; Foster, 1986; Kumashiro & Ngo, 2007; McLaren, 2007). Furthermore, many
critical scholars consider our educational system a highly politicized, oppressive and hegemonic
institution with its neoliberal, neoconservative agendas that perpetuate the status quo through
regulatory social structures, prescriptive curricula, top down decision making processes, and
standardized assessments (Apple, 1990; Dei, G. et al. 2000; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007;
Foster, 1986; Giroux, 2001). However, from these constraints on schooling, a sense of hope for
emancipating experiences evolves from this criticality (Freire, 2000; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1997).
A critical theoretical perspective opens one’s eyes to injustices, highlighting the need to help educators examine contradictory practices within their educational contexts in the hopes of constructing an education that is robust and transformative that can promote social reform through individual and collective activism (Apple & Jungck 1993; Carr, 1995; Foster, 1986; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 2005; Kincheloe, 2007; McLaren, 2007). Given these characteristics, the use of a critical theoretical framework can help educators and myself unpack the hegemonic heteronormative structures that continue to relegate LGBTQ populations to the margins. Using critical theory to interrogate these social structures will help me unpack assumptions made about LGBTQ populations and expose publicized practices that are in fact a misrepresentation of this population.

**Critical pedagogy in education**

One of the first applications of critical theory in education was critical pedagogy. Underpinned by social justice, democracy and emancipation, the literature is rife with conceptualizations of critical pedagogy. I borrow from McLaren’s (2007) definition:

Critical pedagogy asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by dominant culture while others are clearly not. Critical pedagogy asks how our everyday commonsense understandings – our social constructions or “subjectivities” – get produced and lived out. In other words, what are the social functions of knowledge? The critical factor here is that some forms of knowledge have more power and legitimacy than others. (p. 197)

Wink (2000) provides a useful metaphor to help frame this concept further: “Critical pedagogy is the prism that reflects the complexities of the interactions between teaching and learning. It highlights some of the hidden subtleties that have escaped our view previously. It enables us to see more widely and deeply” (p. 30).
In educational settings, critical pedagogy is integral to creating schools where school staff and students can think critically to challenge oppressive power and inequity defined by dominant voices. This critical pedagogy has the potential to provide students and staff with:

- the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities both to question deep-seated assumptions and myths that legitimate the most archaic and disempowering social practices that structure every aspect of society and to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit. (Giroux, 2007, p. 3)

These sentiments are reiterated in Freire’s (2000) seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Freire (2000), one of the forefathers of critical pedagogy, experienced poverty first-hand in Brazil, and professed that the downtrodden can live a fuller and more dignified life through a democratic education that unpacks the complexities of our diverse school contexts in addition to denouncing discriminatory practices against marginalized populations.

For Freire, critical pedagogy has the power to move teaching beyond its traditional role, which he refers to as the “banking concept of education” in which teachers transmit knowledge for students to passively receive, to one that elevates and nurtures the students’ and teachers’ conscientization (Freire, 2000). According to Freire, this “conscientization” is the catalyst for emancipation and transforming social change by providing the oppressed with a vision of hope and courage for a future that contests stringent structures and normalization: “[t]his pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation” (Freire, 2000, p. 47). Hence, Freirean theory views people as subjects, not objects of oppression, who reflect and act on ways to transform their realities. Similarly, Giroux’s “language of possibility” encourages educators and students to inquire about and critique oppressive structures, and construct social change that is emancipatory and transformative (Giroux, 2007).
Both Freire and Giroux have greatly influenced the realm of critical pedagogy by critiquing education’s reductionist and mechanical approach and advocating for one that raises the level of consciousness where teachers and students can interrogate social, economic, historical and political forces that continue to advance the power and privilege of certain groups. However, developing a critical mass of critical educators is not easily accomplished. Such critical pedagogies can upset the status quo, and threaten to change traditions of privilege and dominant power structures by opening up space for discussion, debate and critique (Giroux, 2007). As a result, inclusive oriented educators will meet with resistance from those who prefer the status quo. Additionally, many teachers undergo dialectical experiences in their decisions to bravely pursue social justice practices or forgo them for others to undertake (Carr, 1995).

Finally, as Kincheloe and McLaren (2007) underscore, critical pedagogy is a constantly evolving process that can make most educators, who are used to prescriptive teaching methods, uncomfortable by moving them out of their comfort zones. As with any skill, critical pedagogy needs to be developed and honed on an ongoing basis so that school leaders and teachers can support the diversities in our schools.

Additionally, Ellsworth (1989) argues that critical pedagogical practices are myths perpetuating “relations of domination” (p. 298) despite the possibilities of critical pedagogy to unveil injustices against marginalized populations and reject forms of oppression. In her review of the literature and experiences as a professor teaching a course, Ellsworth (1989) found that educators and researchers who advocate for concepts of critical pedagogy “strip discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political position” whereby discussions operate at a “high level of abstraction” (p. 300). In essence, she claims that scholars of critical pedagogy who profess notions of freedom and social justice, have failed to provide authentic strategies and
programs to overcome power imbalances within educational institutions. Hence it is important that educators and students not only learn about different forms of oppression, but commit collectively to some form of social activism needed to change the lived realities of marginalized populations.

Discourse, hegemony and the hidden curriculum

Despite its shortcomings, critical pedagogy has the potential to unveil the injustices LGBTQ students face and thereby support the need for their inclusion. In particular, I discuss certain domains of critical pedagogy – discourse, hegemony and the hidden curriculum – which can shed light on how educators can better understand instructional structures and processes that can disadvantage LGBTQ students and populations. In this section, I discuss how these domains of critical pedagogy are effective in underscoring different facets of LGBTQ exclusion, an exclusion that continues to promote Western heteronormative superiority by upholding unfair assumptions and beliefs about sexual minorities.

Discourse

Discourse legitimizes power and domination through language (Kincheloe, 2007; Tooms, 2009). The work of prominent French philosopher Michel Foucault on discourse and discursive practices highlights the ability of discourses to carry subtle status and power messages. For Foucault, discursive practices are:

not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior, in forms of transmission and diffusion, and pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them (Foucault, 1972, p.117, cited in McLaren, 2007, p. 209).

Cultural pedagogues have studied how these discourses serve as a form of domination that can control who speaks, who listens, what knowledge is valued, and what is not (Kincheloe, 2007;
Wink, 2000). Hence, dominant cultures produce dominant discourses that determine what Foucault refers to as the “regime of truth” that regulate the actions of people (McLaren, 2007). For LGBTQ people, discourse serves to perpetuate hegemonic heterosexuality in society – that is, through the dominant discourse the LGBTQ population is marginalized, almost to the point of invisibility in a world dominated by male-female binaries and heterosexual norms. For instance, visible manifestations of these populations such as posters of same-sex parents or gender-neutral washroom are largely absent in schools (Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000; Murray, 2011), further contributing to the promotion of the heteronormative discourse. In addition, LGBTQ populations are often demoralized by the discourse of many who tout homosexuality is a deviant behavior, a disease or mental illness that can be cured, even though medical authorities from the Canadian and American psychological associations denounce these misconceptions (Wells, 2006). Such discursive practices that perpetuate beliefs that queer people are abnormal and immoral, need to be challenged.

**Hegemony**

If educators are to become more adept at critically analyzing oppressive social and educational structures, they need to understand ideological hegemony as a central concept of critical theory and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2001). Gramsci, best known for his work on hegemony, (Kincheloe, 2005), argued that dominant power is exercised physically, emotionally and psychologically through a variety of means – family, schools, church, media, cultural institutions, and community organizations (Apple, 1990; Kincheloe, 2007). This domination is so powerful through hegemony that the public domain adopts it as reality and the social norm:

For hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the limit
Hegemony is legitimized by the power of masses that make it appear neutral and normal (Apple, 1990). It is this neutrality in educational settings that concerns American critical theorist Michael Apple since schools promote ideological hegemony through curricula, routines, processes and structures. Apple argues that educators need to remove themselves from dominating economic and political powers and affiliate themselves more with groups who are working towards bringing issues of social justice and educational equality to the forefront.

Since schooling is highly influenced by social forces such as media, Western nuclear family values, religious traditions and cultural customs, sexual identity and gender variance continue to be relegated outside of the neutral zone. LGBTQ students often face harsh school cultures and resistance from those belonging to dominant heteronormative regimes (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Murray, 2011). Hence, many LGBTQ people fear coming out in the neutral zone, thereby perpetuating oppression and self-fulfilling prophesies about their population. As a result, students belonging to this minoritized population may be more vulnerable and at risk academically, socially and emotionally. Through the lens of critical theory, my study will challenge dominant heterosexist hegemonic practices that are regulating and coercive toward sexual minorities and critically examine ways to create more inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations.

Hidden curriculum

Students are subject to prescribed curricula throughout their schooling. Using a critical lens to examine materials can expose what scholars call the “hidden curriculum,” which is the covert expression of dominant interests weaved throughout resources and instructional practices.
(Apple, 1990; McLaren, 2007). The expression was coined in 1968 by Philip Jackson who studied the difference between what was overtly taught in school versus what subtle messages students were actually learning; he referred to this phenomenon as “unpublicised features of school life” (Jackson as cited in Cottona, Wintera, & Baileyb, 2013, p. 192). Certain covert social and political influences shape the hidden curriculum to preserve dominant interests and reproduce inequity in power relations (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1981; Giroux, 2001); certain knowledge and behaviours become accepted tacitly through curriculum, routines, lessons, choice of books, assignments and trips that reinforce neutrality, sameness, and the ideological hegemony of dominant classes (Apple, 1990; Carr, 1995). For example, studies have shown that sexism manipulates the hidden curriculum to privilege males over females in science and mathematics (McLaren, 2007); and that social bias stratifies working class students into skills and trades programs to perpetuate their status in the labour workforce (Cottona, Wintera, & Baileyb, 2013).

In the same way, the hidden curriculum bolsters heteronormative regimes as being the only accepted social norm in society, thereby reinforcing the claim that LGBTQ people are abnormal to the extent that many sexual minorities refuse to self-identify and therefore continue to be silenced. For example, several studies point to the lack of inclusive curriculum resources that portray positive roles models of LGBTQ populations (Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000; Murray, 2011). In this vein, critical theory allows myself and educators to see these hidden objectives and pose questions to challenge the underlying domination of LGBTQ students. Asking questions to think more deeply about whose standards, histories, knowledge, perspectives or language dominate educational discourse (Wink, 2000) can support educators in their abilities to unpack prejudices and biases that silence LGBTQ persons. In this
way, educators who view with a wide-angle critical lens can ensure all voices are heard and included in their classrooms by honouring the histories, cultures, and traditions of all populations.

**Summary of theoretical framework**

As educators, we have the moral imperative to change the realities of 10 percent of our student population that ostensibly do not fit the heterosexual norms perpetuated by systemic discriminatory practices and structures. Concomitantly, LGBTQ students should be encouraged to be conversant with oppressive structures that exclude them in order to become more confident participants in the transformative process for inclusion. Many teachers and school leaders are well intentioned and caring, but this is not enough – more action is required. Educators need to have a vested interest in making inclusion for LGBTQ people part of daily practice through action and steadfast commitment, a process that is enhanced when critical perspectives are embraced. For LGBTQ populations, critical theory and pedagogy remain a source of hope and emancipation that can unpack practices that marginalize queer communities, through discourse, hegemonic structures and the hidden curriculum.

Both critical theory and critical pedagogy make the questioning of covert, oppressive practices possible. With its aim of exploring leadership practices that foster inclusive schools for LGBTQ students and populations, aligning my thinking with the principles of these perspectives will allow me to question both overt and covert practices, discourses, and curricula that exclude LGBTQ in many facets of daily school life. The application of critical theory will also allow me to view this population not just as LGBTQ, but as potentially part of other minority groups so as to increase my awareness of the diverse needs of what is often considered a homogenized group. Following from this, critical theory also enhances my ability to deeply analyze the inclusionary
practices of inclusive minded principals who aim to enhance the inclusion of LGBTQ communities in our schools and the struggles and challenges they face in doing so. To that end, the next section will discuss the connection between Inclusive School Leadership and the creation of inclusionary school settings for LGBTQ students and populations and outline the framework I have created to illustrate this relationship.

**Conceptual Framework**

For the purposes of my study, I borrow from Ryan’s conception of inclusive leadership, which enacts various strategies to make school communities more inclusive. This section will first explore critical tenets of inclusive leadership and discuss obstacles leaders face in the pursuit of social justice goals. Then it will describe how inclusive minded administrators use specific strategies to promote inclusion through fostering school community relationships, communication practices, critical learning strategies and exercising strategic advocacy. While there is scant literature that directly explores inclusive principal leadership for LGBTQ populations specifically, coupled with critical theory, these two concepts join together to unveil inequities and injustices that continue to exclude LGBTQ communities. The terms principals, administrators, school leadership and school leaders are used interchangeably.

**The influence of the principal on inclusive school environments**

There is an abundance of research that points to the significant authority of principals to effect change in his or her school community (Riehl, 2000) and indirectly impact student outcomes and well-being (Leithwood, 2013). In the area of inclusivity and social justice, a growing body of literature outlines key influences principals have in creating inclusive school environments including promoting the equity and social justice agenda for all community
stakeholders and removing barriers for student achievement (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006a, 2006b; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008).

Despite the payoff, however, social justice work can be difficult to achieve, even by experienced leaders who have good intentions (Ryan, 2006a; Theoharis, 2007). Broadly speaking, school principals need to contend with a myriad of issues, reforms, regulations and constraints that usurp their time and energy on a daily basis. Rapidly changing demographics, competing interests among different populations, educational reform initiatives, staff performance issues, fiscal responsibilities, community outreach, student safety, high stakes testing and classroom instruction are just some of the issues school administrators toil with regularly (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Dantley, 2003; Foster, 2004; Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006a, Ryan 2012). Moreover, many leaders are conflicted between carrying out the neo-liberal agenda for schooling that focuses more on globalization, privatization and marketization than on engendering in students a sense of critical understanding to work towards democratic and social justice ideals (Foster, 2004; Ryan, 2012). In such a competitive educational arena, educators and leaders tend to blame students who lag behind rather than blame the system and take on an activist stance to change structures and processes that continue to marginalize certain groups (Ryan 2006a, 2012; Shields, 2004). Notwithstanding, leaders who are inclusive-minded will find ways to rise above these constrictive forces and pressures to advocate for populations who are disadvantaged. The next section will depict key tenets of inclusive leadership.

**What is inclusive leadership?**

The field of education is strongly influenced by critical perspectives, particularly as they relate to inclusive leadership (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006a; McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez,
inclusive leadership continues to gain momentum (Riehl, 2000) and has been recently deemed an area of study in educational administration (Ryan, 2013). There are many types of extant leadership theories, such as transformational, distributive, democratic, instructional, emancipatory and social justice. Inclusive leadership, however, aims not only to promote equity and social justice through advocacy and activism, it is specifically interested in enhancing the participation and representation of minority groups in various facets of school life as well as creating school environments to support the inclusion of such populations (Ryan, 2013). Inclusive leaders care deeply about oppressed populations, have the courage to challenge power imbalances, and open up the discourse that enables others to unpack injustices. Ryan’s (2013) description of inclusive leadership practices are outlined as follows:

(1) targets exclusive systemic practices, such as ableism, classism, sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.; (2) emphasizes the importance of access, participation, recognition and achievement of all students; and (3) advocates for the meaningful participation of all members of school communities in the decision- and policy-making activities of schools and school systems (p. 5).

Inclusive leaders’ abilities to be respectful, humble, modest, highly collaborative, and non-heroic, and to reject hierarchical structures are just some of the key attributes they ascribe to, setting them apart from other leadership approaches (Ryan 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2012; 2013). Ryan speaks explicitly about issues of inclusion and exclusion from different levels – students, structures, and processes. According to Ryan, inclusive leadership promotes a specific end-

inclusion, which transcends all aspects of schooling and society both locally and globally. He also underscores how issues of intersectionality among diverse populations proliferate marginalization further (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). Although many scholars address conceptualizations of inclusion and inclusive leadership regarding special education, English
language learning, low socio economic status, and visible minority groups, Ryan is one of the few researchers who include sexual orientation and gender variance as a legitimately marginalized group. Using this conception, inclusive leadership lends itself nicely with my study’s purpose of exploring leadership strategies that promote the inclusion of LGBTQ students.

**Obstacles facing inclusive leaders**

Inclusive oriented school leaders face additional obstacles above and beyond their responsibilities that prohibit them from achieving inclusive school cultures (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006a; 2012; 2013; Theoharis, 2007). On a macro level, as discussed in the previous section, workload and the neo-liberal agenda, which infiltrate many facets of school life and governance such as policy, programs and pedagogy, deter leaders from pursuing inclusive goals (Ryan 2012; 2013). School leaders themselves can be the objects of obstruction for this work: Some are incapable of fully appreciating the counter-narratives espousing different beliefs and viewpoints (Brown, 2004); others may feel compelled to carry out reforms and policy mandates despite their exclusionary undertones (Ryan, 2012). In Theoharis’ (2007) investigation, those who forge ahead with inclusive goals faced consequences such as burn out, stress or discouragement. These leaders who subscribed to social justice ideals confronted “formidable resistance” and “paid a high price” struggling for inclusion (Theoharis, 2007). What can become more disheartening is the fact that achieving inclusion may never be fully realized in our complex evolving societies (Dantley, 2003). Hence, committed inclusionary leaders may never fully recognize the fruits of their labour. Considering the persistence of barriers that continue to prevent LGBTQ students from fully engaging in school and be able to express their sexual
identities openly without fear of retribution, it would be easy for leaders who are working in this area to become disillusioned.

On the micro level, the reluctance of school community members or staff to embrace change or espouse the transformational vision of inclusive leaders constitutes just one of the many obstacles along the social justice journey (Ryan, 2012; 2013). Schools typify “hegemonic conservative structures” that perpetuate status quo (Riehl, 2000), making it all the more challenging for individuals to understand the need for change. To support this contention, Ryan extends this notion further by stating that exclusion and privilege are so common that for many people, it has become a taken-for-granted part of life (Ryan, 2013). In the case of LGBTQ students, subjected to heteronormative cultures, the inclusion of LGBTQ populations is also a politically charged topic surrounded in controversy. Many politicians and school authorities have been reluctant to move this agenda forward for fear of igniting public debate and outrage (Macgillivray, 2004; Taylor, 2008). In addition, with regards to cultural and religious biases, not only do many citizens hold private beliefs against LGBTQ communities, many educators espouse homophobic beliefs as well (Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2008; Wells, 2006). In particular, studies have shown that principals and teachers may not always deal with homophobic bullying or infuse LGBTQ topics into their classrooms and schools because it goes against their own personal beliefs (Goldstein et al., 2008; Macgillivray, 2004). Within this context, changing perceptions of LGBTQ populations and promoting their full inclusion in school environments is often an uphill battle.
Strategies inclusive leaders use to overcome obstacles and promote inclusion

Despite the obstacles that may deter some leaders from pursuing inclusive goals, not all leaders struggle to the same extent. Notwithstanding, school administrators’ skill sets, knowledge base, and priorities are also important factors in determining the ability of administrators to navigate through these hurdles (Ryan, 2013). Particularly illustrative in this study, Ryan (2013) posits a variety of strategies that can support inclusive leaders who undertake inclusive school practices. The next section will explore the critical nature of certain interdependent strategies that inclusive leaders adopt in their efforts to promote inclusion through fostering school community relations, communication strategies, critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy (Ryan, 2013). Although these strategies are about inclusive leadership in general, my study aims to explore their specific application in the inclusion of LGBTQ students and LGBTQ populations as a marginalized group.

Fostering school community relations

The adage “it takes a village to raise a child” resonates with theories of inclusive leadership that promote a collective process. Education that is truly democratic is concerned with the quality of relationships among all school community members, not just a privileged few (Ryan, 2012; 2103; Shields, 2004). It is precisely this collective commitment that can positively impact on school improvement initiatives and inclusivity, not the heroics of one individual leader (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2007; Ryan 2013; Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). Inclusive leaders are aware that certain parent groups lack confidence, language, and knowledge to navigate through bureaucratic educational structures such as formal meetings, school governance, and policy committees (Ryan, 2007). Dismantling some of these hierarchical structures enhances a school leader’s
ability to ensure that certain minority populations feel welcomed and comfortable to partake in and share their perspectives in different facets of school life (Ryan and Rottmann, 2007).

Transparency, visibility, openness, accessibility, and authentic dialogue are approaches inclusive-minded leaders employ to break down the barriers to meaningful participation in school life for LGBTQ students and LGBTQ individuals. When principals open up their school doors to make all stakeholders feel like valued members of the school community, then the probability of attracting these students and their families to school events (curriculum night, parent meetings, book fairs, concerts, plays, etc.) are much higher. As well, inclusive principals can look for ways to establish relationships with community outreach agencies or advocacy groups that can provide additional services to support the needs of LGBTQ students and their families. By reaching out to their communities and understanding the needs of their families (Riehl, 2000), school leaders can experience more success in encouraging a broader and more meaningful representation of voice from this group.

**Communication strategies**

As our school communities become increasingly diverse, communication amongst various stakeholders can become highly complex. A leader’s visibility and approachability are important in inviting two-way communication. However, there are different considerations for creating authentic dialogic exchanges that can remove barriers for marginalized populations. For principals to engage others in meaningful dialogue, they first need to understand their privileged positions in dismantling the structures and obstacles to allow genuine communication to occur (Ryan, 2013). A principal’s positional power can be intimidating for people and the language they use can project that power. Foster (2004) borrows from Foucault’s technologies of power
theory to illustrate this point. A leader’s language is powerful in conveying messages and thoughts while concomitantly legitimizing power relations. Such hierarchical power dynamics need to be deconstructed so that those who are marginalized feel comfortable and confident to engage in dialogue.

Another important consideration is that these dialogic exchanges should be authentic, not superficial. Brown (2004) speaks to “rational discourse” which has implications for authentic communication:

Unlike conversation in which genial cooperation prevails, dialogue actually aims at disequilibrium in which “each argument evokes a counterargument that pushes itself beyond the other and pushes the other beyond itself” ... Dialogue focuses more on inquiry and increasing understanding and tends to be more exploratory and questioning than conversation. Acknowledgment is a necessary step in linking awareness to action. Through rational discourse, awareness is validated, refined, and focused and motives leading to social action are cultivated. (p. 94)

For Brown, leaders need to be cognizant of their own and their colleagues’ biases so that they can more actively and carefully listen to new perspectives and counter-narratives. Shields (2004) pushes the notion of dialogic exchange further with her conceptualization of “moral dialogue”; leaders who are truly transformational seek out ways to break the silence rather than perpetuate it:

We often remain silent in a well-intentioned but inept attempt not to single children out. In so doing, we are pathologizing the lived experiences of many school children and preventing them from fully entering into the “conversation that makes sense of things.” (p. 118)

Hence, by refusing to discuss inequities and injustices that some communities experience, we inadvertently and implicitly send messages that disadvantaged populations are abnormal.

Thus, school leaders can employ a variety of communication tactics to promote dialogue and conversation around the inclusion of LGBTQ students. However, in order to truly break down the barriers for this group, leaders must understand the power of language and of dialogic
interchanges in opening up channels for authentic and sincere communication about the marginalization of LGBTQ populations with students, staff, and parents alike. Towards this end, leaders will have more success engaging LGBTQ voice in school governance activities (policy, parent council), garnering feedback from them (surveys, consultations), and inviting other LGBTQ community members to partake in school activities and events. In this way, principals’ efforts to fairly represent LGBTQ voices are more realizable.

**Critical learning strategies**

Developing a critical conscious through critical learning is an essential component of inclusive leadership since:

Critical skills can assist people to understand the basis of claims, the assumptions underlying assertions, and interests that motivate people to promote certain positions. They can help people to recognize unstated, implicit and subtle points of view and the often invisible or taken-for granted conditions that provide the basis for exclusive stances and practices. (Ryan, 2013, p. 13)

This concept echoes what critical theorists such as Freire label “conscientization,” which is the catalyst needed to dismantle hegemonic social structures within our educational institutions. However, we cannot assume that all school leaders are born with a high level of critical reflexivity. In fact, researchers maintain that this level of criticality is difficult for school administrators to exercise “not because it seeks to serve dominant interests but because it is ‘trapped within a discourse of efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness that make problematization or critical reflection difficult’” (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998 as cited in Riehl, 2000).

Research also shows that the training for principals lacks explicit teachings related to topics of social justice leadership (Brown, 2004; McKenzie et al, 2008). For some school
leaders, informal learning opportunities are the main sources of the professional development they access to better understand the dynamics of inclusion (Ryan, 2013). Regardless, there is a significant body of literature that supports the need for this type of critical learning for prospective and practicing leaders through ongoing professional development and research opportunities (Capper, Theorharis & Sebastian, 2006; Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; McKenzie et al, 2008). Leaders who engage in critical learning can open their eyes to examining all school-related functions and interactions using a social justice lens. Honing this critical stance, drawing on various critical theories supports a leader’s ability to engage others in shifting values, attitudes, and belief systems needed to do ethical work (Brown, 2004; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005).

The importance of ongoing critical learning in promoting inclusive environments for LGBTQ students and LGBTQ families in schools cannot be underestimated. Leaders who engage in cultivating their own critical reflexivity can transfer these skills and knowledge to influence other school community members. There are a number of ways to achieve this end: Modeling inclusive approaches; hiring equity oriented staff; deliberately weaving LGBTQ themes in policy, pedagogy, and professional development; organizing meetings and other school-related events; and having critical conversations with different stakeholder groups – these are just some of the ways to foster a critical mass of equity advocates (Ryan, 2012; 2013; Theoharis, 2007). To gage the level of impact of ongoing critical learning on the inclusion of LGBTQ populations, principals and staff can conduct equity audits to analyze data (school climate surveys, student absenteeism rates, suspension rates, numbers of bullying incidents, student at-risk data) that unpack the inequities inherent in school practices (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). These tools provide leaders with a framework for leading staff in
discussions that address inequities and barriers affecting LGBTQ groups, to deepen the analysis of inequitable practices and provide the impetus for broader critical discussions of solutions and interventions to make the school more inclusive of this population.

*Exercising strategic advocacy*

Although critical theorists denounce ideals of power and privilege, inclusive leaders find ways to use their stature in politically strategic ways for activism and to advocate for equity (Ryan, 2014). The heightened risks associated with the political nature of this role are echoed by Lugg and Soho (2006). They stress that inclusive minded leaders who practice the political dimension of leadership take risks and, as a result, may face professional consequences and backlash from their local work contexts. However, Ryan (2013; 2014) contends that if leaders ignore the micropolitical orientation of their institutions, they run the risk of being unsuccessful in their efforts for inclusion. Therefore, it is incumbent on inclusive school leaders to understand the politics of their organizations in order to use this awareness strategically for inclusive goals. Inclusive leaders must also be cognizant of the structural changes required to support inclusive measures. McKenzie et al. (2008) outline ways that leaders can strategically change micro and macro school-level structures to improve the experiences of marginalized students. At the micro level, considerations should be given to building teacher capacity and timetabling to foster teacher collaboration. At the macro level, student organizations should reflect balanced heterogeneous groupings where students are not centered out through segregated programs. More so, principals must use their political skills to leverage money and resources and reallocate support staff where needed most. Hence, school leaders, through positioning, can employ different forms of activism to strategically advocate for marginalized populations in their attempts to challenge the status quo (Ryan, 2014)
However, principals, who are social justice activists and who embrace LGBTQ inclusivity, need to be strategic about the ways they pursue this goal since this area of diversity is usually surrounded by controversy and resistance. If inclusive leaders are to be effective in promoting and advocating for inclusive environments for groups such as LGBTQ, leaders should take the time to learn about their school context and be politically aware and astute of the micropolitics of the larger organization:

Instead they need to take the time to understand the often invisible manner in which power operates in their organizations, assess the situations in which they find themselves, and judiciously select a course of action that will lead to their preferred goal. (Ryan, 2015, p. 91)

Leaders need to find ways to leverage their political acumen and skills for activism by involving people through persuasion at opportune times. By convincing and persuading others about the importance of LGBTQ initiatives through dialogue, debate, questioning, telling stories, sharing of data and so forth, administrators can influence others to join the cause. Inclusive leaders need to optimize on relationship building by forging alliances with allies, colleagues and LGBTQ organizations that can support their goals for social activism and change (Brown, 2004; Ryan, 2014), by forming coalitions with like-minded individuals (Ryan & Rottman, 2007) and by positioning and aligning themselves with key school board personnel and community agencies that can provide the resources needed for their schools (Ryan, 2013). Additionally, by aligning themselves with such groups, inclusive leaders form networks to build capacity so that LGBTQ populations can advocate for themselves. In other words, inclusive principals who are in tune with the political culture of their schools can embark on activist work to strategically take risks in a variety of ways that will serve LGBTQ students and populations who are marginalized in the dominant organizational structures of their schools.
**Summary of conceptual framework**

Inclusive leadership is a critical component needed to advance the inclusion agenda for LGBTQ people and stop the perpetuation of exclusionary practices that marginalize them. Such leaders play a critical role in mobilizing staff and school community members to challenge the status quo and create conditions that realize inclusion for all students (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006a; 2006b). Thus, my doctoral thesis aims to investigate the strategies inclusive-minded principals in elementary settings employ such as fostering school community relationships, communication practices, critical learning strategies and exercising strategic advocacy. They use these strategies to create more inclusive school environments for queer populations.

Using a critical theoretical framework, this study critiques current institutional structures and practices, particularly those that are fraught with inequities and replicate the status quo that privileges some groups while marginalizing others. In particular, I present some of the critical strategies that leaders for inclusion need to nurture and develop in order to effectively lead for inclusion of LGBTQ communities. After reviewing and reading information on websites, books, journals, and board resources, I have identified three core areas that focus on creating inclusive schools for disenfranchised populations such as LGBTQ: safe school climates, ongoing professional learning, and inclusive curricula. Drawing on the framework, the study examines how inclusive minded principals in public elementary schools use these strategies to promote safe and caring school climates, equity oriented professional development and inclusive curriculum as they attempt to create inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations. This thesis is intended to add to our understanding of inclusive leadership through Ryan’s inclusive leadership framework in addition to exploring strategies inclusive leaders employ to facilitate inclusion for queer populations. This is illustrated by the diagram in Figure 1.
Figure 1: A framework for inclusive leadership to create inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations
Chapter Summary

Both the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used for this research were outlined in this chapter. The first section of this chapter described key tenets of critical theory. A rationale was provided as to why a critical theoretical framework was chosen to guide this study. Critical theory provides the lens to analyze and unveil the deep seated biases and exclusionary practices that LGBTQ communities are subjected to in our schools and society.

The second section of this chapter elaborates on the conceptual framework borrowed from Ryan’s (2013; 2014) conception of inclusive leadership. Drawing on the framework, this study explores how inclusive leadership can promote LGBTQ inclusion by employing a variety of strategies such as fostering school community relations, communication practices, critical learning strategies and exercising strategic advocacy. Despite obstacles that may impede principals’ inclusive efforts, inclusive minded leaders find ways to overcome them by employing the strategies outlined above.
Chapter Four: Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological approach applied in this research and outlines participant selection, data collection and data analysis. More specifically, the chapter explores the alignment to the critical underpinnings of the study as well as the study’s purpose of investigating strategies inclusive principals in elementary settings employ to create inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations.

Justification of a qualitative research approach

A qualitative research paradigm best suits this study since it aligns with the critical/constructivist nature of this study, which views reality as socially constructed, (Merriam, 2009). With its roots in understanding how people interpret and construct their worlds, rather than being concerned with issues of generalizability (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), qualitative research, by design, allows the researcher to probe deeper and garner participant opinions, voices, views and ideas in a rich way (Creswell, 2012; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Merriam, 2009). Gathering such data in this study provided meaningful and important insights into how inclusive minded principals create inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations that could not have been gleaned from quantitative surveys or questionnaires.

Since this study adopts a critical approach, qualitative research design also allowed the researcher to take on a critical perspective in decisions made around research design, data collection and analysis and served as a vehicle to unpack the inequities and oppression associated with certain populations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Schram, 2003) such as LGBTQ. In this study, participants’ knowledge, experiences and actions provided an outlet for discussions
around and understandings of the oppression of certain groups with the goal of promoting “social change” (Bogdan & Biklen; 2007, 34) through the use of inclusive strategies to improve the realities of queer populations. In other words, a qualitative research paradigm allowed me to probe how participants make meaning of the phenomenon being explored. Moreover, since there is a gap in the literature in this area, principals’ experiences and opinions can potentially provide a significant contribution to the scholarship around LGBTQ inclusion.

**Participant selection**

McMillan and Schumacher (1993) state that individuals who are knowledgeable about and have experience with the phenomenon being studied are more likely to provide richer and more descriptive data. Thus, in qualitative research, respondents who are directly involved with the research context typically provide the most relevant insights and compelling data into the phenomenon being explored (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Subsequently, to garner data from those who are closest to the phenomenon of inclusive leadership for LGBTQ populations, participant selection in this study was based on particular characteristics and therefore utilized “purposive” sampling (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). As a result, participation in this study was limited to leaders in Ontario public elementary school settings, who have been actively involved in creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ students and populations since they have the greatest potential of providing specific experiences and personal stories about this phenomenon. Principals in the Ontario Catholic school system were not included in this study as work in this area of inclusion has been limited as a result of the conservative nature of many faith-based schools (Bishop & Casida 2011; Kosciw et al, 2009). Hence, it was expected that interviewing leaders in the Ontario public system would provide richer data than interviewing principals from the Catholic system.
More specifically, using the inclusion criteria outlined above, potential participants were identified from current contacts as a result of my own involvement with various equity-focused initiatives. I also worked with some of these principals in various equity committees or connected with some of them at workshops or conferences dealing with equity issues, including LGBTQ topics, where I learned about their inclusive approaches. It is important to note, however, that my criteria for participant selection was not based on years of experience, religious affiliations, ethnic, cultural background, or sexual orientation but rather on the participants’ ability to lead for inclusion for LGBTQ populations. I borrowed from Ryan’s conception of inclusive leadership to describe the strategies and approaches inclusive leaders use to create inclusive environments. Drawing on the framework, this study explores how inclusive leadership can promote LGBTQ inclusion by employing a variety of strategies such as fostering school community relations, communication practices, critical learning strategies and exercising strategic advocacy. Moreover, I was also interested in interviewing inclusive minded principals from different jurisdictions who worked in diverse school contexts that were located in rural, urban and suburban settings.

Creswell (2012) indicates that developing a strategy for purposive sampling can support the researcher in finding participants who can best inform the phenomenon being explored. Hence, from the pool of nine potential participants, selected participants were invited to participate in the study following brief discussions with them to initially explore their understanding of LGBTQ inclusion and whether they were employing strategies to create inclusive environments specifically for this population. During these initial discussions, I outlined the purpose and details of the research so that participants could be better informed about the project. Additional potential participants were also mined from these conversations as
initial participants provided me with the names of eight other principals who endeavoured to promote LGBTQ inclusion and have espoused a commitment to social justice. This technique is commonly referred to as the “snowball” sampling strategy (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 1990). In this case, initial participants were asked to send out an e-mail invitation on my behalf to other inclusive minded principals whom they think could contribute to the study (see Appendix B). Two participants withdrew as they felt they could not contribute significantly to this area of research and two others withdrew due to lack of time.

In total, thirteen elementary principals in different public school boards in Ontario who experienced different levels of success in facilitating inclusive environments for LGBTQ participated in this study. This purposeful selection of participants was an important step in securing individuals who could contribute meaningful data related to my topic (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990).

Detailed profiles of each participant and their school contexts are not outlined in order to protect their anonymity. However, in order to provide a snapshot of the diverse range of participants’ educational and administrative experiences as well as other pertinent information regarding their school contexts, the respondents are described in the table below. In addition, pseudonyms are used in order to protect participants’ anonymity. All participants in this study were elementary principals working in various Ontario public school boards, with work in the field of education ranging from fifteen to twenty-nine years. Within the group, the number of years served as principal ranged from one year to twelve years and five of the principals had served in the role for five years or less. Two of the participants began their careers early on as educational assistants.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years as a principal at the time of the study</th>
<th>Total number of years in education at the time of the study</th>
<th>School Context as described by participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gregory</td>
<td>Eleven</td>
<td>Twenty-one</td>
<td>-diverse school population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-rural setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-mix in socio-economic-mix of high and low income families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Fifteen</td>
<td>-homogenous population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-rural setting surrounded by acreages of farm land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-mix of families from low socio economic to affluent families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>Twenty</td>
<td>-diverse school population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-urban setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-mix in socio-economic-mix of high and low income families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>Twenty-one</td>
<td>-high population of newcomers mainly from Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-urban and suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-high ELL population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-mixed socio-economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernadette</td>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>Seventeen</td>
<td>-homogenous population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-located in small town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-high socio-economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-faith based community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Twenty-two</td>
<td>-very diverse school population with over 31 languages represented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-mixed socio-economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Fifteen</td>
<td>-highly diverse- ethnic culturally, linguistically, religiously, socio economically, spec ed, ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-urban /suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Twenty</td>
<td>-highly diverse school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-century old school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-mixed socio economics-very low to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Homogeneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>Homogenous population - suburban - mainly working class families - middle to low income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td>Homogenous population - mix of urban and rural - low income to very affluent families - small town, faith based community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>Homogenous population - small rural community - mixed socio-economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td>Diverse school community - suburban - affluent community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>Predominantly Caucasian with some Aboriginal families from low socio-economics - high number of identified students with special needs - rural community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was also considerable variability in professional experiences amongst the participants, with eight having experience in different boards as a teacher, vice principal or principal prior to joining their current board of education. Many of the participants taught in all divisions in elementary settings as well as specialized classes or special education. At the time of data collection, about half of the group identified as LGBTQ and the other half as allies. Two participants were from visible minority populations. Nine of the participants contributed to different facets of equity and social justice work within their jurisdictions, either as chairs or active members of equity committees, or presenters at workshops or conferences. Five of the participants served in central positions as consultants or principals on assignment overseeing literacy, numeracy, special education or equity portfolios.

The school communities in which these principals worked varied considerably in size and in diversity, with students coming from a variety of socio-economic, cultural, religious, and...
ethnic compositions. In particular, at the time of the interviews, schools ranged in size from 220 to 850 students. Six of the schools had student populations over five hundred. The majority of the schools were kindergarten to grade eight; two were kindergarten to grade six and three offered French Immersion programs. The majority of the participants described their school contexts as highly diverse and many schools were comprised of families coming from both very low to very affluent socio-economic backgrounds. Outside of this demographic, two schools were situated in affluent areas and one school had a significant population of low-income families. The majority of schools had high numbers of students with special needs and/or English language learners. Most of the schools were located in urban and suburban contexts with the exception of four, which were located in rural settings. Six of the principals portrayed their schools as having homogenous populations; however, four of these principals noted a significant change in population demographics over the past few years due to newcomers and visible minorities relocating into their communities. Three participants characterized their school communities as small towns with a high concentration of faith based populations.

Data collection

Commonly used for “person to person encounters”, interviews were used for data collection in this study in order to gather thick, descriptive information from the participants in a relatively suitable timeline (Merriam, 2009). Interview questions were informed by the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and probed participants’ perspectives regarding the ways in which they have gone about attempting to create a more inclusive school environment for queer communities. Other questions explored perceived barriers as well as supports required for this work (see Appendix C for interview protocol).
Desimone’s and Le Floche’s (2004) technique of “cognitive interviews” was utilized in an effort to improve the quality of the interview protocol. Originally described in relation to the construction of survey instruments, this process allows the researcher to explore respondents’ understanding of particular questions to garner if there are shared or conflicted interpretations of the items. In applying this approach to my qualitative interview protocol, I conducted one pilot interview with a fellow Ph.D. student who works in the area of social justice and equity to explore possible participant interpretations of the questions. No data was collected during this interview since the purpose of the conversation was to review the questions to better discern possible misinterpretations or misunderstandings of terminology and to identify and reassess potential problem questions. As a result of the pilot interview, changes to some of the questions were made. For example, some of the original questions incorporated the conceptual framework by specifically probing about communication strategies, critical learning strategies, fostering school community relations and exercising strategic advocacy. It was decided that framing the questions using the conceptual framework may be too leading and could potentially limit the coding to these four areas. Consequently, more general questions were asked to elicit more authentic responses whereas questions incorporating the conceptual framework could be used if required for probing purposes. Additional changes to the questions were influenced by feedback from the Thesis Proposal Hearing Committee. Questions asking “what” were changed to “how”. For example, the question “What strategies do principals employ to facilitate inclusive school cultures for LGBTQ populations?” was changed to “How do principals go about facilitating inclusive schools for LGTBQ populations?” to encourage participants to elaborate on strategies employed rather than simply listing them.
Prior to data collection, the University of Toronto ethics protocol was completed and the Research Ethics Board approved the study. As required by the ethics review protocol, all participants received the informed consent letter (see Appendix A), which outlined the nature of the study, confidentiality issues and how the data would be used. The interview protocol was also sent to participants ahead of time and all signed consent forms were collected prior to the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews took place at a time and location convenient for the interviewees. One interview was conducted via telephone conference and the remaining interviews were carried out face-to-face, which was the preferred method of data collection as it allows the interviewer to observe any non-verbal cues or facial gestures that can enhance the significance of the data (Creswell, 2012). The interviews, which ranged from forty-five to 90 minutes in length, took place during a three-month period from May to July, 2014. Interviews were audio-recorded, with participants’ permission, and later transcribed verbatim to preserve the genuineness of what is to be analyzed and to honour everything the respondents imparted for a more authentic and accurate analysis. I was particularly cognizant not to let these sessions last longer than 90 minutes, an appropriate time frame as prescribed by Gay & Airasian (2003) due to the volumes of interview notes this type of methodology can generate. They caution that transcribing and analyzing the data can be very time consuming (Gay & Airasian, 2003).

At the beginning of each interview, I provided each participant with a preamble for the research. In addition, I reiterated my role as interviewer so that the interviewees would comprehend the need for me to remain impartial during the data collection. Each was reminded of confidentiality measures and each understood that he or she would be audio taped. As a backup, I also jotted down brief notes on the interview protocol (Creswell, 2012), which also
helped me keep track of pertinent themes and ideas as they arose. For the one-on-one interviews, it was also significant to maintain eye contact in order to observe facial expressions or other nuances that could potentially enhance the data collection process.

There are many advantages to employing this type of qualitative design. During a one-on-one interview, participants are more apt to share their insights, voice their experiences and elaborate on ideas in an open and honest manner (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Schram, 2003). In this situation, the “purposive” sampling of administrators enabled me to solicit each respondent’s personal “point of view” in order to express his or her own story of this particular phenomenon in a safe forum (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). By using a semi-structured interview protocol, interviewees were able to express their thoughts and opinions in a free-flowing manner (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, less structured questions were used to probe for further insights as the discussions were taking place (Merriam, 2009). The use of such probing questions or prompts, allowed the participants to make deeper connections to their experiences by providing examples. As issues or considerations emerged from previous interviews, I was also able to capitalize on this new information to further probe subsequent respondents in later interviews.

There are also disadvantages associated with one-on-one interviews. Not all interviewees may be comfortable disclosing information about specific questions or sharing personal experiences related to the research questions (Creswell, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). Additionally, the researcher may unconscionably influence the interviewees’ responses through comments or leading questions (Creswell, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). In this regard, I endeavored to keep this interview as informal, comfortable and casual as possible. As a result, even though questions regarding personal motivation for this
work evoked emotions from the majority of participants, participants openly contributed their thoughts and opinions and, from my perspective, seemed to enjoy sharing their experiences and knowledge in this area. I found that each participant was very supportive of the study and very passionate about topics surrounding equity and social justice themes. In fact, many of them shared additional resources and the names of organizations with me that support LGBTQ communities in Ontario.

I continued to interview participants until a point of data saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009), which occurred at thirteen participants since the data was becoming repetitive and the collection of any new data would not contribute anything new to the phenomenon under investigation (Mason, 2010; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). With thirteen participants, I was able to extract thick data and capture a robust depiction of the participants’ understanding of the phenomenon, so that an authentic and consolidated picture of the data can be presented.

**Data analysis**

After data collection was completed and interviews were transcribed, to further facilitate a more authentic and accurate analysis, participants were provided with the verbatim transcript of their interview in order to confirm the contents, to make additions or to edit passages that they were not comfortable with. This strategy, known as “member checks”, allowed participants to review the transcripts to ensure that they rang true and helped the researcher eliminate any possible misinterpretations of participant perspectives (Merriam, 2009). One participant made two minor changes to their transcripts. The other twelve participants did not request any changes be made.
A thematic approach to data analysis was employed for this study in order to facilitate the process of making sense of the large quantities of data. Such an approach afforded me the ability to categorize the data into major themes and incorporate quotes and rich details from the data to support the themes in responding to the major research questions (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Data analysis is an iterative process, a common practice in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009) that cycles back and forth between the data collection and analysis. This “recursive” process, whereby I collected and analyzed the data simultaneously, assisted me in sifting through the volume of notes during the process, facilitating my ability to make deeper connections with the data to draw preliminary conclusions and themes (Merriam, 2009). Bogdan & Biklen (2007) note that while reviewing the data, certain “words, phrases, patterns of behaviour, subjects’ ways of thinking, and events repeat and stand out” (p. 173). In this vein, after reviewing half of the transcriptions, I began to see important and meaningful trends and themes emerging from the data. Once all the transcripts were completed, I reviewed them several times in their entirety. Using the research questions and my conceptual framework, I coded and recorded categorical notes on the margins of the transcripts using the comment tool in Microsoft word. After this was completed, I created a new Word document for each of the themes, cutting and pasting selected portions of the data to their respective files. The themes extrapolated from the data captured reoccurring patterns in the data (Merriam, 2009). Once this process was complete, I was able to review each themed file individually to extrapolate it for sub-themes and assign supporting quotes, evidence or information to these themes and sub-themes. Breaking down the data into sub-themes allowed me to go further with the analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).
This process began again for each research question. This also allowed me to review the transcripts several times as I approached each research question, providing me with the opportunity to gain a deeper connection the data and answer the research questions. Several themes emerged such as principals’ commitment to equity for LGBTQ, principals’ understanding of the barriers associated with this work, principals’ abilities to employ various strategies to overcome some of the barriers and their understanding of the supports needed to further this inclusive agenda.

**Chapter Summary**

In this study a qualitative research design was utilized because it provided the principals with an opportunity to share their insights and experiences regarding LGBTQ inclusivity. This method of data analysis is appropriate for this study, which seeks to provide an understanding of the strategies inclusive leaders use to create inclusive school environments for sexual minority populations. Before this study, little or no research had been carried out on elementary principals who facilitate inclusive school environments for LGBTQ. The study involved thirteen principals working in very diverse school contexts from different school boards. These participants were able to provide specific experiences and personal stories about the phenomena being explored. The interviews were semi-structured; one was conducted by telephone and the rest were face to face. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded into themes that reflected the research questions and the conceptual framework. It is important to note that it would be impossible to view all the data objectively and that my personal biases and lens through which I viewed the data influenced my interpretation. In the following chapters, I present the data analysis from the interview data collected.
Limitations

Notwithstanding, there are also limitations for this type of qualitative research design, which are outlined below.

1. The study requires a specific sub-group of school leaders who are inclusive and working towards creating schools inclusive of LGBTQ populations. Additionally, deeming these leaders as inclusive and equity-minded relies on personal and/or peer perceptions of this. This sub group was challenging to locate.

2. Accuracy of the interview data can be compromised if participants withhold information or change responses to reflect the types of responses they perceive the researcher may desire.

3. This is a small study, not an exhaustive study. A larger study could provide a broader picture of how principals create inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations in various contexts and school settings.

4. While the strategies used by participants are intended to promote inclusivity for LGBTQ populations, outcomes cannot be known as interviewing students or other staff members to judge outcomes is beyond the scope of this research.
Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to the research policies and guidelines as set out by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The individual interviews took place in safe, private locations chosen by the participants, and at a time that was convenient for them. Audio recording occurred with participants’ consent and they were informed that they could have the recording stopped at any point. Participants read an information letter detailing the purpose of this research and informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews (see Appendix A). Participants were notified in the consent documents of their rights to pass on a question or withdraw from the study at any time.

There are no foreseen risks for participants since confidentiality of all school administrators was maintained throughout the process. Participants were also reminded not to identify the names of schools, staff, students or boards during the interviews so that participants’ identities are not compromised in any way during the recording of the interviews. Pseudonyms for participants and locations are also used to protect anonymity. The audiotapes, transcribed notes of the interviews, and letters of consent are all kept in a secure place and will be destroyed five years after completion of this study. In addition, all participants received a transcribed copy of their own interview in order to verify for accuracy and amend if they so wished. A copy of the complete study will be shared with participants if requested.

The information obtained through this investigation has not been used to generalize to greater populations, nor will it be used to generate theories.
Chapter Five: Principals’ Understanding of Issues Surrounding LGBTQ Inclusion

This chapter explores how principals participating in this study understood issues surrounding the creation of inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations. All of the principals interviewed espoused strong beliefs around equity and inclusion for all individuals. However, for a variety of reasons, they were particularly motivated in ensuring that sexual minority populations were treated respectfully and represented equitably in their schools. Despite the myriad of responsibilities and challenges that the principal’s role entails, the commitment of these participants to equity work as a whole is noteworthy. Their commitment solidified the need to ensure their schools were safe places for LGBTQ people, that learning about LGBTQ needs and infusing LGBTQ curricular content became embedded in their schools’ equity journeys. In the next section, both the personal and professional/work experiences that motivated these thirteen individuals to become committed leaders in the area of LGBTQ inclusivity are discussed.

Principals’ Commitment to Equity

All participants demonstrated a commitment to support all dimensions of diversity, possessing a wider conceptual lens through which they understood diversity as not being limited to certain groups of people. Within this lens, they viewed LGBTQ populations as deserving the same privileges and rights in our schools and in society as everyone else but saw their work in this area as being more broadly associated with their commitment to equity on a larger scale.

Their individual commitment to equity and social justice for all, however, evolved for different reasons. Some participants described early life experiences that heavily influenced
their conviction to advocate for disenfranchised populations. Others explained how personal experiences with diversity solidified their leadership framework for equity. Additional participants shared how their personal learning journey impacted their need to give voice to all minoritized populations.

**Early life experiences**

When growing up, Mary’s “moral compass” was strongly influenced by her parents, who were very open and accepting of everyone and were “always looking out for the little guy or the underdog.” As a result, equity and social justice were naturally interwoven in her personal and professional endeavours. For personal interest, Mary noted that she reads extensively on equity topics and listens actively to the stories and situations of others so as to learn more about their realities of marginalization. She indicated that a colleague, who identifies as LGBTQ, described her as a person who is non-judgmental and who embraces all dimensions of equity. Mary said that he remarked that “[When] I just look at people... I don't look at anything else when I look at people.” She was delighted that she was asked to sit on a steering and advisory committee to compile a compendium of JK to 12 resources to support educators across the system with LGBTQ inclusion. Although it was a huge undertaking, she was honoured to have been considered and committed considerable time to the project.

Elizabeth’s passion for equity was also heavily influenced by her upbringing; purposefully seeking out equity-oriented roles since it complemented her vision and core beliefs around social justice:

It's not just my professional career that leads me to this path. I am from South Africa. I was born in South Africa and my parents and my family was very involved in the anti-apartheid movement. The whole idea of equity and social justice has been ingrained in me since I was a child; it was part of who I was; always looking at creating places and
spaces for people who were safe and equity was always a passion of mine. So I think more than anything, that’s how I found those positions, so that's where I'm now in terms of my career.

As an equity consultant, Elizabeth participated in professional learning around LGBTQ topics, and prepared and presented equity workshops to support schools in their equity journeys. Currently as a principal, she keeps apprised of issues surrounding equity by joining distribution lists for different organizations, and continues to lead for inclusivity.

Likewise, Francis’ conviction for equity was long-standing. His commitment to help others particularly stemmed from growing up in a large family of thirteen siblings, experiencing poverty first hand, and attending a diverse inner city school. Some of his siblings struggled with mental health issues, and he and his two sisters identified as LGBTQ. Despite the many barriers he faced growing up, Francis noted that he is committed to helping others because he is thankful for those who helped him along the way:

I am moving on from the discrimination that I felt and really my core beliefs are about inclusion and about helping kids be the best that they can be. I believe I am here today because I’ve had amazing experiences, amazing parents, and amazing teachers.

Francis was adamant in his beliefs that equitable schools must embrace all marginalized populations:

My experience with inclusion and honoring diversity is vast and it’s not just relating to the LGBTQ and not a buffet where I choose to support only LGBTQ; but it’s one of true inclusivity and my history shows that I have been a member of [associations for Black students and Southeast Asian populations]. I’ve worked within equity committees. I’ve done a number of things so my leadership style is inclusive. We all work together, everyone is valued, we love kids and we support kids and we are pro kids and pro families and pro teachers.

Francis continued to learn about equity issues through social media, books, participation at workshops and conferences, as well learning alongside his colleagues and peers on different
equity committees. The staff, students and parents at his very diverse school community appreciated his inclusive leadership style. Recently appointed to the Ministry, Francis’ current goal is to continue to work towards closing the achievement gap for students who face obstacles in their educational journeys.

In a similar vein, as a child, Veronica experienced what it felt like not fitting in:

I would say the first factor came from my personal experiences as a child. Remembering as a child, going into a school system where it was predominantly English-speaking children, all English backgrounds and my parents were of Greek descent. I quickly noted that there was a difference between my peers and myself. I remember always feeling that negative feeling that goes along with not being included in something.

Consequently, Veronica’s mantra centered on helping others who experienced marginalization and she believes education is a conduit to positively impact change for these populations. As an educator, Veronica was committed to learning about the needs of others by listening to oral stories and asking questions:

Listening to what they’ve been through; how they felt and also I’m not afraid to ask the questions because what I feel is that by asking the questions, as long as a person feels comfortable in answering them, it equips me with the knowledge of what perhaps the kids in front of me are feeling.

She was as a principal for several years in a number of high diversity school communities and, at the time of the study, was assigned to a central board position supporting schools with high needs. Veronica’s reading and research on the plight of LGBTQ people fortified her conviction that all leaders need to be cognizant of this dimension of equity, regardless of their own values and belief systems:

Whatever your personal values are, or your personal belief systems are, I think if you signed up to be a public servant and a leader, then you check those values at the door. Truthfully and I’m sorry but that’s where it goes to because I know for a fact that some of those leaders in our systems don’t go there because of their personal beliefs. For me that is wrong, that is just simply wrong -you need to check that at the door -you really do!
Anthony’s beliefs around equity were also deep-seated and stemmed from his early life experiences of marginalization:

This is my life; my life has brought me here, really. I have an understanding to be different - to be bullied an awful lot, to have some significant issues in my life as a result of that. That’s where it’s coming from and also from a dedication and love for my job and the kids at this school and so that is my motivation…There are going to be other supports in your life and that is a big message that you need to give people, right?

His experiences as a gay male, his resilience, and his optimism propelled him to support others in his school community as well as at the board level. He also chaired an equity committee where he was responsible for purchasing resources and instructional materials to promote LGBTQ inclusion in elementary schools within his family of schools.

**Experiences with diversity**

Gabriel’s strong conviction for social justice and inclusion was rooted in his early practicum experiences as a teacher in highly diverse inner city school communities where poverty and race intersected to disadvantage students even further. He was part of an urban education program where “every single class was really an equity class.” He pursued a Master of Education in Critical Literacy, which has also helped him to unpack privileged and dominant discourses through a critical lens. At the time of the study he was working as a principal in a very homogenous school community. Rather than let the status quo remain, however, he made significant changes in the school by challenging norms and assumptions to create a more inclusive school for all populations so that all diversities can be visible and equitably represented through displays, presentations, celebrations, inclusive resources and so on. He moved different agendas forward, despite the reluctance of some school community members:
That’s again a more broader thinking about where we are because right now I hear about the staff and people say that “we don't really need to consider this at this time” because of where we are currently. To me that is not preventative or proactive around it. There is a lot within [the] building that need[s] to change - very traditional euro centric celebrations and beliefs being what we recognize and nothing really else. The various themes such as Asian Heritage month just started, and there [was] very little to no thought at this point [given to]… Black history [which] took quite a bit of work to give some reason to get some resources.

As with Gabriel, Bernadette’s experiences working in very diverse school communities supported her more recent inclusionary efforts within a highly mono-cultural school community. The sharp contrast between working with students coming from underprivileged areas as opposed to those from affluent neighborhoods with involved parents had solidified her commitment to equity. Bernadette contests:

So leadership in that lens has kind of framed a lot of work that I have been doing. My passion for equity and inclusivity came very early on and I mean it’s really been a part of me and the work that I do, because I strongly believe in public education and I believe that every student should have access, no matter whether or not you have a parent that’s advocating for kids or not… I became that voice really pushing teachers to think - to use that lens: “Am I doing everything that I can do to enhance the life chances for these kids?”

Monica attributed much of her inclusive style to experiences working with differently abled students, such as behaviourial students with learning disabilities. She spent many years teaching students with special needs and was very concerned about how different school community members related to them, often marginalizing them further:

I think just realizing even how the students saw themselves, how other teachers saw them and consequently how even the parents saw them -when you had that designation of something or you felt you were different. I think that's kind of where the whole inclusivity kind of equity piece came in for me.

Monica now uses her equity lens to promote the rich diversity of her school community, which is characterized by a high percentage of low-income families, a high concentration of English
Language Learners, and a significant number of students who are identified with special needs.
She was also excited to work with staff in supporting Burmese students who speak Karan – the fourth-most popular dialect at her school. These populations, who have no written tradition, have been displaced in their homeland, growing up in Thai refugee camps.

**Personal learning journey**

David is an avid reader who had embarked on a journey to learn more about the needs of sexual minorities. Over the past few years, he had participated in various workshops specifically geared towards creating more inclusive schools for LGBTQ persons. This learning journey allowed him to examine his own personal biases and assumptions, an exercise that he noted had enhanced his inclusive leadership approach for all diversities: “Discovering in myself and my own biases and where those originated and where they came from, and how do I manage those to have more open and inclusive attitudes towards those around me.” Subsequently, he volunteered to be part of a pilot project for LGBTQ inclusion at his school, which entailed intensive professional learning for staff and school community members along with inclusive resources. He commented that this commitment to ongoing learning around equity had given him the confidence and knowledge to enact inclusionary practices for all populations, including queer communities at his school.

Gregory’s previous role as a consultant positively impacted on his learning journey and growth in the area of equity, providing him with a breadth and depth of knowledge and expertise regarding all aspects of diversity. He had authored numerous resources, presented workshops, and delivered keynote addresses at several conferences. In his role as Principal, he continued to advocate for disenfranchised populations by sharing resources and writing article inserts for
newsletters for colleagues, focusing on social justice themes. Gregory was seen as a “go to person” and a strong voice in the area of equity and LGBTQ inclusion:

I don't have all of the answers or anything like that but I mean we just have to think you have to [advocate] if you have a voice. I think it's compelled upon us as educators to use it and that's because I never had -I'm trying to think back -I never had a role model so I think if you can, you can use your voice and remain safe, I think we're compelled to do so.

Jerome’s passion for social justice and social activism was sustained through his thirst for personal and professional learning in this area. At the time of the study he was completing research for a Masters of Education where he was focusing on LGBTQ inclusion. He had read widely, attended and presented at equity workshops, and was chairing a system level committee focusing on creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations. As a teacher, Jerome made a point of learning about the barriers students face in his class and intentionally worked to eradicate them through inclusive instructional practices. He believed educators have a moral obligation to ensure their schools meet the complex needs of the changing school contexts:

I really fundamentally believe at my core that schools are in the business of serving communities, so I really firmly believe that the role of the administrator, the Principal, or the Vice Principal and the teacher as instructional leader is to provide inclusive leadership and provide an inclusive environment that serves the needs of the community. Personally as a school leader, I obviously believe that every child deserves to feel included, deserves to find that their school is a place where they can be and express their true identity. And that we certainly want every student to feel that the multiple identities that they have that comprise them, that they're always respected, that they're all honored and they're all welcome within the school context.

As an educator, Theresa continued to learn about equity and social justice issues through her placements in diverse school communities. In these contexts, she learned a great deal about the complex needs of students with special needs and about supporting families from low socio-economic status. However, Theresa also recognized that some groups were left out of the equity
equation. She began to explore ways to support LGBTQ colleagues and school community members who continued to be under-represented at the elementary level:

I think because they are the invisible minority, unless somebody says something or unless a parent or a child brings it to the forefront. I don’t think it is ignored intentionally… To me it should be something that is overt- It should be a part of curriculum, it should be woven into what everybody is doing already. It shouldn’t be an event. It should be like everything we are doing in terms of inclusion. It should be like we want all kids to be represented…and all families to be represented in our schools, so it is just a part of that; and providing people with the resources to do so.

When the opportunity presented itself, she embarked on a learning journey to research different resources and supports that exist for sexual minority populations. She became immersed in work at the system level, participating in different sub-committees responsible for exploring age appropriate resources for LGBTQ integration and presenting LGBTQ- and equity-related workshops to various stakeholder groups such as parents, trustees, administrators, educational assistants and teachers.

Charles, on the other hand, leveraged his learning around the needs of marginalized populations by supporting educators across North America as a workshop facilitator, presenting seminars on topics dealing with Global Citizenship and Intercultural Awareness for almost a decade. Advocating for “invisible marginalized communities that have a culture and who also need to have a voice,” he also became involved at the board level to support work around creating safe schools and workplaces for LGBTQ. Charles infused LGBTQ themes in his diverse school context and capitalized on sharing his success stories at various presentations for parent groups, administrators, superintendents and school staff. In his role as a principal on assignment at the board, he was excited about the new learning that would occur as he worked with a number of schools to ensure marginalized students were supported in the classroom.
Thus, it is evident that all the equity-minded principals participating in this study exuded the principles of inclusivity; they were dedicated in their efforts to challenge certain norms and assumptions about marginalized populations in efforts to advance social justice. Many of the participants extended their support beyond their school walls to other colleagues, other schools, other jurisdictions, or volunteered their time to system-level equity initiatives in pursuit of broader equity goals. Further to this, strong convictions to support their own learning in the area of equity and partake in various social justice activities solidified their belief in inclusive educational ideals and practices for all learners. The next sections detail personal and professional experiences that strongly motivated these principals to enact inclusive leadership practices for LGBTQ inclusion.

**Principals’ Commitment to LGBTQ Inclusivity**

This section discusses some of the experiences, both personal and professional, that influenced principals’ understanding of the pressing need to give voice and representation to LGBTQ students and the broader LGBTQ community, further motivating them to take an active stance in removing barriers to LGBTQ inclusion in their school community.

**Personal experiences**

Many of the principals participating in the study described feelings of marginalization and victimization in public or in school settings that heightened their personal aspirations to change the lived realities of LGBTQ people within their own school contexts. Some participants experienced multiple forms of marginalization in different contexts; however, only certain experiences are described in this section in order to honour the voices of all participants.
Some participants described their marginalization in terms of their own experiences as LGBTQ individuals. Anthony, for instance, commented “nothing quite outs you like being a parent,” vividly recalling how uncomfortable he felt when his family was subjected to “dirty looks” from some parents he was on an outing with his husband and two children. As a teacher, Anthony also recalled working in a school where colleagues advised him to stay closeted: “Do not come out no matter what you do...the population here is not ready for it and you’re putting yourself at risk.” As a new administrator, he found that staff and parents would often initially assume that he had a wife. He voiced concern for his children’s feelings of safety and acceptance in a world where such heteronormalizing practices continue to perpetuate systemic and societal discrimination for gays, and parents who are in same sex relationships: “I didn’t want to live in a world where my kids had to be ashamed of who their parents were.” In that vein, Anthony extended this same ethic of care to all his students and was cognizant of the needs of students who may reside on the margins due to their own sexuality or gender identity:

I want all of my kids here to be happy and safe. I know next year we have aboriginal boys, the gay population, who have the second biggest group of males who are suicidal. I don't want that should my son be gay or trans - what if he took his own life because the world is not a safe enough place for him. I couldn't bear to live with that knowing that I couldn't do anything I could for each child.

Thus, much of Anthony’s commitment for LGBTQ inclusion was derived from his own personal journey, which stimulated his commitment to improving the conditions for others who identify as LGBTQ:

It’s all to me about respect and safety. A lot of that has to do with my journey of dealing with a lot of homophobia in my life and the consequences of that and also having to deal with being a parent – being with a husband and wanting to be proud of my family and my relationship. At the center, we’re just happy people and I don't want other kids to not have that opportunity. So my motivation really is to ensure that everyone feels respected and safe at school and that has to do with my personal journey.
Theresa also experienced some of the same frustrations Anthony expressed about how others view same sex parents. In particular, for Theresa, the transfer process was particularly stressful. Customarily, principals are not given the choice of assignment or school location when transferred. When she moved from a school community where everyone knew her well to one where almost no one knew her, Theresa had some reservations about sharing that she had a child within a same sex relationship: “And I should not have had to feel that anxiety about that. I have explained it to some of my colleagues who are friends – when you get moved to a different school; it is like a coming out process all over again. So it is stressful.” For Theresa, these types of experiences continued to heighten the need to support and represent other families like her own in order to challenge the damaging stereotypes and prejudices about queer communities that exist in many school communities. She had friends and colleagues in same sex relationships who had children, and as a school administrator, she came to know other same sex families and students who struggled with their sexuality, so it became important to her that supports be put in place to honour all families:

I have plenty of friends who have children and we want to make sure our children are represented and that staff have the resources and the strategies to put into place in their classrooms so that [same sex parents and their children] do not feel awkward and that they feel they are being supported by their colleagues and their administration.

Likewise, Jerome’s interest in human rights and social justice had been a “very personal journey” as a result of being subjected to targeted homophobic banter in his elementary and secondary schools when growing up in a small town:

What brought me to this work is of a very personal nature. So my goal being that no child in the future will ever have to endure the level of bullying, the level of internal hatred that I held for myself... Certainly, from a staff perspective, that I have a commitment not only to students that identify as LGBTQ, but to ensure that staff, community members, families,... different manifestations of the family- that everybody regardless of who they are in the stakeholder group; however they approach education; that they all feel included, respected, and a sense of honor.
According to Jerome, the principles of inclusion need to be interwoven into all our schools because LGBTQ youth and populations exist in all communities, whether small towns or large urban settings. He wanted to ensure that as a leader, he created the conditions in which inequality and injustice are challenged so that students, staff and parents, regardless of their actual or perceived differences, feel safe, welcome and respected.

Charles, who came from a very religious background, also experienced marginalization as a youth in middle and high school when he began to question his sexuality. He explained that he felt compelled to stay closeted: “It was very hard to come out because you were marginalized and you worked so hard to conform and assimilate so that you are safe and typical or normal.” Charles joined the drama club, which was run by a gay teacher, to find safe refuge – as many other students who identified on the LGBTQ spectrum did. He remembered it being located on the fourth floor, “away, out of sight.” According to Charles, conforming to the dominant heteronormative discourses entailed denying who he was when he was growing up, a struggle that can have significant consequences for any individual. In retrospect, Charles had hoped that during his adolescent years, someone would champion equity work to challenge the overt heterosexuality that existed in the mainstream programs and curriculum, but he accepted that “it just wasn’t the decade to do it.” As such, he affirmed the criticality of creating safe places in all our schools:

Championing and supporting any difference - you have to have a safe place for them to be who they are within their difference. So whether it be size if they are a large person or a really small person, or if we would call quirky or a diverse thinker or any way that makes them different [so they don’t] ...get marginalized...That one or two classes where you have that [inclusive] teaching philosophy isn't enough; that it has to be a full school and then board wide but full school and that was what I was at a school doing.
Charles knew he could have had a “very different school experience” had his school been more “inclusive.” As a result of these personal experiences, Charles was committed to ensuring respect for all diversity within the human community.

Similar to other participants who identified as LGBTQ, Francis was victimized physically and verbally for being a gay male. The discrimination he experienced also impacted his professional life and he remained closeted for many years. However, at the time of the study he openly and proudly shared that he is gay and married with two biracial children: “I wasted a lot of energy denying who I am and I can’t be that way. So the energy that I wasted staying in the closet is used in a powerful way, in different ways.” Francis was also a role model for others, such as the young lesbian teacher in his school who described him as a person who carries “no shame for being gay....you’re not asking for acceptance, you’re not apologetic, you are who you are.” Francis said that transferring this sense of pride to LGBTQ children and youth was the crux of his work and passion. When he was charged with the opening of a new school, he ensured its mission and values echoed themes of equity and inclusivity. According to Francis, student wellness and academics are interconnected, so tapping into those students who have been marginalized to support their success undergirds his motivation as an equity-oriented leader:

I do think this is the area that’s going to push us even further, because when we think about the students who are not supported- if we can tap into their wisdom and their expertise and honor them, I really think this is going to raise the bar and close the achievement gap and it is totally connected.

Other participants reported that their motivations were the results of belonging to other marginalized groups outside of the LGBTQ community. For example, Monica’s commitment to supporting diversity and challenging conventional family norms stemmed from her personal experiences of being a single mother. One of her supervisors expressed concern about how
certain parents, depending on their cultural backgrounds, may react once they ascertain that
Monica is a single parent. Monica, however, was pleased that her school community embraced
her family by offering support, presents and food. For customary school activities such as
Mother’s or Father’s day, she engendered staff to widen their notion of family by considering
alternatives such as writing cards for other family members or special people so that all students
can participate meaningfully in these activities. When asked by colleagues and her own family
members why teachers would engage in reading stories about same sex parents, Monica
respectfully unpacked the realities of family diversity:

But then when you realize and say hey, wait, my son doesn't have a father or there are
people in our schools who have two dads or two moms and we need to share and talk
about that and celebrate it as well.

Although she could appreciate that some individuals are “one or two steps removed” from
accepting non-normative family structures, she continued to advocate for single and same sex
parents.

Although Gabriel is well versed in equity issues as a result of his urban education-
focused teacher-training program, his Master’s degree on critical literacy, and his teaching
experience in highly diverse inner city schools, it was his experiences as a principal in a
homogenous school community that had been eye opening. It was in this setting that Gabriel
realized that different school communities could be on very different equity continuums. He
noted that students would engage in inappropriate behaviours when people from different ethnic
backgrounds came to his school: “It isn’t here so when something different arrives, it raises
brows and starts that kind of indifference and we need to educate the kids on this.” On a
personal level, he also experienced this discrimination in his school setting. When Gabriel
disciplined some intermediate students for leaving the school premises without permission, one
of them later yelled out the “F word” and the “N word” in front of the entire school community, directed at Gabriel. So for Gabriel, challenging discriminatory behaviours required a great deal of teaching and learning on behalf of all staff and students, especially since there were students who identified as LGBTQ at his school. He indicated that the learning journey needs to be framed within the larger discussions of the “legality surrounding it, around racial slurs, and about human rights, chartered rights.” Embarking on the journey to create an inclusive school community which is safe and welcoming for visitors, staff, supply teachers, students and parents became a priority for him as a school leader in a mono-cultural school context. This would be the stimulus for him to move people out of the comfort of their status quo.

**Work-related experiences**

Many of the principals referred to in this section described an event/incident or an influential colleague in their work environments that underscored the need to advocate for LGBTQ populations in their school communities. These events, and also influential colleagues, were pivotal in pricking the consciousness of these principals to critically examine ways to create more welcoming, safe and inclusive school environments for sexual minority populations.

**Event/incident**

Mary’s passion to support LGBTQ persons began in the 80s when she was an educational assistant. She recalled two lesbian parents who were the “laughing stock of the school.” It became frustrating for her as she realized that there were no supports in place for this family. For Mary, the situation heightened the need for educators to know their school community and not to make assumptions about their students’ backgrounds:

> If we are talking about race, we can look at a person and we can still make assumptions—where they’re from and what their background is. But in the LGBTQ community, it's
really invisible. It’s more so invisible... That's why we have to be more in-tune because we don't know if there's a child, we don’t know if the child has a parent or family member [that is LGBTQ] and I think that's really important.

To optimize the learning environment at her school, Mary emphasized the need for students and school community members to feel included and safe: “I think again my basic understanding of LGBTQ community is that, if I'm not creating a space for absolutely everyone no matter what it is, then how can they [LGBTQ] be learning to their maximum potential?”

In another instance, David described a “confictive situation” that occurred at his school which spurred the need for deeper learning around equity topics for all school community members. In particular, while school demographics changed considerably over the years, some individuals resisted the implementation of inclusive practices for LGBTQ communities, such as Pink Day. The dissonance between groups of people became very evident, as David described: “People took positions, very strong positions and some folks were offended and sometimes that's what it takes to sort of wake up people’s interest or willingness to do more, then take notice, but to actually do something.” Rather than quash the event to appease some of the dominant voices, David forged ahead with the event and embraced the need to work alongside his school community to legitimize inclusivity for LGBTQ communities. For David, as for many other participants, LGBTQ inclusion was not a separate or isolated event, despite some of the bias and resistance he observed towards this under-represented population. David’s equity oriented leadership stance countered the notions of exclusion, which was key to moving the LGBTQ agenda forward: “I think it starts from a general approach to not excluding anyone. And also I think that impacts on the approach that I take when you are looking at a specific group that might be alienated or ostracized or pushed out.”
On an even more serious note, when Gregory learned of two LGBTQ individuals being assaulted at a school, he knew he needed to take action. He was legitimately concerned about the vulnerability of others in this community and felt that if he “outed” himself in public, he could better assist the LGBTQ community who were feeling susceptible:

It wasn't anything I ever felt that I needed to advertise. But for this particular reason, I was like I know because the [LGBTQ] community is talking. I'm hearing them because I am in the community...Once the community and once the population of this board knew that I was gay -it opened up, the [LGBTQ] community felt safe in actually coming to the board...so now they knew that I was one of them.

As a result of support that Gregory received from his board, he spearheaded a variety of initiatives such as parent and staff networks for LGBTQ communities and allies. He received positive feedback from his peers and immediately recognized how important these structures were in giving voice to LGBTQ:

[P]eople that came out because they didn't know that you can actually be gay and won't get fired. I could put a picture of ...my wife or my girlfriend and as a male I can do that and that's okay? Yeah that is actually fine. I’m not saying for a second that you won't potentially get flak from the homophobes, but you won't get flak from the board.

The event substantiated the need to put formal structures in place for LGBTQ populations and also affirmed that individuals like Gregory are role models for others. Throughout the years, he commented that many people at the school and board levels have learned from his inclusive approaches.

**Influential Colleague**

Veronica first conceived the need to be more inclusive of LGBTQ populations early on in her teaching career when she was partnered with a teacher who identified as lesbian. This teacher unpacked and interrogated some of the heteronormalizing language Veronica used with her students which further reinforced hegemonic discourses:
I would be talking to my grade 7/8’s and saying things like: “oh yeah, when you grow up and get married; your wife this, or your husband this” and she called me on it. She pointed it out to me. This is basically my first year teaching, and she called me on it. She said, “Have you ever thought of the words that you’re using and what they’re doing to students who perhaps might be gay?” And I was like “No, I’m not.” She said, “Think of the vocabulary that you are using; you’re assuming that everybody in your class is heterosexual.”

Rather than be offended by this criticism, Veronica was “thrilled” with the new insights garnered from her colleague. Veronica admitted that this teacher taught her to deconstruct language and structures that marginalize sexual minority students early on in her teaching career:

That was the initial step for me that … began my journey for me in noting that not everybody is a heterosexual and because I am and because my experiences, and my identity would be hetero, I had not experienced the exclusionary feelings that go along with identifying as homosexual…Throughout the year, we had a lot of conversations around it. It was from there that I started getting involved [with LGBTQ inclusion] and this is going back you know when I first started teaching.

Similarly, Elizabeth began to learn about the plight of LGBTQ individuals by listening to the stories of one of her colleagues who identifies as LGBTQ:

So when you look specifically at the LGBTQ community, it’s taking the time to listen to LGBTQ people talk and share about the challenges they face, and trying to understand, help me understand that because I can't pretend I understand it when I’m not the person in that community.

Elizabeth stressed that some of her most valuable learning happened when she listened to “stories” which positively influenced her understanding of LGBTQ needs. It was through these learning opportunities that Elizabeth better understood the next steps she needed to take as a leader in creating more inclusive schools for queer people. Although she saw herself as a leader for “all students” and was committed to ensuring a vision of acceptance for all people, she also recognized that LGBTQ are “probably one of the few groups that are more marginalized than others.” She stated that she could better appreciate that there is “a lot more conscious work, deliberate work that needs to sort of happen in that area” through the stories of her colleague.
Bernadette noted that it was a superintendent who helped her understand the significant impact a school leader could exert in creating an inclusive school. He epitomized notions of equity through his leadership and took advantage of opportunities to teach others about diversity by holding meetings at synagogues or mosques. Similar to Elizabeth, who listened to stories to learn about the obstacles and injustices people face, Bernadette learned the importance of listening to stories from her superintendent: “He helped us to understand that everybody had a story; everybody needed to feel included.” Although Bernadette came from a single parent family that struggled financially, the superintendent made her understand that others who look at her as a leader see the “outside packaging” and that she emanated “white privilege.” Bernadette remembered him saying, “You don't look that way so you need to share your story, you need to get people to understand that you are just like them and you’re there working for them.”

Listening to the stories of others eventually became embedded in her own practice. A staff member, who remarked Bernadette’s openness to listening to the stories of others, shared his own struggles identifying as a gay teacher:

I think a lot of the work in this particular school started with one of our staff who to a small group of us was very comfortable and saying I'm gay; I'm in a relationship and so on. As he started to feel more comfortable knowing how I felt about it, he started to talk more about it.

Bernadette embraced this new learning from her colleagues in actively supporting inclusivity for LGBTQ people in her school.
Chapter Summary

All the principals participating in this study embodied an inclusive oriented leadership style and were committed to equity work within their school communities and beyond. Different factors influenced their leadership framework for equity such as their upbringing, experiences with diversity and personal learning journeys. Although all of them were interested in creating inclusive schools for all disenfranchised populations, they also recognized LGBTQ populations as being a particularly vulnerable and legitimately under-represented group whose needs must be addressed. The principals identified significant experiences that motivated them to embark on LGBTQ inclusivity. Some principals shared personal experiences of being marginalized either in public or in school settings. Other principals shared work-related experiences involving an influential person or event/incident that fortified their motivation to support sexual minority populations. The principals also became involved in various other initiatives in their board or community to enhance the inclusion of LGBTQ people.

While these principals endeavored in their quest to create inclusive schools for all school community members by promoting safe environments, infusing LGBTQ professional learning and content in their schools and classrooms, accomplishing this can be a daunting task given the myriad of roles and challenges a school leader faces in his or her daily work. Committing to LGBTQ inclusivity can present additional challenges for inclusive-minded school leaders given some of the significant barriers sexual minority populations contend with in schools and in society. The next chapter explores principals’ perceptions of the barriers that exist in creating inclusive school communities for LGBTQ populations.
Chapter Six: Principals’ Perceptions of the Barriers to Creating Inclusive Schools for LGBTQ Populations

Although school leaders face many barriers in their social justice work, this chapter specifically examines the various barriers principals participating in the study perceived as impeding their efforts to create more inclusive schools for LGBTQ communities. Participants alluded to LGBTQ as a dimension of diversity typically fraught with politics and controversy, thereby creating obstacles along the equity continuum that school leaders must overcome. In particular, several principals reported facing barriers in their efforts as allies for LGBTQ communities, while other principals were subjected to different forms of marginalization as a result of their sexual orientation. In this vein, participants provided meaningful insights into the types of barriers other school administrators may confront in their efforts to create a safe space for LGBTQ people, promote learning around LGBTQ topics and integrate LGBTQ content and lessons within the classrooms. While many individual barriers were identified, two broad themes emerged from the findings: system level barriers and school level barriers.

System Level Barriers

System level barriers included the lack of explicit guidelines and policies, the shortage of professional learning opportunities, the absence of accessible and approved resources, and the continued perpetuation of systemic heterosexual frameworks.
**Lack of explicit guidelines and policies**

Several principals pointed out that although there are Ministry and board policies on equity, they are not robust enough to support their efforts. For instance, the Ministry’s equity strategy has been in place for over five years but, according to Gregory, very little accountability is placed on boards and schools to enforce it and the emphasis on equity seemed overshadowed by political and neoliberal agendas:

> Can I just say I am uncomfortable with my math score so I'm not doing math EQAO? You can't, they will hold me accountable. Equity it's kind of hindsight - if you're doing it, that's lovely. Just don't do it so much that it becomes political. And if you're not doing it and you have good EQAO scores- you have a wonderful school. It doesn't matter that this [LGBTQ] community doesn't feel supported.

Many of the principals questioned how their colleagues could avoid or refuse to include this dimension of diversity within their programs and not be held accountable. Veronica added that despite the Ministry policies advocating for Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in every school, some principals whom she knows actually disallow such clubs. She also maintained that some principals refused to participate in any activities associated with gay populations. Furthermore, Gregory commented that not all principals attend mandatory in-services when LGBTQ themes are presented. According to Veronica, these scenarios occur because the policies lack explicit directives such as “thou shall,” which are needed to support LGBTQ initiatives. More so, Bernadette stated that “[students] can't wait for us to figure it out” and concurred that “you must” statements need to be weaved in polices and guidelines to push for more timely LGBTQ inclusive efforts.

Referring to the system level, Gregory and Francis conveyed the important role of senior administration in ensuring that all schools are fairly representing all dimensions of equity,
including sexual orientation and identity. According to them, superintendents should be infusing equity themes at principal meetings in addition to demonstrating their support by communicating about and participating in activities honouring LGBTQ communities, such as Pink Day.

In another vein, Francis warned that some system-level policies might be misconstrued if not clearly communicated by boards and the Ministry, noting that some parents interpret religious accommodation guidelines and policies as a vehicle to remove their child when LGBTQ content is taught in classrooms because homosexuality infringes on their religious beliefs. Francis elaborated:

So I think one of the barriers …is that I am very worried that we are making religious accommodations our number one goal. I am very worried that people will use the fact that they are religious as a scape-goat for hatred towards LGBTQ. I am very worried that the people who are promoting religious accommodations are not recognizing the basic human rights about LGBTQ- to be safe and honored and there is a Canadian, a human charter of rights… the human right codes that really needs to say we respect and honor your religion. But we do not espouse hatred!

He also underlined that all churches – including those affiliated with the United Church, which supports gay populations – must be recognized in religious accommodation policies.

**Lack of professional learning opportunities**

All participants concurred that ongoing professional learning is required to help debunk myths associated with queer populations and to support teachers in embedding LGBTQ topics into the curriculum. Principals discussed how the dearth of LGBTQ training creates barriers to expanding people’s knowledge about gay populations. In particular, principals identified the lack of dedicated time and money to release teachers, as well as limited access to workshops and consultants who have expertise in this dimension of equity, as obstacles that continue to stand in the way of the equity efforts of principals.
Both Gabriel and Theresa, for instance, discussed the many initiatives and school community needs that compete for educators’ time. Theresa remarked that the learning needs of her students resembled “orange concentrate” as opposed to “orange juice” - so many needs compacted in one school context, consequently compromising some of the time required to embark on PD around LGBTQ inclusion. Gabriel shared his frustration about the “many balls to juggle” in his school. Despite his staff’s eagerness to pursue more learning around LGBTQ populations, carving out dedicated time posed a challenge. On a related note, Mary drew attention to the lack of financial support to release her teachers to collaborate on LGBTQ lesson planning, which echoed the sentiments of several participants in the study:

The teachers are constantly asking for, not only the resources, but the time - time to get together, the time to sit down, the time to plan and talk and ask “what worked for you and how did you do that?”

However, with her small school comes a small budget, making it difficult to comply with such requests by teachers.

Further to this, Gregory pointed out that equity-related workshops are not always readily or consistently accessible. The Ministry allocates additional funds to in-service new teachers in their first year; however, there is no guarantee that equity themes will be infused in this training. He lamented that equity workshops for novice teachers who were eager to learn about equity and inclusion were non-existent: “…so all new teachers this year, who had the two appraisals, there was nothing they could put under equity because it didn’t happen.” Mary added that her school’s geographic location hinders accessibility to training because of the long distance and travel times required to attend a workshop. Additionally, she noted that, in a large board like hers, consultants are in huge demand; so accessing the experts is not always feasible:
Then our central office staff...I had them come in actually and speak to our staff as well. But even bringing them in - there are very limited numbers of them to be able to come out to your schools to provide the support and I think that's what we need.

Similar to Mary, Gabriel shared that he would appreciate having more consultant visits at his school but was cognizant that the assigned consultant, who is well versed in LGBTQ needs, has a number of schools to service in a large board: “I really wanted to get back to the consultant about all these really important issues.”

Participants also commented that learning opportunities regarding LGBTQ inclusion needed to be offered regularly and infused within all equity workshops as opposed to organizing singular or isolated training events. For many of the principals, ongoing learning justified LGBTQ as a legitimate minoritized population. Also, some LGBTQ individuals have complex identities and needs of which school staffs need to be apprised. Some of the participants who identified as LGBTQ reiterated that they also needed to learn more about the varying needs within the LGBTQ community. This again puts emphasis on the importance of ongoing learning regarding this population.

**Lack of accessible and approved resources**

Several principals voiced concerns about the lack of prescribed resources that positively portray LGBTQ populations, which can be easily accessed, for instance in libraries. Moreover, lack of access to approved elementary resources was an area that many participants drew attention to. For instance, while Jerome acknowledged that the number of LGBTQ resources had increased over the years, Theresa lamented the shortage of accessible resources appropriate for the elementary panel. Likewise, Charles discovered a wealth of web-based information
exploring LGBTQ themes; however, websites were often difficult to navigate when trying to locate specific JK to Grade 8 materials.

Participants also called attention to the need for “approved” resources, commenting that a principal’s consent to implement a particular resource is not sufficient for many staff. Charles emphasized that having Ministry- or board-approved resources gives credence and comfort to staff using them, particularly in conservative faith-based communities, as is evidenced in this passage:

So we had a conversation of [the teacher] feeling the importance of the board directing how resources get distributed in the school libraries because she felt that she needed to feel she could appeal to the authority if parents within the school pushed back. And the nature of the culture and the religious climate and religious diversity but ardent in its diversity that isn’t supportive of LGBTQ typically- that she felt she needed to appeal to the authority.

Both Charles and Anthony emphasized that the finite LGBTQ resources that do exist should be prominently displayed and accessible to all students and staff. These were ongoing discussions principals had embarked on with staff, as illustrated by Anthony:

Unfortunately, there aren’t enough resources... We bought pretty much everything on the list and there was a discussion rather brief but anyways: “Do we have them aside so that teachers can use them for teaching or do we have them in the general library?” [We] pretty quickly decided, of course, they have to be in for the kids to take out in the general library and teachers have to be aware and use them for teaching too. They are not to be put aside.

**Systemic heterosexual frameworks**

Principals participating in this study understood that many barriers that deter LGBTQ visibility in schools are a result of the hegemonic heteronormative paradigms prevalent in society. Gregory asserted that societal forces that emphasize heterosexual frameworks continue to undermine sexual minorities: “Well I think everyone is homophobic. I’m homophobic. I
think we are. You can’t grow up in a society and not be homophobic. You are because society has taught us to be that way.” Moreover, heteronormative structures, defined by the norms of heterosexual populations, are systemically replicated by the Ministry of Education and boards of education, with the participants in this study identifying these institutions as perpetuating the invisibility of queer populations through the use of heterosexual symbols and images, language, and hierarchical structures.

Many participants noted that schools and other board buildings often conceal the richness of family diversity that exists in our schools by exclusively displaying symbols of selected family structures. Gregory, who is in a same sex marriage, delineated:

“I think [this is] where families suffer - is when they walk into a school and they don't see themselves represented. To date, I've never seen a same-sex couple on our board website - every bloody colour and every denomination of man/female/single, but never two men and a child or two females and a child.

Although both Gregory and Elizabeth cautioned that visible “symbols” lack significance unless understood and embraced by school community members, they noted that symbols and images nevertheless accentuate and foster positive dispositions of non-conventional family structures. These principals reiterated the importance of visible manifestations of diversity so that all families feel welcomed and represented when they enter schools and other board buildings.

Hegemonic language structures that reflect predominant heterosexual discourses also reify the invisibility of LGBTQ people in schools. Several of the principals noted that traditional activities customarily celebrated in all schools (such as Mother’s and Father’s Day) inadvertently marginalize students who do not know who their parents are, come from single parent families or same sex parents, are raised by guardians or grandparents and so forth. Monica indicated that she continues to engage in conversations with her teaching staff to help them re-conceptualize
the language they use to portray diverse family configurations: “We did talk about, you know, with Mother's Day coming up, so ‘what are you going to do to make that inclusive for everybody? What are you doing for Father's Day to make that inclusive for everybody as well?’”

Principals also pointed out how language structures in Ministry and board forms continue to reflect male-female binaries. Although Ontario’s equity strategy was implemented five years ago, Gregory was astounded that various forms continue to echo heterosexual social structures, but added that this lack of awareness is unintentional in many circumstances since heterosexual norms influence multiple areas of school life. When he pointed out the language to several secretaries, they were apologetic and reacted accordingly to change the forms:

They were like “oh my God” what forms do I have? It was like they weren't being homophobic- they were so organized that when they get a form, they print out thousands of them… so they don't run out and then they grab an old one and they brought that in front of the family…They didn't mean to be homophobic.

Theresa also shared these views and elaborated on how registration forms can cause unnecessary discomfort amongst office staff and parents:

I think it is being aware and not to make assumptions when families come into the door… There is an example of a colleague who called me because there is a same sex family in the school community. They split and one of the parents wanted to update the office index card and saw it said mother and father. Really it is an oversight but it is something for people to be aware of. They (the office) felt badly because the person seemed a bit offended that it said “mother – father” as opposed to “mother – mother”. So we did some investigation and realized that YES, this can be changed within the system with a click of the computer. It could be anybody- mother-father, uncle-aunt, grandma- whoever as the guardian and we have to make sure that we pay close attention to those details. That parent did not feel good about that and having to point it out when the school is already aware. Same thing for the OSR [Ontario Student Record]- the actual file we have to use says Mother- Father-Guardian and for me it should be updated to say Guardian 1 Guardian 2 and this is a Ministry document. I noticed that and I brought it up to the board and I was given some contacts for the Ministry so I will follow up with the Ministry.
This example further underlines that office staff, as front line contacts, must be cognizant of the diverse needs of the families within their school contexts.

Some principals also spoke of the need to fairly represent the voices of LGBTQ people at all levels of the hierarchy within the Ministry and the boards. Referring to the change cycles of heterosexual discourses that marginalize sexual minorities, Elizabeth stated that current “power dynamics” still do not fairly represent LGBTQ voices:

It's one thing to say “Are we going to respect the rights of the lower power gay students but as long as they stay in that lower power… but what are you going to do to ensure those students are sitting where you're sitting eventually? Are we really, really doing that? I don't know if we are.

Gregory further supported the contention that not enough allies or LGBTQ individuals are presently occupying positions of power to make meaningful changes for sexual minorities:

I know what it’s like for me growing up in the 80s and although the youth of today are so different, it's people my age or older that are still in these positions that are continuing to perpetuate the stereotype. Until people that we’re teaching now -when they are the principals and superintendents, I think it's going to be a different world. But in the meantime, I still see so many kids falling through the cracks.

School Level Barriers

Participants described school level barriers that were generated from different stakeholder groups such as principals, staff, parents and students. These obstacles are explored in detail in the sections that follow.

Principals

Study after study underscores the influential role of school administrators in realizing certain initiatives in their school communities. However, as some participants noted, principals themselves can erect barriers to stymie the voice of LGBTQ people. Some participants reported
that many of their colleagues were uncomfortable dealing with LGBTQ topics. Veronica, for instance, pointed out that school leaders’ personal belief systems against gay lifestyles can get in the way of their equity work. Principals’ apprehension dealing with foreboding resistance was additionally identified as a factor deterring inclusive efforts, as elaborated by Theresa:

I think the biggest barrier is fear; fear that you might have to deal with a difficult parent or fear that you might have to deal with a difficult community member who is questioning. The board needs to prepare supports to prepare administrators on how to deal with this. I know we are doing this. Sometimes barriers are higher up because they do not want to deal with the political fallout or how it might look.

On another note, several principals who identify as LGBTQ described how they assumed an obstructive stance to LGBTQ inclusivity because they did not want their interests in this area to be misconstrued as “pushing their own agenda forward.” Jerome, for instance, expressed at length his past reluctance towards actively pursuing LGBTQ initiatives:

I had a real internal sensitivity to an agenda as someone who identifies as gay…Certainly one of the common statements, one of those common pieces that comes out from people who challenge us around providing inclusive environments for LGBTQ students, that there is an agenda or that… we're convincing people to behave a certain way or … that there's some sort of recruitment strategy on the part of the LGBTQ community. And so I really felt that in the early stages of my administrative career, I was holding back the staff. I was holding back the students but the students have always been very committed to this work and certainly the popular culture catches up and reflects these pieces. These students have become very vocal advocates for the importance of the work and I felt one of the significant barriers is that I felt I was actually standing in the way of the work out of my own fear or my own apprehension; that where I can be seen to be promoting a certain agenda or be promoting a certain “lifestyle” choice. Certainly that's one of the pieces that I had to reconcile for myself and do some very serious critical reflection, both on a personal level and professional level.

Anthony was also fearful of being perceived as pushing his own agenda but has since conceded that the situation is no different from that of any other group promoting their culture and identity:

Just like the black teacher runs black history month stuff. Now I am at the point where, so what. What if it's important to you…do it, don’t sit around…. I've had plenty of years
of being a victim. I’m not going to allow my fear which is homophobia really to dictate my behavior, so it has to happen!

Francis concurred that LGBTQ leaders must forge ahead with this work as long so they are respecting and representing all areas of diversity in their school communities:

I think I’ll say this because I think that in some ways gay leaders in the school system can take a back seat because they are afraid of promoting the “gay agenda”. What we need to know is that they should. I would encourage them to not be fearful of promoting the gay agenda because they are promoting all agendas.

**School Staff**

Staff (teachers, support staff, educational assistants) as barriers to moving the agenda forward was a common element that weaved through principals’ discussions. Participants noted a variety of reasons why staff members were reticent to embark on this work: some staff simply resisted out of faith, culture, or homophobia, while others lacked sufficient comfort and confidence to engage in LGBTQ content. Furthermore, some staff who were overly zealous in their attempts to celebrate LGBTQ populations, created friction amongst school community members, which encumbered inclusive approaches.

Whatever the reason, many participants noted that staff resistance, which can sabotage inclusionary strategies, must be addressed and overcome. Anthony, for instance, commented:

I have I’d say a handful of staff that is fundamentalist to the core. Some of them coming from countries that are very rigid thinking and some of them carry that over and some of them have almost rebelled against it and [over time] now are polar opposites! I can still see a little bit resistant.

Veronica reiterated this stance, stating that board employees need to park their values at the door in order to treat fairly and respect all individuals in a school community. David also observed how resistant staff that visibly manifested their disapproval of LGBTQ topics can create tension in a meeting:
I think of two particular people on staff. You see the body language in our initial discussions with staff- arms crossed, sitting back and look on their face- they're not even aware of how tense and uptight they are over the topic. People that are normally very verbal, vocal [do] not say very much.

According to Charles, some staff in his school resisted because they believed an insignificant percentage of their school population comprised LGBTQ individuals. In this vein, these staff members did not support the need to expend effort, money and time for LGBTQ initiatives. Gregory countered this notion, however, stating that LGBTQ people exist everywhere, and when they feel included, safe and welcomed, they will come out:

They are within our community but even if they aren't within our community, it's important that we still train these kids because I get that comment all the time in [my small town]. Why do we have to talk about gays; there are no gays here! Yeah there are. You just don't know it. I'm from north of [a small town]. There are not a whole lot of them up there but I was there. They do come forward when they feel safe.

Anthony also noted the existence of “quiet resisters”, but felt that so long as they were compliant, the LGBTQ agenda could still move forward.

Staff members’ lack of comfort and confidence, which created additional barriers to legitimizing LGBTQ presence in elementary contexts, resonated overwhelmingly with the principals. Some participants noted that particular staff members were still reticent to move out of their comfort zones despite having partaken in discussions and workshops on queer topics, claiming they did not have enough expertise about LGBTQ. Gregory observed that this discomfort sometimes led to silence: “Many people are afraid to use the wrong words and so they say nothing.”

Gabriel asserted that some individuals are uncomfortable with having to deal with something that is completely foreign to them, such as having to address safe spaces such as the washroom needs of transgender students:
…I think we have some learning to do on that because I think our staff haven’t had to deal with this. It’s uncomfortable for them at this point still. I think they need to experience this a few times. We need to coach them through it…

Bernadette also noted similar staff discomfort when dealing with a transgender student who wanted a name change. Staff members were only familiar calling the transgender student by their birth name, which matched their biological gender. In both instance, these unfamiliar requests confused staff and created uneasiness for them as it opposed their traditional views on norms around sexual identity.

Additionally, participants noted that even teachers who were supportive of equity work and well on their way to incorporating LGBTQ themes into the curriculum still had reservations. These teachers were often uncomfortable and lacked confidence as a result of the fear of having to placate impending parental concerns over LGBTQ topics. Anthony, in particular, discussed how engaging in conversations with these staff helped him appreciate their consternation and better judge the pace at which to move the inclusion agenda forward:

We had a staff member that went with me to [workshops] and said “This is all great and I love doing all this stuff [and] I’ve had the full day of positive space training. I now have had this but I am worried about the fact that I don’t know if our community is ready for it” …[We decided] we can’t just start by putting up posters because all that will do is get reactions and then it could be counterproductive so we really thought about what we can do.

Several principals also cautioned that LGBTQ staff and allies can create barriers that are counterproductive to the advancement of LGBTQ inclusion. For this group, the journey to inclusion is an emotive process, with many hurdles to overcome. As David shared, sometimes overly enthusiastic staff become “zealots for the cause”, adopting “militant” behaviours that are very obstructive to the work:
And also the very militant, the supporters, the allies that can err on the side of being zealots for the cause, besides the fact that it’s really tough to win supporters that way, by hitting someone over the head with a rubber mallet. That piece is really important that it can't be ignored. The folks that end up saying “well if you don't get on the back of the wagon, you're going to be run over” … So we have to really watch that and that’s some of what we experience here -some folks that were so intensely supportive that they were very blinded by the needs of those folks that weren’t there yet at whatever stage, and that is the big obstacle.

According to David, it is incumbent on leaders to be mindful of situations where conflict may arise because of competing interests and passions. Being astute and in tune with the situation can ensure principals are proactive in the approaches they employ to thwart discord.

Parents

According to participants, parents can present as barriers to LGBTQ inclusion for a variety of reasons, including parental misconceptions about queer communities, subscribing to the dominant culture, religious and cultural beliefs, and being the parents of children who identify as LGBTQ.

Parental misconceptions

Parents in this group were classified by participants as “well intentioned” but possessing various misconceptions about gay populations as a result of lack of exposure to or misinformation about LGBTQ communities. David, for instance, attributed unfounded comments he heard from these parents to negative gay stereotypes prevalent amongst the general society. Similarly, Theresa described this parent group as individuals who make “assumptions” because they lack knowledge about and exposure to LGBTQ people. Anthony explained further that many parents in his school automatically assumed that he was married to a female because that situation is their norm:
I was placed at a school where I could be open. I remember the very first week, they had a big celebration at the beginning of the year and someone said, “I understand you have kids” and I said “Yes, I have two boys at home”. [The parent] mentioned something about my wife, and I said “It’s my husband” and then it just went on from there. As a matter of fact, I was kind of shocked by the reaction from the parent [who said] “I [am] so sorry, I shouldn't have assumed”, and I just moved on.

Gabriel shared that parental misconceptions can also lead to unwarranted fear. When concepts around LGBTQ themes were presented in a class, Gabriel needed to counter a parent’s perception that the teacher was “encouraging their child to be LGBTQ.” In this vein, many participants advocated that providing accurate information in schools about gay populations is instrumental to debunking myths and challenging stereotypes that shroud sexual minorities.

**Dominant cultures**

In some school communities, dominant cultures refute that which does not conform to their norm, making it “tough to be different”, as Bernadette indicated. She further cautioned that, in such schools, dominant cultures often protect images of the typical nuclear family, which can silence other populations:

I think it makes it difficult for people who are not the typical nuclear family or the once defined nuclear family to really come out in the community like this because everyone knows everybody’s business because everyone is watching. And that becomes a huge barrier for some of our students and also for our staff who might feel intimidated by the mindset of the community—of the dominant culture.

Gabriel also expressed concerns that sometimes, when the “covert” dominant culture in a school community is so established, it can influence marginalized populations to conform:

There's definitely a covert dominant culture which I would say is probably one of the largest barriers because of all those pieces that I’ve been speaking about from FNMI (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) to race to LGBTQ to poverty…I would say in some instances, sometimes people feel that they need to follow the dominant culture for that reason.

Accordingly, Mary emphasized the need to challenge the status quo and disrupt the hegemony of the dominant culture in order to eradicate roadblocks to change:
Steeped in tradition comes to mind when we talk about many of our schools. Things are just done that way or not done that way because they've always been done that way or not that way. So the whole change process - I think is a difficult one. It’s a challenging one. *There's no learning in your comfort zone and there's no comfort in your learning zone*…That is a mantra that I use quite often. You have to feel uncomfortable in order to learn and grow. Whether it's a parent, whether it's a child, whether it's a staff member, even myself, you have to at times feel uncomfortable to be able to get beyond the barriers.

Subsequently, several principals were cognizant of moving the LGBTQ agenda at a slower pace because parents were cemented in the comfort zone of the dominant culture. These principals highlighted the power and influence that the dominant culture possesses in inhibiting efforts to ensure all family structures, diversities and sexual orientations are equitably represented.

**Religious and/or cultural beliefs**

Overwhelmingly, principals cited certain religious or cultural beliefs as deterrents to their advocacy efforts for sexual minorities. Gregory observed that, as school communities become more enriched by faith and cultural diversity, school leaders must be aware that with different families “come [their] community’s values and beliefs, which don’t always coincide with the [equity] policy.” Gabriel further pointed out that religious or cultural belief systems can often “collide” with human rights or the charter of rights. In Charles’ school community, parents’ religious and cultural affiliation was further magnified by the presence of a school church, which created anxiety amongst staff in pursuing LGBTQ inclusive practices.

On a similar note, David contended that certain parents, as a result of entrenched cultural and religious belief systems, could be “myopic” in their viewpoints and create “some obstacles to openness and understanding and comfort and even knowledge.” Likewise, Anthony described an encounter with a parent from a particular culture to highlight how their insular views presented strong disdain for gays that continued to tarnish images of queer people:
I had one parent last year come in and was very upset…He hears in the class about bullying, the issue about people being gay came up and he thinks that's disgusting; it brought aids to the world and it's a sickness; it's a dirty thing and that sort of stuff. I listened to him until he was done talking.

Similarly, parents in Bernadette’s school challenged visible manifestations of LGBTQ posters because the subject went against their religious beliefs:

The posters actually say this is a place where human rights are respected. Where lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their families and friends and allies are welcomed and supported…One of the parents very quickly came and said “I'm not comfortable with the poster and it needs to come down”.

In situations such as these, it is difficult to change views and beliefs that are deeply entrenched in people’s religious or cultural beliefs.

Contrarily, school location may positively impact how parents respond to LGBTQ content. Monica’s school population was highly diverse, with parents and students from various religious and cultural backgrounds who typically do not support discussions around sexuality, puberty and family diversity. However, she noted that being situated in an urban location where LGBTQ populations are more visible and prevalent may have resulted in less parental opposition.

**Parents of LGBTQ students**

Various participants expressed that some parents whose children identify as LGBTQ resisted when supports were offered to their child. Monica remembered a young primary student who identified as transgender. Despite the supports brought in to help educate the family, the parents had a difficult time accepting that their child was different than “the norm”. Similarly, Bernadette recalled an intense dialogue with a parent whose transgender child wanted to change their name legally to reflect their gender identity:

So, it's tough because as the school leader you don't get this training in “principal school”. The original conversation with that parent was, your child just shared with us
Charles remembered how taxing it was to support a gay child whose culture, religion and race conflated to disenfranchise him further, yet his mother refused to accept that he needed support:

The most difficult part with that were conversations with mom because of her cultural background. She rejected any inference that her son was different and needed some sort of support. She rejected social work, she rejected [family support], and she didn't want any school based support. She was managing him just fine and he would be fine. He just needed to mature in her opinions. [However], we carefully supported him throughout.

Consequently, many of the principals needed to pay particular attention to the strategies they employed for inclusivity since they were often challenged by parents who, for various reasons, did not support diverse sexual orientation and gender identity. These principals nevertheless moved ahead to create inclusive environments for these students, despite some overt resistance from parents.

**Students**

Although several participants believed that the vast majority of students are accepting of LGBTQ populations, other participants talked about elementary students who put up barriers to sexual minorities because of faith, culture, and/or homophobia. Just as with parents, religious beliefs can impact how students view queer populations. Mary described an encounter in which a student, who was a Minister’s son, deliberately defaced a positive space poster. This student’s strong belief system against sexual minorities transferred to the school context in a derogatory manner. Mary remembered this event vividly as it was so “powerful.” She made a point to remind this student that such opinions or actions against LGBTQ persons have no place in public school contexts:

I understand but you attend public school in this board. If you were attending Christian school, things might be different. If you were attending your Sunday school,
conversations may be different but when you come in here, in this school, every single child, every single parent, every single community member is valued as equal and so if you are a part of this community, then I expect you to treat them the same way.

Students’ cultural beliefs also play a significant role in how they respond to sexual minority populations. Veronica shared a discussion she had had with a student from a particular cultural background who refused to go to an assembly on anti-bullying organized by the Gay Straight Alliance. The student came to the office feigning to be ill in order to miss the assembly:

I'm in my office, I hear this boy come into the office and he said to the office administrator, “I'm just going to sit here, I'm not planning on going to the assembly”. And the office administrator said “Okay what, are you not feeling well or something?” He just said “yeah that's it”. I heard the whole conversation so I stepped out and I said, “Come into my office for a minute, let's have a chat” ... I knew exactly why he wasn't going but I thought, let me have a conversation with him. And I asked him you know, “What's the reason why you're not going to the assembly? Is it true that you're sick?” He said “I can't go -it's about gay people; gay people are putting this on... My parents are against gay people”.

For Veronica, ignoring such behaviour condones the notion that certain cultural or religious convictions trump the need to respect all diversities.

Further to this, some participants noted that homophobic banter such as “that’s so gay”, which proliferate negative stereotypes of LGBTQ people, continue to be entrenched in student lexicon. Because such comments are widespread, sometimes staff members choose to ignore them rather than deal with them. However, Gabriel stressed the importance of addressing all homophobic epithets in a serious manner as one would for racist comments or profanity:

Well that's why we do what we do because when the word gets thrown around all the time, “that's gay” or “you're a fag”; whatever it maybe, it gets thrown around constantly. So imagine if you are gay and that's just being thrown around and I said, similarly, I can tell you if I'm walking around, I'm not into walking by and ignoring someone saying “hey N-word, hey whatever”. It's the same sort of content.

Thus, for Gabriel, it was important that students understand the severity of using such language that create toxic environments for closeted and outed LGBTQ students.
Some principals also noted that student homophobia/transphobia delegitimized transgendered students. Many students did not approve of transgendered students using washrooms or change rooms that did not correlate with their biological identities. Students openly voiced concerns about sharing such facilities with transgendered students or having to refer to transgendered individuals using different names or pronouns.

Chapter Summary

Principals participating in this study described many barriers that impeded their endeavours to facilitate inclusive schools for LGBTQ students and discussed a myriad of problems and challenges arising at both the system and the school levels. These barriers directly impacted on participants’ abilities to ensure safe and welcoming school environments for LGBTQ people, to promote learning about LGBTQ with all school community stakeholders and to extend the learning about queer populations within the classrooms.

Although work relating to LGBTQ inclusion can be a daunting task for school leaders who may be embarking on unchartered territory, many of the principals remained optimistic that it is the right time to do such work. Additionally, they found that, overall, students are more accepting of learning about LGBTQ topics in elementary panels – as Theresa exclaimed, “The kids are ready!” The principals attributed some of the shifts in attitudes to social media where positive images of LGBTQ communities have been displayed more prominently in recent years. The next chapter explores the strategies these leaders used to overcome the barriers described, achieving different levels of success as they strived to create more inclusive school environments for sexual minority populations.
Chapter Seven: Overcoming Barriers-Strategies to Promote the Inclusion of LGBTQ Populations

Although barriers can potentially hinder inclusive efforts to legitimize LGBTQ populations, the participants in this study demonstrated that most barriers could be overcome by focusing on strategies to deal with them. Veronica summarized in this quote: “I tend not to think of barriers very often. I see them quickly and then I’m like, how do we get around that?” On a similar note, Jerome commented that allowing obstacles to hinder inclusive efforts is a “copout” and that there are many “strategic” ways to go about the work. In this vein, the principals in this study adopted a wide range of actions to ensure sexual minority groups feel included within their school communities.

This chapter details the specific strategies that principals employed to promote LGBTQ inclusion. Through their concerted efforts, principals in this study found ways to create safer school environments for LGBTQ people, encourage learning around LGBTQ topics and engender in staff the need to honour LGBTQ populations in the curriculum. I borrow from Ryan’s (2013) conception of inclusive leadership, which enacts various approaches to make school communities more inclusive. In particular, the sections that follow explore how the inclusive minded administrators in this study used these strategies to promote LGBTQ inclusion through fostering school community relationships, communication practices, critical learning strategies and exercising strategic advocacy. It is important to note that, while presented individually for the purposes of clarity and ease of reporting, there was considerable overlap between the strategies principals used and the issues they addressed, further highlighting the complexity of engaging in such work.
Fostering School Community Relations

Principals in this study recognized the importance of building and sustaining relationships with different school community stakeholders to foster a collective and coordinated approach to LGBTQ inclusion. Fostering school community relations is predicated on the ability to create a culture of trust among staff, students and parents. Central to this perceptive is building a foundation of relational trust that yields many positive benefits for a leader:

There is a significant amount of trust that we will be doing the right thing the right way….It all comes down to relationships and I think there's a lot of lip service given to relationships; the importance of them. I don't know how you do work of any value without strong relationships and so I think it buys me a lot of currency. It buys me a lot of latitude (Jerome).

Yet, all participants acknowledged the challenges associated with forging school community relations when promoting what some may perceive as a controversial agenda. To this end, participants employed a variety of tactics to foster such relations and support their efforts in creating an inclusive school for LGBTQ populations. These included creating a welcoming and inviting school environment, employing outreach strategies, and finding common ground with resistors or reluctant individuals.

Creating a welcoming and inviting environment

Principals in this study were genuinely interested in fostering relations with LGBTQ persons by creating an environment that significantly enhanced their visibility. Participants were cognizant of the need to create a school environment that was as safe and inviting for sexual minority populations as it was for other disenchanted groups. Principals achieved this sense of belonging for LGBTQ through visible manifestations of diversity and through the use of inclusive language and events.
Visible Manifestations

Several participants cited the importance of ensuring their school building portrayed visual representations to equally honour all diversities, including LGBTQ populations. Gregory, for instance, talked about a series of posters that were hung in the corridors, commenting, “We identify all the different areas of diversity, marginalization within the school.” On a similar note, Jerome worked alongside parents, staff and students to create a “Touchstone” celebrating the multiple interlocking forms of unique identities that comprise their school context. Other principals displayed pride flags, images of diverse families or different LGBTQ role models to highlight positive images and the contributions of LGBTQ communities. In Elizabeth’s school, for instance, “safe space” posters where posted throughout her school to highlight LGBTQ visibility:

I have come to realize how important those visuals are for this specific community… so by them seeing those visuals [such as] the safe space posters, I mean we’ve got them on our doors as you walk in here. I’ve done it through those little reminders so people who are LGBTQ can walk in here and know that’s what the school stands for.

Elizabeth believed that these visuals signal to her school community that LGBTQ people will be respected and treated fairly in her school. Theresa added that, at her school, students worked with a local artist to create a diversity wall exploring themes of equity and social justice:

There is actually one kid who chose to [paint] – “why do you support people that hold guns [and not] two men that hold hands”. It is actually up there. They did a whole thing on diversity and social justice. They did that without prompting. This is coming from the kids; that is where it needs to come from.

Despite her monocultural school community, by allowing students to express themselves through visuals, Theresa confirmed that youth at her school understand the complex issues of diversity that exist in the broader society.

Some participants also discussed how these visuals positively impacted LGBTQ students, staff and parents. Bernadette noted that one of her students had the courage to come out once he
noticed the “safe space” posters and one of her teachers talked about how the posters gave “credence” to his existence. However, Anthony cautioned that leaders needed to proactively ensure that proper groundwork is done prior to displaying these visuals. He recalled a colleague who displayed several posters and received significant backlash from his school community because there was no communication to students, staff and parents about the significance of the visuals.

*Inclusive language and events*

Many principals noted that the use of inclusive language could potentially break down some of the barriers for LGBTQ who may not relate to commonly used vernacular such as husband and wife or mom and dad. In that vein, recognizing different forms of families through inclusive language and events such as “Family Day” or “Special Person Day” were established practices in many of the schools in the study. Theresa, for instance, noted that traditional celebrations such as Mother’s or Father’s Day create anxiety for many students whose families may not conform to normative family dimensions. She discussed other ways of conceptualizing long established practices with her school council, which in turn helped her to more openly share about her own partner and son in her school community:

So I said, can we change it-slowly change it to say “Special Person Day”? Make it more about awareness around various family make ups; the diverse nature of our families so that it is inclusive of mothers, step mothers, step fathers, single moms, single dads, blended families, same sex families so that it is all mixed together- so that you are not saying just LGBTQ; but it is inclusive of the rest. I find that it tends to be less threatening and parents may be more accepting of it because I just come in and I talk about my family and I talk about my son and I bring him to school events.

This sense of acceptance extended to Theresa and her family as she began to feel more and more comfortable sharing details about her family once her school community started to become more inclusive. Moreover, according to Mary, as a leader, it’s “not just talking the talk but walking the walk” and that by modeling inclusive language daily she influenced how staff members
speak at her school. Hence, staff became more conscientious in applying inclusive language in their verbal and written interactions with parents and students.

Monica also facilitated a school climate where LGBTQ populations were accepted at different events. Embracing the diverse nature of families through visuals and school activities such as school council provided opportunities for same sex parents to be more visible and active in school life. According to Monica, this type of open and accepting environment created a sense of safety at her school where students felt supported to express themselves, like the primary student with two mothers, who shared with classmates she wanted to grow up to be a “lesbian”.

Additionally, many principals expanded on notions of inclusion by celebrating various cultural traditions as well as special days to highlight causes such as Down syndrome, autism or epilepsy. Participants confirmed that using an overarching inclusive approach for all diversities was helpful when introducing or implementing special events affiliated with LGBTQ populations such as Pink Day and Pink Shirt Day.

**Outreach strategies**

The school administrators in this study recognized that the support of the school and community is essential to the school life participation of marginalized populations like LGBTQ. As such, principals demonstrated concern and interest regarding the quality of relations with different stakeholder groups, engaging in a variety of strategies including directly reaching out to the school community, educating families about equity topics, and accessing supports from community organizations and advocacy groups.
Reaching out to the school community

Many principals understood that getting to know their school community was crucial with respect to their inclusion work. Gregory, for instance, sent out a survey at the beginning of the school year to all parents/guardians to ascertain different family compositions residing in the community. This proved to be a highly effective outreach strategy since he discovered that same sex families lived in his catchment area and subsequently felt comfortable identifying themselves: “So we did discover we had a couple of same-sex families that we didn't know… because the parents hadn’t come out; they were willing to and so now we know.” This further justifies that efforts to represent LGBTQ people are needed and warranted.

On a similar note, in order to build relations with her school community, Veronica put forth concerted efforts to regularly converse with members of her school community. Although she believed in an “open door policy” to encourage dialogue, Veronica contested that it was incumbent on her to reach out to others by going into their spaces since school buildings can be a barrier for some groups:

I'll come out to you in your space. So parents’ spaces in the elementary school is the parking lot, it is the playground, it is the community; whatever they're doing in the community. Whether it be an event raising money for a holiday hamper or whatever it may be. You are engaging yourself and that you're bringing up conversations with parents and letting them into the school environment. So we have to make sure that we are going out as much as they’re coming in.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, endeavoured to reach out to her marginalized families through personal invitations to join the school council in order to ensure that more balanced perspectives are brought forth from her community. In this manner, she covertly and strategically invited LGBTQ voices to be part of the discussion:

Can you join the [Council] as I think your voice would be great.
So if I invite you to join the [Council], I'm going to invite you at the [Council] but I'm going to make a point specifically about inviting you because I'll also know that you may not actually know that I want your voice at the table. But, I'm not going to do it in such a way that this person over here can say I need this voice at the table instead of others.

In these ways, many of the school administrators in this study created a venue for different voices to be heard and particularly worked to ensure that LGBTQ voices were represented in different facets of school life.

**Educating families about equity topics**

In their efforts to be open, transparent and supportive, several principals reached out to the parents in their school communities in order to keep them abreast of equity related topics. Anthony informed parents about respect and bullying by sending home anti-bullying resource booklets and by facilitating presentations at curriculum night so that parents could support their child if he/she was victimized by any form of bullying, including homophobia. He also discovered that parents were more apt to inquire about their child’s safety and well-being when he opened up the doors for discussion:

> So if a parent reports there is something wrong, even though they don't really understand, it is part of my job to help them understand and have them feel listened to and valued. So I think I work to have that kind of relationship with the parents that they do trust me. So they know that they can report things right away if things happened.

According to Anthony, the same courtesy of time and support must be afforded to parents who contest the inclusion of certain equity topics. Celebrating family diversity was an important theme at Anthony’s school and was discussed widely with all school community members. When a video about family diversity was shown to all students, a few parents complained about its portrayal of same sex marriage. Rather than quash their objections, Anthony invited them into the school to view the video and discuss the underlying themes of equity and diversity:
So two out of the three families came and watched the video. One couldn’t. So we talked about the video and what the message we were giving to the kids was. At the end, both families were completely fine over it.

Other principals presented an array of equity topics to parents and students to broaden their understanding of the diverse needs of individuals within their school community. Charles, for example, invested considerable time ensuring his families were cognizant of the available resources to support mental health and well-being through regular parent engagement evenings. Similarly, David took time at each school council meeting to “get in front of the [topics] that we think are going to be more sensitive.” Working within a school community steeped in faith traditions over the course of the year, David found that it became easier to discuss topics around LGBTQ themes as conversations continued and evolved:

So it was a fairly comfortable conversation, we carried it over to the last meeting and then the next one. The plan is to continue with that discussion. What we saw is an improvement; it’s almost like the etiquette, which is sometimes a signal, a sign that a group is at least entertaining the idea from a cerebral perspective even if not from an emotional because that’s often what gets in the way. What we are seeing is at least a willingness or receptiveness to hear different perspectives. So that is where we are in terms of...discussions.

He also ensured other groups’ needs were acknowledged as well: “I think part of it too is that we are presenting it in a way that is again the larger picture about ‘how do we ensure everyone has a place and everyone is comfortable and everyone is safe’”.

These principals demonstrated that reaching out to their school communities by supporting their learning around equity and LGBTQ topics is important with respect to promoting an inclusive school environment for all students. Conversely, they also demonstrated that inviting and addressing questions or critique from their school community is an integral part of building relations and fostering trust.
Accessing support from community organizations and advocacy groups

Several school administrators underscored the importance of ensuring that proper supports were in place for LGBTQ populations. For example, when Charles noticed that one of his gay students with a low social economic background was becoming withdrawn, Charles accessed a community drama lunchtime program for him, free of charge. The student enjoyed the program and found opportunities to socialize with other students. On a similar note, Gabriel connected one of his transgender students with the local Child and Youth Worker who provided regular check-ins and support when needed. Veronica also commented that when some students in her school were “battling with their sexuality” she accessed different programs that addressed issues of gender roles and homophobia. She was able to bring in adolescents to speak about their experiences in hopes of supporting students who were questioning, commenting, “It’s key to hear other students talk because grownups just sometimes aren’t able to hammer that message in.” Likewise, Bernadette liaised with colleagues from different boards to ascertain the services and supports that can be accessed to advocate for LGBTQ populations. She leveraged these supports to assist students, staff and families at her school. Using another tactic, Jerome, who identifies as gay, availed himself to assist his colleagues in navigating through tricky scenarios involving LGBTQ, noting, “I am seen to some degree as someone who may be able to support and provide a support.” Jerome used his lived experiences and expertise to provide advice and support to his peers.

Some of the principals moved beyond their school communities and offered support to other schools, boards, and community groups. For example, Veronica shared the good work of her school’s Gay Straight Alliance with other schools in her area. She worked alongside her GSA advisor to facilitate school visits so that other schools might consider establishing their own GSA:
I said to the teacher, this is great work that you’re doing inside the school. We need to reach out to other schools because this talk should be happening as early as kindergarten. So what we did was we worked with kids in the Gay Straight Alliance to develop workshops that they delivered to the feeder schools. So the feeder schools came in and they delivered those workshops and they talked about what the GSA is about. And it was brilliant and it was so good.

Finding common ground

School administrators also espoused a belief in the centrality of fostering relations with LGBTQ resisters or reluctant individuals to move the LGBTQ agenda forward. Participants used a variety of strategies to build relations with resisters by finding common ground on particular issues. To this end, principals committed to inclusive school approaches for all diversities, appealed to different stakeholder emotions, and explored ways of balancing stakeholder needs with the needs of LGBTQ populations.

Inclusive school approaches for all diversities

Many of the principals understood that individuals are on different continuums when it comes to embracing different kinds of diversity and noted that, when all groups see themselves represented, there is more of a willingness to entertain discussions on topics that some may perceive as controversial. David particularly noted this, as illustrated in the passage below:

I have found that the best approach is to essentially be inclusive of all groups and be considering of anyone that might be in a vulnerable position. Having said that, it also presents a very strong position because most people, …everyone has biases, but anyone that has a strong bias towards a particular group, you can usually find a parallel group that is often alienated…That’s sort of the premise, the logic that I work from. If you are trying to include all groups, you can find hopefully some common ground beginning from understanding and that’s really how you start your dialogue.

Francis further emphasized that school leaders need to advocate fairly for all diversities: “As important as it is to have a prayer room, it is as equally as important to have a GSA.” In his
view, it is important that school community members not perceive that one group is favoured over another as it would be counter-productive to the overall goal of genuine inclusion.

**Appealing to emotions**

Another effective strategy employed by several principals in finding common ground was to appeal to the emotions of different school community members. In particular, appealing to the emotional side of non-supporters of LGBTQ provided the fodder for further dialogue and resisters were more apt to accept LGBTQ inclusive efforts. Participants found that many people could empathize with or relate to stories of abuse and victimization. In that vein, Mary found that using questions such as “Would you want your child to be treated this way?” helped her when discussing issues around homophobic behaviours. She noted that, rather than use an authoritarian stance when dealing with resisters, she preferred to appeal to their sensitivities: “I never push without support, I never demand, I never dole out the ‘Thou Shalt’, but I appeal to people’s emotion and human side which has been quite successful for me.”

On a similar note, Anthony appealed to the emotional side of a parent who came in to voice her concerns about LGBTQ content that a classroom teacher had infused in their child’s kindergarten class. The parent believed that the students were too young to be exposed to such material and requested her child be removed during those lessons. Anthony took the time to listen to the parent and explained the underlying themes of love, caring and respecting family diversity. He commented to the parent, “What you need to know is that we are talking about respect and surely you want your child to feel respected?” The parent responded, “Yes.” From an emotional standpoint, the parent could better relate because Anthony was able to show the parent that concepts of respect, love and caring also include LGBTQ families and he reassured her that LGBTQ content presented would be age appropriate.
Appealing to the emotions of staff, Charles contended that sharing his own personal stories of “marginalization” helped his staff better understand the plight of queer populations. Many staff commended Charles for “putting [himself] out there; [for] taking a risk to share” and, according to Charles, it opened doors for other colleagues to share their stories: “Everybody has had a barrier. Everybody has something they are struggling with. So it allowed for a safe place to have that dialogue and then focus on the school barriers to inclusionary practices.”

**Balancing stakeholder needs**

Some administrators found common ground with resistors to LGBTQ inclusion by balancing the needs of interested parties. For instance, when a parent requested that safe space posters containing LGBTQ terminology be taken down, Bernadette realized that sustaining relations with this parent would require being open to reciprocal influence:

> But with the school community, it’s interesting because you’re trying to balance both. You try to manage yourself and you’re trying to manage parent groups and be responsive to everyone’s needs.

She further discovered that when she took the posters down, it had unintended consequences for an LGBTQ staff member who stressed that the posters acknowledged him and gave him “voice”. Bernadette responded by providing learning for parents, students and staff around the terminology on the posters. She also modified the posters so that the younger grades were exposed to only some of the terminology, while intermediate grades had the unaltered version. Although it was challenging, by exacting decisions in the best interests of all parties involved, Bernadette was able to appease both parent and teacher. When reflecting on the situation, she commented:

> That was hard. But you try to build relationships and you try to establish trust and I made a commitment to this teacher that we would continue to do this work over the years and I felt confident and comfortable with that [decision].
In a similar instance, when some of the male students complained about sharing the washroom with a transgender student, Gabriel noted that finding common ground with students by balancing their individual needs was an effective strategy in fostering trusting relations with the student body. After taking the time to listen to differing views, Gabriel ascertained that the underlying issue centered on privacy, which he elaborates on in this passage:

There were a number of boys who felt shy and didn't want to change in front of everybody and so this is the reflective piece that we said where girls and boys must be feeling this way- why not have anyone who is feeling this way use the family bathrooms. So now we have three bathrooms going and now it's not just dependent on anything other than comfort and whether they want to use that or not.

In this way, Gabriel found common ground for his transgender and male students who both expressed concerns around comfort by creating additional spaces for them.

**Summary**

As demonstrated in the sections presented above, principals in this study employed an array of strategies to build relations with sexual minority populations as well as LGBTQ resistors and allies alike. In doing so, they created safe and welcoming spaces for LGBTQ, advanced learning around equity and LGBTQ topics and infused curricular themes supporting LGBTQ within their school contexts. Strategies that forged school community relationships benefitted staff, parents and students belonging to LGBTQ communities. David, for instance, shared how one LGBTQ staff member felt comfortable sharing “this is who I am” in a faith based school community that was beginning to give voice to sexual minority populations. In a similar vein, Charles noted that parents from a same sex relationship became involved in different aspects of school life as a result of LGBTQ inclusion, commenting, “One of the gentlemen became a lunch supervisor on staff and they spoke not only to me but to members of council about finally feeling
included and connecting with other parents.” Additionally, students felt they belonged to a safe and welcoming environment and were more comfortable to express their sexuality. Charles noted:

In the same grade we had young man who was in a very religious household, who came out to myself and another staff person, but he wasn't comfortable in coming out to any of his peers because of his ardently religious family. He thought it was too risky to do that, but felt very comfortable in coming to the office or going and seeking out this teacher at recess or lunch, sometimes after school. I think his first expression of who he will be was at graduation at the dance, where he danced with a boy one-on-one. They are good friends and it was a slow dance; it was interesting. Nothing was said. I thought that was really cool too.

Likewise, Bernadette shared that this sense of belonging positively impacted a transgender student in her school: “There were times when you would walk down the hall and he wouldn't even make eye contact. He holds his head high and now he is so happy.”

**Communication Strategies**

Participants respectfully challenged biases and assumptions about LGBTQ people and effectively legitimized their presence in schools through various communication strategies. Strategies participants employed entailed proactively and transparently communicating their vision of inclusivity, espousing an open communication stance, and engaging in courageous conversations. These communication strategies allowed principals to message the importance of sustaining school environments that were respectful, safe and inclusive of sexual minority populations. Participants also used communication strategies to teach others about the urgency for this work, to promote learning about LGBTQ communities and to highlight LGBTQ topic integration with the programs.
Ongoing proactive and transparent communication

The principals in this study emphasized the importance of ongoing and transparent communication in promoting a whole school ethos centering on equity and inclusivity for marginalized populations like LGBTQ:

I found that transparency really helps, that sense that something is happening. So whatever you are against or you're totally in support or somewhere along that continuum, knowing that work [LGBTQ inclusion] is happening. So it tells you that it can't be avoided. There are folks that are very committed to it (David).

This section explores how these equity-oriented leaders communicated their mantra of inclusivity for LGBTQ by keeping school community members apprised of their vision for inclusivity and through their frequent and transparent communication with school council and the broader school community.

Vision of inclusivity

Participants spoke about weaving the principles of equity and inclusivity into their school’s overall vision and goals. As highlighted by Mary, participants noted that the school’s vision needed to be inclusive of all diversities: “I think we start out by having our big umbrella over everything that we do, the fact that our school is safe, welcoming and inclusive [for all].” Bernadette added that espousing a vision of inclusivity is about, “giving voice or giving a platform or creating a safe space for everyone to feel that they can express themselves and not to be afraid.” In this vein, Bernadette clearly articulated her vision with staff right from the get go:

I always say to my staff very early on in my first hello “my name is”. I believe in equity, in anti-racist education and my expectation is that you are all on a continuum to cultural proficiency. I don't care where you are but you need to be on it and I will help.

Francis emphasized that the mantra of inclusion can be realized through visuals, celebrations of heritage, culture, religion, and sexual orientation. Of utmost importance, however, the vision needs to explicitly include LGBTQ populations:
My vision is more about students as individuals and accepted and ensuring that we provide spaces for all people to feel safe and to be the best they can be and that's what drives me and it's a passion. I've been fighting for all students to be who they are and to be accepted, and then I fight for LGBTQ too (Elizabeth).

**Communication with school council and school community**

Participants shared how clear and consistent communication sends well-defined messages to the school community regarding the work that needs to be done to ensure that LGBTQ voice and presence are weaved throughout the fabric of their schools. In particular, participants’ communication protocol involved a multi-pronged approach where regular, proactive and transparent sharing of LGBTQ related activities took place with both the school council as well as the broader school community. During council meetings, several principals cited that they shared LGBTQ initiatives in their administrator’s update. Participants also ensured that their school equity goals encompassed all dimensions of diversity, including LGBTQ, which again they shared with school council. In addition, some participants invited staff and students to council meetings to outline LGBTQ curriculum integration and school events around anti-bullying and anti-homophobia.

School leaders also communicated LGBTQ activities to the broader school community through announcements, twitter, assemblies, memos, letters, e-mails, visuals, newsletters and the media and several principals spoke about weaving themes of respect, safety, homophobia and anti-bullying during school wide assemblies. In terms of communicating with staff, Monica noted that her equity representative shared regular mailings with staff and Bernadette included an equity corner in her staff memo where links and resources for LGBTQ content ideas could be accessed. In a similar vein, Veronica sent out regular e-mails to families to share upcoming school equity events and Mary incorporated a “curriculum connections” section on her school website to educate parents on LGBTQ myths and misconceptions and share the significance
underlying events such as Pink Shirt Day. Likewise, Gregory included equity news in his school newsletter and twitter feeds to promote LGBTQ inclusion. He commented:

We promote it. Every newsletter has an equity component. The board is great about putting out to all administrators, equity issues of the month. I use Twitter extensively so I tweeted out pictures of the flag, different quotes from LGBTQ kids. Statistics around why International Day against Homophobia is important. So even those people that might be borderline, I think if we actually see the reasons behind this, they may not like it but you can't argue the fact that over 36% of street youth are LGBTQ because they've been kicked out of home. I think it's compelled upon us to support that.

Other forms of broad communication pieces that supported LGBTQ included positive space stickers, celebration of special days, pride flags, and displays showcasing different images of LGBTQ communities:

In terms of LGBTQ, we make sure that there are some visual displays. We have our positive space on our front door, on my office door and classroom doors. I make sure our posters are up especially where they're going to be seen. We have our famous people posters right over the drinking fountain. We have one that reminds everybody, that poster that says “Gay is so yesterday”, so really every time that child is there it’s just that visual reminder in different places. We obviously celebrate very special days. We will be raising the rainbow flag. We celebrate Pink Shirt Day (Mary).

Charles, for instance, explained how creating window displays of student poems and art portraying LGBTQ themes piqued the interest of parents and the community members who stopped and asked questions about their significance. Other leaders ensured that special events such as Pink Shirt Day were not isolated events but connected to raising ongoing awareness around issues of equity and social justice. As David commented, “So that Pink Day, it's not first of all an isolated occurrence or incident you know that you just think about one day, pink week or whatever. It's in connection to all kinds of other activities that bring awareness about [marginalization].” On a related noted, Mary explained the important role the media can play in promoting LGBTQ inclusion, highlighting the possibilities for promoting LGBTQ on a wider scale in a small conservative town:
[The media] is huge - this is only my second year at this school but the first year I arrived here, it was like this whirlwind had arrived in this tiny little community. So we kind of made the newspapers quite a bit which was very interesting because I remember a reporter saying to me, “I notice you have pink shirts up in a small-town like this?” and my response to the reporter was “And why wouldn't I in a small town like this?”

**Open communication stance**

In addition to transparent communication strategies that embrace LGBTQ populations, principals also relied on supplementary communication strategies to address concerns raised by different stakeholder groups. In particular, participants adopted an open communication stance when dealing with resistance to LGBTQ inclusive efforts during dialogic exchanges. Although participants experienced different levels of success, three sub themes emerged from the data: adopting a non-judgmental and non-confrontational approach, candidness, and direct efforts to seek understanding.

**Using a non-judgmental and non-confrontational approach**

According to several participants, leaders need to be cognizant of how their positional power can impact two-way communication and should know when to abstain from making judgments or confronting others when discussing issues around LGBTQ. Francis shared that the training he received around having difficult conversations has been invaluable in helping him to challenge others “professionally and respectfully.” For several participants, difficult conversations and situations require specific approaches. For example, Veronica shared a time when staff members contested notions of LGBTQ oppression by drawing comparisons with their own personal experiences. She specifically talked about the importance of listening to staff rather than confronting their views:

It's very important that if you're promoting that risk-taking environment, don't squash the stupid comments. So teachers, some of them would say, “Well I went through rough
stuff; my dad was a total asshole and I got through it and I still went to university.” So they got personal about it, which is good right because then it brings those feelings to the table. It puts them out there; they are raw now. So I would wait and I would not respond always to a topic because what I think is important is that you let the voices start to come out from the table; if it's constantly you that's doing the talking- that's a problem, because you're the Principal. People are going to shut down and if they say something like that and you attack them, they're never going to say something again. So I just let the conversation go.

By allowing staff to share their opinions openly, free from judgment and confrontation, Veronica was able to leverage the opportunity to continue the discourse on LGBTQ lived realities.

The sentiments expressed by Veronica resonated with other participants as well. When a staff member, who worked with Anthony for over a year, inquired about his “wife”, Anthony respectfully pointed out that he was actually married to a man. He went on to comment, however, “I don't get offended by it; I understand that’s life, that’s their paradigm. They need a bit of a paradigm shift so I don’t make such a big deal of it.” Instead of confronting this staff member for a lack of sensitivity or judging her for her ignorance, Anthony minimized her embarrassment by remaining “matter of fact” so that open communication between them continued.

Theresa also recognized that staff members are on different continuums when it comes to inclusive practices for LGBTQ populations. She noted that she specifically refrains from judging or confronting teachers for failing to infuse LGBTQ content in their lessons. Rather, she chooses to engage in gentle “non-threatening conversations” by using prompts or questions that support staff members’ ability to reflect on their practices:

You’ve seen a lesson or you’ve seen something in action and you just ask the prompting questions: “Tell me more about, have you thought about?” And it is usually done in such a non-threatening manner, that people go “Oh yeah, I have not thought about that, or it just slipped.” So it is more about the non-threatening conversations.
In all these instances, an open communication stance, free from judgment or confrontation, boded well in promoting further dialogue with LGBTQ supporters and non-supporters. Moreover, by managing emotions, listening, controlling cadence, pitch, volume and tone or using gentle prompts, communication around LGBTQ themes was nurtured rather than stymied.

**Participant candidness**

Endorsing an open communication stance also required participants to model candidness in their conversations with school community members. This was particularly true of principals who belonged to minority populations themselves. Subsequently, these particular participants demonstrated that taking an open communication stance through personal candidness facilitated reciprocal dialogic exchanges and contributed to their ability to highlight different dimensions of LGBTQ exclusion.

Charles described how sharing his personal story with staff prompted further discussion around exclusion, marginalization and oppression, illustrating the power of sincerity and candidness:

> At the staff meeting at the end of my fourth year, the very last June staff meeting when I had the pride flag in the window, I did something around inclusionary schools… So I started with the “Who Am I”, so you know how every kid in kindergarten does the “Who Am I” so, I did my “Who Am I” piece and made it very personal. So I shared my story with the staff. So on this day I shared quite a bit and one of the things I said was nobody chooses to be male or female; nobody chooses to have a learning disability or physical difference; nobody chooses often what their religious affiliation is; where they live or the language they speak. They inherit it upon their birth. I didn't choose to be gay; I was born that way. I choose to live my life honestly and with transparency and I choose to lead in the same way, but the work of one does not move the school. It’s the “we”. Afterwards, people that I have been working with during the four years said that it was so important that sharing take place because…it levels the playing field for other people to share.

Charles’ openness touched others, encouraged them to share their stories in addition to gaining deeper perspectives about the predicament of disenfranchised populations.
In another instance, Anthony further magnified how personal candidness evoked empathy in others, describing how his own plight as a gay person engendered a deeper understanding amongst staff about the urgency of creating inclusive school environments for sexual minorities:

At some point, I can’t remember how it came up with the staff but I mentioned that, at one point I was suicidal as a result because it takes its toll on you when you’re told you’re just a dirty and disgusting person—all these different things. I could see a number of the staffs’ eyes welling up. I thought “Oh my God. I never did that for that affect, but how nice that the staff care.” It was just a great experience.

Sharing his personal stories about growing up a gay male significantly impacted his staff’s ability to better comprehend the harsh realities that face many LGBTQ individuals. His openness about being gay also invited dialogue with parents who sought advice around their own children’s sexual identity. He recalled:

I do have one child here whose mother came up and asked me a little bit after I came here and said I understand that you are gay and you’ve probably met my daughter already and we are wondering about her whether she is Trans or lesbian. We’re not quite sure. [The mother] came and she said, “I want your take on this - what do you think I need to do as a parent?” So I get it. I had to deal with being different and I would have a good take on it.

On a related note, Gregory found that his straightforward approach to sharing personal experiences of marginalization enhanced conversations with parents who believed that their son was being racially profiled as a result of the disciplinary actions he received. Gregory shared: “Well I have an adopted biracial child and I’m gay. I think that covers some dimension of diversity. I’ve been where you are.” This openness allowed the conversation to focus on the real issues at hand once the parents appreciated that Gregory could relate to similar experiences of oppression.

Seeking to understand

In order to nurture ongoing and open communication with different educational partners, participants also sought to understand specific concerns raised about LGBTQ topics. As Gabriel
outlined in the passage below, listening and probing for clarification were key strategies employed:

The learning for me as a leader was again that we need to slow down, really listen, talk about where this fear is coming from, what are your concerns really about? Really listen to what the person is saying and trying to identify and ask clarifying questions.

According to Gabriel, seeking to understand concerns requires patience, time and reflection on the part of school leaders. Jerome further delineated that issues and barriers needed to be teased apart and explored for deeper understanding: “You need to consider what is the source of the resistance? Why are they resisting? It's rarely obvious and actually warrants unpacking and further consideration and dialogue.” As outlined above, this unpacking facilitated the problem-solving approaches required to find solutions and was useful in fostering the continued evolution of discourses around LGBTQ inclusion.

Several participants corroborated examples of how seeking to understand effectively promoted further dialogue to remove barriers to LGBTQ inclusivity. When parents challenged LGBTQ content infusion in a class, for instance, Gabriel engaged them in a deeper conservation and discerned that their apprehensions stemmed from their belief that presenting LGBTQ themes would influence their child’s sexual orientation. By understanding the underlying problem, Gabriel was able to placate their fears:

But when you're thinking about the parent experience around this; it was very limited and it was mainly from a fear base and by the end of the conversation with them, you talk about what we’re offering in terms of an educational opportunity for kids to prepare them for what the world is like. LGBTQ kids, they’re here and they’re in your community.

Taking the time to really listen to the parents supported Gabriel’s capacity to hone in on the actual problem to address it appropriately.

In a similar example, parents at Jerome’s school raised concerns about LGBTQ subject matter integration. By actively listening and unpacking the issues through open dialogue,
Jerome was able to distinguish that the parents did not object to LGBTQ topics, rather they wanted an opportunity to further support their child’s learning at home:

I think it [understanding] is needed because that's when the comment came and it wasn't even a negative comment. It was “Can you let me know when you're teaching this particular topic in class because I want an opportunity to -not counter- but I want an opportunity to express our family and our religious traditions and beliefs with my child at home.” So it wasn't so much as they wanted to withdraw their child from the program, they just wanted a heads up, if you will, and wanted an opportunity to engage with the school…Whoever it may be, people need relationships and they need to understand.

In this passage, Jerome underscored the criticality and power of active listening in facilitating the resolution process.

In Bernadette’s case, a parent demanded the removal of positive space stickers that supported LGBTQ populations. Instead of becoming defensive or utilizing authority to silence the conversation, Bernadette asked the parent to help her understand the reasoning behind the request. In the exchange that followed Bernadette discovered that the parent was actually concerned about the terminology on the poster (i.e.: bisexual, transgender), which her 2nd grade student had subsequently asked about at home. Bernadette realized that a valid concern was being raised; the parent felt ill equipped to address her child’s inquiries. As such, she reflected on a plan to modify the posters and provide additional learning around the positive space posters for parents, staff and students.

**Courageous conversations**

While seeking to understand and engaging in open conversations is important, when conversations become difficult, participants also acknowledged that authoritarian approaches might be warranted, particularly when challenging biases, misconceptions or inappropriate behaviours toward LGBTQ. Debunking such attitudes entailed having courageous conversations
with various educational partners. In this vein, participants demonstrated conviction and determination when dealing with individuals who ardently challenged LGBTQ inclusivity. As David stated, “If you hear it enough, you really have to combat it because sometimes it can become very offensive even if it's not intended to be so.” Further to this, Veronica also added that leaders should not be fearful about embarking on courageous conversations to confront inequities: “I also had courageous conversations with people right off the top. So they knew I wasn't afraid to go there. So I'm telling you that you shouldn’t be afraid to go there.”

Several participants noted, however, that maintaining emotional control during courageous conversations was critical in allowing the conversation to remain civil. David explained that this approach is more effective than letting your passion or anger get the best of you, noting that such conversations should be firm “but also calm, a very systematic sharing of information disputing in a factual, respectful way the bias and misinformation.” That being said, in order to exert their authority, participants took a firm position by standing their ground and by borrowing from legislative and policy frameworks during conversations in order to relay messages that LGBTQ inclusion is non-negotiable. This is further described below.

**Standing their ground**

When participants faced strong resistance from school community members in their efforts to support LGBTQ, they sometimes resorted to communicating firmly and resolutely. Several participants stated outright that they would not back down, but instead stood their ground in the face of adversity. When a school trustee challenged LGBTQ related themes at Charles’s school, for example, he firmly stressed how this work supported the needs of his students:

I had to be really direct with her, and speak to her first professionally about where we were going with our equity goal and share that with her. I gave her a copy of our school plan but focused on that one goal.
As a result, the trustee retracted her concerns. Anthony was also staunch in his reply to a few parent council representatives who challenged a family diversity video portraying same sex parents. The members wanted Anthony to send a letter home explaining the video prior to the classes viewing it. Anthony’s blunt response accentuated the fact that family diversity is not a subject about which parents need to be forewarned:

I said “no” because the only purpose of sending a letter before would be for a parent to pull their children out, give them fair warning. We don't do that anymore, just like we don’t send a letter home when we are talking about racism or homophobia. And I said, “If it's something you're invited to do, we do [send a letter home]. But we’re not inviting you to this. You’re getting the heads up here.”

Subsequently, all the staff and students at Anthony’s school embarked on a family diversity project, which included same sex partners.

Likewise, Veronica refused to back down to a staff member who made an inappropriate stereotypical statement to a male student wearing pink nail polish. She used her authority to sternly respond, commenting that she could not let “sly comments” go unnoticed, especially when they are derogatory to gay populations: “[I said this is] completely unacceptable and you will apologize to this child, you will apologize to the parents and you will tell the class that that was not a comment that should have been said and this is the reason.” Veronica used a similar approach when dealing with a contractor who discriminated against gay populations by mimicking them while completing work in the school. Veronica reproached him by saying his behavior was unacceptable, unwelcome at her school and should not be replicated in any school building, clearly communicating her support for LGBTQ populations.

Moreover, both Bernadette and Mary emphasized that it is incumbent on leaders to “fight the good fight” when warranted. Parent council members at Bernadette’s school contested LGBTQ initiatives taking place, stating, “The school is not the place to do this work.”
Bernadette pushed back using her authority to emphasize, “School is the place to do this work.”

In a similar instance, Mary stood her ground with a family who disputed the need to include LGBTQ content in schools. She did not acquiesce to their concerns and eventually the parents moved their child out of the school. Mary remained stoic in her beliefs to support sexual minority populations, stressing, “I’m just not willing to back down.”

*Borrowing from legislative and policy frameworks*

Principals in this study also persevered in the face of adversity by borrowing from frameworks that protect LGBTQ populations in order to carry out their mandates for LGBTQ inclusivity. In particular, principals used their authority to refer to legislative and policy frameworks that support sexual minority rights:

> And then my “go to” is always human rights of course because it is a wonderful thing. I pull out documents and I show children that we have our federal symbol on this one, and we have our provincial symbol on this one and this is much, much bigger than me, than this school, than this board; this is something that we need to value as Canadian citizens. (Mary)

Elizabeth, for instance, stated that certain “values” and deeply entrenched “beliefs” against sexual minority people need to stay outside of publically funded school systems, where policies and human rights support all diversities. Consequently, she was quick to respond to a student’s homophobic tendencies by clearly communicating her position:

> You know what your parents say at home, that is something they're entitled to believe and think and value but what I’m telling you that when you're in school, this is what is expected and we are not going to accept this behavior.

Similarly, when a parent challenged her inclusive approaches for sexual minorities, Elizabeth knew that certain laws and policies afforded her the authority she needed to address parent resisters:

> What I can tell you is we’re in a publicly funded school system. We’re in a society that is founded on the Charter of rights and freedom, a human rights code that says that every person ultimately has the right to be who they are or who they believe they are.
Anthony also pulled out the “human rights card”, so to speak, when a parent demanded that LGBTQ content, which he deemed to be “dirty” and “disgusting”, not be shared at the school: “So I said, ‘You are welcome to have those beliefs but in this school, in this board, in this province, that’s a human rights issue and what we need to do is promote a safe positive, accepting environment.’” In a similar situation, in order to protect a transgender student’s right to use a male washroom, Bernadette needed to remind staff and students, who were uncomfortable with this scenario, that it is the student’s human right to be afforded this choice.

Ultimately, when situations became intense with resistors, these leaders clearly communicated their intentions and decisions, which were backed by robust policy and laws that upheld LGBTQ rights in schools and in society. This further helped them to deal with resistors and move such agendas forward.

Summary

Ongoing dialogue is critical to building and sustaining relations and to supporting the diverse needs of stakeholders. Further to this, if principals do not exercise due diligence to openly communicate and carefully examine the underlying issues and problems for solutions, then they may potentially face additional consequences, which Jerome noted in this passage:

I find often that where issues develop is where there isn't an opportunity to dialogue and discuss. Where schools are not welcoming places that people believe they can’t actually call and ask questions; that they can’t send the principal an email; that they have to go to some other means be it the newspaper, the superintendent, the trustee, the director’s office, or whatever. So important for people in the community- that families see that there is a path that they can come and it can be through the school and that we’re here to support their child in positive ways.

Consequently, participants in this study used a variety of effective communication strategies to promote conversations highlighting respect, acceptance and safety for sexual minority populations. Participants did not quash complaints or become defensive. Rather, by
maintaining emotional control, investing the time, patience and genuine attention to listen to and tease apart the issues raised, participants nurtured two-way communication to find viable resolutions in support LGBTQ inclusivity by pushing the learning about LGBTQ forward with students and school community members.

Where situations warranted, principals were not afraid, however, to employ an authoritarian communication protocol where they remained firm and stood their ground with trustees, parents, staff, students and visitors. Engaging in courageous conversations when dealing with challenging or complex resistance, they used their authority to draw on laws and policies that safeguard LGBTQ populations to stress that LGBTQ communities are welcome, included and supported in their schools and classrooms.

Utilizing these communication tactics assisted principals in supporting LGBTQ presence and addressed resistance in firm, respectful and professional ways. Additionally, some participants observed that open communication in support of LGBTQ populations influenced staff that also started to chime in to support this community. In Charles’ school, for instance, when a teacher contested the need to support a small LGBTQ population in the school, staff challenged him by stressing that no one should be subjected to homophobic banter and exclusion. This also implies that leaders who are ardent in their communication to support LGBTQ can potentially engender in others this same call for inclusivity.
Critical Learning Strategies

Communication strategies explored in the previous section underscored how participants highlighted and embraced LGBTQ presence in their school communities. Critical learning strategies, however, were significantly more impactful in helping educational partners at different continuums gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the pressing needs for LGBTQ inclusivity. Moreover, participants enacted critical learning strategies to support school community members’ abilities to reflect on personal biases, unveil inequities and unpack pervasive heteronormative structures. Hence, critical learning strategies allowed participants to influence professional and personal learning about LGBTQ needs and topics as well as encourage topic integration within classrooms. Using a multitude of strategies, principals modeled learner and teacher stances, accessed resources to promote a culture of critical reflection and facilitated content integration to weave LGBTQ themes and topics into school life. Details around each of these strategies and the manner in which they were employed are provided below.

Principal as learner

It was evident in the data that participants displayed humility with respect to their lack of knowledge regarding LGBTQ populations: “It’s okay not to know or it’s okay to be unsure. It’s okay to make a mistake” (David). Gabriel elaborated further that “modeling an open learning stance as the leader of the school is really important” in order to help others appreciate that everyone is on a collective learning journey to support sexual minority populations. In this vein, principals participated in a variety of professional learning opportunities that underscored their commitment to learning about LGBTQ inclusivity, honing their own critical consciousness by espousing an open learning stance during both informal and formal learning opportunities.
Informal learning opportunities

Jerome contended that capitalizing on rich learning opportunities through informal contexts could be very impactful:

So much of the learning that I've done in this area around inclusive environments for LGBTQ students and communities has been through contacts from various system levels, employees, workplaces and school staff, even students that I've worked with in the context of high school students and staff and families that I worked with and learned from. I think there's as much to be gleaned from those informal contexts in terms of professional learning than from a particular course.

As a result, Jerome was able to more confidently transfer this knowledge to support his efforts in creating an inclusive learning environment for all diversities. Likewise, David encouraged informal learning by using a “qualitative approach” to collect information from colleagues and fellow administrators that provided meaningful insights for him in terms of navigating tricky situations involving LGBTQ populations. By being open to feedback and suggestions from staff, board personnel, students and parents, David was better equipped to deal with resisters when implementing inclusive strategies. Gabriel also called on others to help guide him or push his thinking by seeking different opinions about LGBTQ integration from colleagues and staff. Finding individuals who are not like-minded further challenged Gabriel’s thinking to consider different options.

Anthony explained that he informally learned about the complex needs of individuals by working in highly diverse school communities. He commented that those experiences helped him maneuver through situations involving competing interests among different cultures and religious groups when dealing with LGBTQ content. Monica, on the other hand, expressed that deep learning occurred when she invited a specialized team to her school to do a walk through. Through informal discussions with the team, Monica became increasingly aware of the lack of explicit representation of diversity in visuals and resources at her school. Veronica added that
meaningful learning occurred for her during informal interactions and discussions with individuals belonging to gay populations. She gleaned so much about their needs by dialoguing and asking questions. On a similar note, Bernadette confirmed that much of her most powerful learning derived from informal interactions with marginalized individuals themselves:

Our transgender student taught me things that nobody else could have taught me. His parents have taught me a lot. Yes, this teacher coming-out taught me, but I kind of had some grounding, background knowledge around being lesbian, gay. But the transgender piece in elementary has been huge [learning].

These examples confirm that participants leveraged learning opportunities through informal contexts to garner information about sexual minority populations in order to better support their integration in school life.

*Formal learning opportunities*

Concomitantly, formal professional learning opportunities complemented participants’ ability to critically reflect on the needs for LGBTQ inclusion. Several principals kept abreast of LGBTQ topics by participating in conferences, workshops, courses or engaging in professional reading. For instance, Francis attended a conference that he found to be “powerful learning” because he learned from “people that were so far advanced on [an equity] continuum.” Similarly, through her involvement in a system level Positive Space committee, Theresa modeled her learning by researching, creating presentations and attending seminars around LGBTQ themes. In particular, Bernadette shared the powerful impact attending conferences had on her learning around gender variant individuals:

Some of those conferences have been unbelievable when you hear people- the transgender adult who is living happily integrated into society and talks about the hardship and says “I'm okay”. Or you hear about the parent of the grade one student saying, “When my kid was born, I thought I had a girl, but now he's a boy. You [educators] need to create the space because I want to go to work feeling safe that my kid is going to be safe in your school.”
The insights gleaned from these experiences provided Bernadette with a heightened sensitivity to ensuring that the rights of transgender and gender non-conforming populations were protected at her school, especially around issues dealing with washroom access or name preferences. This ongoing commitment to learn both informally and formally positively influenced participants’ capacity to support the critical learning of others around LGBTQ themes, which is discussed in the next section.

**Principal as teacher**

As instructional leaders, participants expressed the need to create a safe environment for learning in their schools. Moreover, since LGBTQ topics were foreign for many staff, creating a safe learning environment for school community members was a precursor for principals to explore LGBTQ inclusivity. For instance, Jerome reiterated the importance of employing a caring and non-judgmental approach when teaching about this dimension of equity:

> A lot of the staff that I work with are older than me and so they went through teacher’s college and various Bachelor of Education programs a number of years ago. [LGBTQ] wouldn’t have been part of their training and experience. I glean a lot of my knowledge from this area as a result of my own lived experience. If you haven't lived this experience, or you haven't done a lot of professional reading or coursework recently, how do you know this information if we don't provide it? I think the obligation is that we provide this information and that we don't judge people for not knowing.

Further to this, Gabriel promoted a non-threatening learning environment for staff by allowing them think time to provide input. For staff members who were reticent to share their views or ask questions, Gabriel encouraged them to write down their thoughts, concerns or ideas for next steps. Both principals demonstrated respect and an appreciation that people are on different learning continuums with regards to LGBTQ topics and that leaders need to find deliberate ways to create a safe, nurturing learning environment. In other words, creating an environment that
promoted risk taking and questioning supported participants in their efforts to be teacher leaders for LGBTQ topics.

In that vein, this section addresses how participants effectively imparted their knowledge about queer communities in an attempt to hone staff, students’ and parents’ critical understanding of this populations’ needs to feel included. In particular, participants demonstrated their resourcefulness and instructional abilities by directly teaching school community members about LGBTQ. Additionally, by pushing staff and student thinking, participants were able to effectively challenge assumptions and biases inflicting queer communities.

*Directly teaching others*

School leaders in this study capitalized on different opportunities to directly teach LGBTQ content to different audiences. As instructional leaders, several principals confirmed the importance of deliberately infusing LGBTQ themes when conducting workshops for staff. As Elizabeth pointed out, “I am always ensuring that it's part of [staff learning] and I specifically will talk about the barriers or the obstacles that are faced by that group, so I'm always doing that in terms of my training.”

Similar to Elizabeth, several principals adopted the role of lead teacher in facilitating learning about LGBTQ populations. Anthony, for instance, modeled instructional leadership by directly teaching staff about family diversity, guiding staff in unpacking the missing voices of marginalized families in videos and resources through discussions and questioning:

We talked about how at this age level the most important thing is to push that there are different kinds of families. It’s all about acceptance of different types of families and love and that’s all it means. It has nothing to do with sex and so they [staff] were comfortable with that. They got that and so we said, “Who’s missing in this video and whose voices aren't heard, who is this, what’s the bias in this video?”
Consequently, as a result of Anthony’s instructional leadership in facilitating staff to challenge the taken for granted assumptions they possessed about families in their school context, Anthony observed that staff became more attuned to the fact that students in their classes may come from non-normative family compositions. Additionally, through Anthony’s guiding questions, staff members were also able to critically analyze resources to critique the lack of equitable representation of diverse populations in their own teaching practices.

On a similar note, after attending EGALE workshops, Mary helped staff explore notions of sexuality by sharing her new learning around inclusive language, enriching staff perspectives on sexual orientation, gender identity and the impact inclusive language has on creating a welcoming environment for queer communities. She noted how receptive staff was to learning beyond gay/straight sexual binaries. Accordingly, teachers at Mary’s school became more comfortable exploring gender identity in resources. As she noted,

    In fact, *My Princess Boy* [book] went around this year prior to pink shirt day. Almost every class did that and the feedback I got was incredibly positive. Not a single call from parents so they may think it and feel it, but not a single call.

Jerome also spoke about “aha moments” his staff had when he presented concepts around LGBTQ terminology, sexual orientation and gender identity. As he pointed out, for many teachers and support staff, knowing that people struggled with their gender identity and expression was eye opening because it was beyond the scope of their experiences:

    So when you open up to a whole range and when you talk about asexual and the whole continuum of sexual attraction, that was a huge “aha” for the staff. I think another “aha” was the difference between gender identity and gender expression. I think they saw boy/girl -they didn't see a continuum. They didn’t see the difference between pronouns. What pronoun do you want to be referred to as? I may outwardly appear X but I may want to be referred to as Y. I think that was a huge “aha” for them because I think again, I don't want to layer an assumption with another assumption, but I think many of the staff come from and had perspectives of their own context where there was no dichotomy in their own identity.
Thus, as a result of Jerome’s principal directed learning sessions, staff became more aware of the gender identity continuum and felt more comfortable openly asking about strategies for inclusion.

By adopting the teacher leader role, Mary also leveraged opportunities to develop students’ critical reflection on gender roles through direct instruction when visiting classrooms, which she describes below:

I was doing some coverage in a fourth grade class not too long ago and just talking about that in terms of fairytales. What if the giant was gay? How would that have changed the role? What happens if the giant was a woman or an older woman? How would that have changed the role? So something that they are very familiar with and really blowing it up.

As an instructional leader, Anthony also led student learning by co-teaching lessons on family diversity with his vice principal. As he noted, students responded favorably to watching a video on family compositions presented from a child’s perspective: “It’s from a child’s point of view and it's just so much fun and there are all these songs and they loved it and that's how we went about it – that was our start in.” This modeling was also instrumental in building staff courage and confidence to teach the same themes within their classrooms.

Thus, principals in this study enhanced staff and student critical perspectives and understanding of LGBTQ people by employing direct instructional strategies. Furthermore, by modeling LGBTQ inclusive approaches for staff and students, both Mary and Anthony also provided a springboard for teachers to more confidently embark on this work in their classes. Modeling direct teaching was impactful for both staff and students because it reinforced these school leaders’ vision that is committed to equity for LGBTQ populations.

**Questioning to push people’s thinking**

As instructional leaders, several participants contended that pushing people’s thinking beyond existing heteronormative frameworks needed to occur in order to broaden their abilities
to critically understand notions of LGBTQ oppression and exclusion. For many participants, questioning, probing or challenging people’s assumptions were strategies they used to push staff and parents to think outside of their comfort zone or life experiences. Further to this, Veronica claimed that challenging people to think beyond heterosexual structures sometimes engendered discomfort. According to Veronica, this uneasiness was a positive sign that some level of learning was taking place:

So I always make sure that I was transparent and that people knew that I knew that things are uncomfortable and I let them know that’s part of the process. And being uncomfortable is a good thing because what that means is we are starting to affect change. That’s the cognitive dissonance and I talk about the fact that it’s not a personal thing; it should not be a personal thing. It's about being able to have courageous conversations to move forward.

Hence, principals like Veronica openly challenged people’s assumptions about gay populations in order to help staff, students and parents dismantle their biases and misconceptions about this population. Moreover, in another instance, Veronica expressed that in order to help Council members understand that some of their practices were exclusionary; she deliberately pushed their thinking by becoming the missing voice of families who were not present at the meetings:

I'm just going to put on the table I have to be the voice that's not here -that's not represented. So I am the voice of the mother that is raising their kids on their own. I am the voice of the mother that is in a relationship where I’m with the same-sex partner because the person with the same-sex partner wasn’t part of the council yet. So I am the voice of the person that is working three jobs to put food on the table and can’t possibly sell coupon books for $30 for the school council fundraiser.

Through these ongoing discussions, Veronica influenced Council parents to be more critical about how their decisions could impact others who were not present or able to express their voices.
On another note, Elizabeth utilized “comparison factors” to reveal inequities in people’s thinking, drawing on the analogy of a parent asking that their son not be placed in a gay teacher’s classroom. In Elizabeth’s view, this should be no different than a parent asking that their daughter not be placed in a heterosexual male teacher’s classroom:

[So if] you’re a heterosexual male, am I supposed to think that every time you teach a female student, that your having sexual thoughts about that. Why is it okay for me to say my daughter can go into your classroom - you are a heterosexual male - but my son can't go into a homosexual male teacher’s classroom?

Using this approach, she attempted to help parents see the discrepancies in their logic.

Similarly, Anthony, Theresa and Monica exposed staff to the inherent biases associated with traditional Mother’s or Father’s Days celebrations that promoted Western nuclear family compositions. In their efforts to create inclusive schools, these principals pushed staff to think about how to better represent family diversity in their schools by acknowledging children who have same sex parents, single parents, no parents or raised by grandparents. By exposing these biases, traditional celebrations evolved to include different dimensions of family diversity at participants’ schools.

Hence, as instructional leaders, participants invested time to directly teach their staff, students and parents important messages about LGBTQ existence, normalcy and acceptance. This learning consequently helped others to critically examine prejudices in their practices, resources or discussions. Participants also questioned or challenged assumptions to hone people’s critical perspectives of LGBTQ needs.

**Leveraging external and school level resources**

In addition to modeling the learning and directly teaching staff and students about marginalized populations, participants also ensured that staff and students were exposed to and
had access to various external and school level resources that presented a variety of equity and social justice perspectives to support LGBTQ integration. For principals like Mary, who worked in very insular and isolated school communities, it was critical to expose staff, students and parents to a variety of resources and voices that are reflective of the global community. As Mary noted:

We’re a very tiny school. We’re very isolated and very insulated, and so to help the growth of the students and the understanding that we are situated in a much larger community, a global community and we do really have to understand these issues [despite that] they will not always be here in our context.

In this vein, this section explores how participants capitalized on using external and school level resources to support staff and students in their critical learning journeys regarding sexual minority individuals.

**External resources**

Bernadette particularly emphasized the importance of accessing external resources to introduce her school community to rich learning: “Let’s tap into what's out there and how can I, as a school leader, facilitate conditions for learning for this work.” Like many other participants, she capitalized on external resources by sending large numbers of staff to workshops and conferences that specifically enriched their understanding of the complex needs of LGBTQ populations. These workshops highlighted the lived realities of sexual minority populations and highlighted terminology, myths and misconceptions along with practical strategies for inclusion.

Additionally, many principals invited guest speakers to their schools to deepened staff and student learning around LGBTQ populations. To this end, when a student was being bullied because he had two moms, Monica called in a specialized support team to address issues surrounding the complexities of family diversity. Monica actually accessed this expert team on several occasions because staff and students benefited from the equity lens the team employed to
highlight covert and overt forms of oppression and exclusion. Likewise, for a staff meeting, Anthony invited a student activist who ran a GSA at her university to speak about the trials and tribulations a friend experienced as a result of their sexual orientation. Anthony particularly stressed the importance of hearing an outside “voice” speak about LGBTQ oppression, noting that he could quickly see the impact that this form of learning had on staff. He commented, “For some of the fundamentalist staff at my school, that’s where I could see the lights go on. I could actually physically see a difference [in staff reaction].”

Bernadette also invited external presenters to work with staff and students in unveiling restrictive notions of male/female identity binaries. When presenters introduced students to other pronouns beyond “he/she” to reference one’s gender identity, it opened up a great deal of discussion and reflection around what it means to be male or female, noting, “For lots of kids, it was ‘What are you talking about? If I’m a boy- I am a boy, that’s it!’” Workshop presenters enhanced student and staff understanding of the diverse social identity constructions that exist such as transgender, gender independent or gender variant. Bernadette later invited a consultant to co-present with a transgender student to help teachers and educational assistants critically understand the negative impact that heteronormative discourse and structures have on LGBTQ well-being. According to Bernadette, the consultant helped staff understand how insensitive it was to call someone “she” when they wanted to be referred to as “he”, emphasizing that staff learned how this was similar to calling someone by a different name all the time. In this sense, by allowing a transgender student to share his schooling experiences during a staff presentation, the consultant was able to highlight extant heteronormative classroom practices that marginalized the student. According to Bernadette,

[The student] shaped the professional development that we had with staff through the consultant’s brilliant facilitation. The consultant asked [the student] what are some tips,
what do you wish you could have changed, what did we do wrong as teachers? [The student] said, “You guys got to stop asking boys to line up here and girls line up there. You got to stop saying here are the boy’s books, and here are the girl’s books. You got to stop saying here are the boy’s toys, and here are the girl’s toys because I never ever felt like I fit”.

School-level resources

To complement staff learning that occurred through the use of external resources and direct teaching, participants acknowledged that school-level resources needed to be user friendly and accessible. Both Monica and Francis shared that such resources needed to be reflective of all diversities and celebrate the uniqueness of families. Francis exclaimed further that it was incumbent on him to ensure that the “amazing resources that are inclusive and up to date” be showcased for his school community, including parents on School Council. In the same vein, Mary posted resources and posters on her staff portal and contended that LGBTQ materials needed to be housed with all the other resources so that themes of sexual orientation and gender identity were visible rather than hidden. According to Mary, making these resources visible supported LGBTQ topic integration, which is underscored in the following quote:

It was made very clear, the board has provided libraries with some resources, certainly read-alouds and it was made very clear that they are to go on the shelf with all other books; they are not to be separated. And that's the whole piece- it has to be embedded in everything we do. It's not enough to just celebrate pink shirt day. It has to be a part of what we’re doing and so any time we are having those conversations in our classrooms or any time we’re doing a read aloud -why can't we pick up one of those books?

Further to this, Mary displayed resources and picture books embedding LGBTQ themes in her office and invited staff to borrow from her personal collection. When one staff member came to ask for her “inclusive language” resource, she relayed that it was already lent out:

In fact, my copy has gone. And so that makes me feel wonderful because I know it's out there and being used by people. Someone came looking for it not too long ago and I said, “I don't know- it's out there” and that's great and that tells me that people are beginning to talk about this and beginning to use it in their classroom.
Thus, despite concerns about the lack of resources in this particular area of equity, many participants’ continued to find ways to ensure their accessibility for staff and students. Notwithstanding securing a variety of appropriate LGBTQ resources, participants imparted that infusing LGBTQ themes within the classroom was another venture. The next section outlines how participants attempted to build capacity among staff and students to continue to foster a culture of critical learning through the integration of LGBTQ themes within the classroom.

**Facilitating LGBTQ content integration**

Fostering critical teaching and learning about LGBTQ inclusive efforts is one level of work. Finding ways to embed LGBTQ themes into school curriculum is the next level. For instance, Gabriel expressed that, although the majority of his staff members were well intentioned, they were not acclimatized to including conceptualizations of non-conforming sexuality paradigms in their classrooms. Consequently, Gabriel emphasized the importance of challenging individuals to critically reflect on LGBTQ inclusive actions needed at the classroom level in order to move the LGBTQ agenda forward:

> I think it helps with the framing of questions around who’s included and who's excluded, right and also about what to do next. There is a difference about, and I will articulate who's included and excluded but it’s also about how do we honor those voices now? What's that going to mean and how that applies to LGBTQ?

In other words, Gabriel underscored that commitment to LGBTQ goes beyond verbal acknowledgment and awareness of LGBTQ needs to actual inclusive measures in the classroom. Further to this, Jerome contended that, in order to create a sense of normalcy around LGBTQ populations, positive topics and images of LGBTQ need to be regularly weaved throughout the elementary school curriculum to debunk myths and misconceptions about this community:
Often you see a really negative view when it comes to LGBTQ. We focus on the suicide, we focus on the lack of self-esteem, self-confidence, all of those particular pieces. And so it’s really making sure that we reflect that community in our resources, in our materials, in our teachings and that it's done in a ‘normal’ way. (Jerome).

Thus, as highlighted by these principals, regular integration of positive topics celebrating LGBTQ communities is integral to ensuring sexual minorities are fairly and equitably represented within the diversity dialogue. Hence, principals utilized different approaches to continue to ensure LGBTQ topics were infused in both curricular and co-curricular activities.

By ensuring LGBTQ themes were embedded at a deeper level in school activities and events and by supporting staff capacity building and confidence in this area of equity, principals were more effective in realizing different forms of LGBTQ content integration.

Embedding LGBTQ themes into school life

As Gabriel expressed, “I think the more we also continue with the learning- it’s not just, we did a session and now it's gone. We continue with the work because it is the work.” This allowed for clear messaging that LGBTQ integration is not an isolated or one-time event. In this vein, principals ensured that school wide initiatives and events regularly included references to sexual orientation and gender identity and that topics were explored further in the classrooms.

For instance, when the GSA at Veronica’s school organized “Kindness Week”, the expectation was that staff members extend conversation about anti-bullying in their classrooms to include LGBTQ issues. During Pride Week at Charles’s school, resource staff worked on a unit with students that culminated in the creation of a stained glass window incorporating the pride colours. Consequently, one of the teacher resistors at Charles’s school encouraged his students to explore Pink Shirt Day and homophobia through animation projects. On a similar note, school assemblies at Jerome’s and Gregory’s schools centered around social justice and social activism that focused on breaking down the barriers and ensuring that everyone feels valued, included and
safe. The ongoing embedding of LGBTQ content in different school activities messaged to all staff and students that LGBTQ communities are part of everyday school life both outside and inside the classroom walls.

**Supporting staff capacity building and efficacy**

Several participants observed a heightened level of LGBTQ content integration in classrooms as a direct result of increased staff knowledge and comfort in this area of diversity. Participants used a variety of methods to support teacher capacity building in this area. David, for instance, found ways to “systematically” build capacity among staff about LGBTQ topics through job-embedded sessions. He accessed consultants and his own staff to lead the learning for others around biases, stereotypes and empathy through professional learning communities that were regularly scheduled to support staff in unpacking the complexities associated with LGBTQ topic integration. Consequently, he commented that staff members and educational assistants felt better equipped to address LGBTQ matters with students in the classrooms.

To build capacity among his staff, Anthony provided a folder of resources for staff in order to facilitate the transfer of knowledge to students:

> There's a whole series of lessons from K to 12. It's got anti-homophobia. It’s really good. And so we took each of those lessons for their grade level and gave it to the teachers in a folder and said there are four lessons for each grade.

He additionally coached them through the delivery of the lessons in order to build their knowledge and confidence around the teaching of family diversity. Through his support and guidance, he found that teachers were able to use the resources effectively with students. Anthony also noted that his staff was aware that if any backlash occurred, he would be there to support them.
Although Bernadette did not provide actual lessons to her teachers, she built their capacity by pushing their thinking while co-planning a unit with them. She specifically remarked:

When we have planning time I really try to push their thinking through that equity lens. I remember one of the units they were planning – I made a point about showcasing the big question; the enduring understanding being gender roles. And this was in grade a grade 3 class. Asking the right questions is going to help move this conversation, and trying to pair teachers to kind of do collaborative planning and to tell them I'm not asking to engage in a conversation that you aren’t comfortable in, that’s going to come out. But pair yourself with somebody who is trying to push your thinking. So in that particular unit that we had planned, I helped them plan together. The kids had to create a gender-neutral toy.

It was through probing and questioning that Bernadette helped to hone the critical lens teachers used in their planning and lesson delivery. Moreover, by asking teachers to pair with other staff who would push their thinking, Bernadette was building capacity among individual staff members so they could support each other in finding ways to integrate LGBTQ topics in their lessons.

To promote further LGBTQ curriculum integration, Veronica encouraged teachers who were further along the equity continuum to experiment with different forms of LGBTQ inclusion. For instance, her kindergarten teachers included same sex parents in their discussions about families. Likewise, her grade six teachers explored notions of gender identity and gender stereotyping in a fairytales unit, which helped students use a critical lens to unpack gender stereotypes prevalent in different fairytales. On another note, Charles observed that teachers were more apt to facilitate learning around LGBTQ topics when it “came from the kids.” Hence, when a sixth grade class studied human rights, a group of students chose LGBTQ for their project. Charles explained how this project also helped a black gay male student feel more recognized and included in his class. Charles ensured that these students presented their LGBTQ
project to multiple audiences, including Parent Council. This sharing was significant in that it demonstrated that children at a young age could understand and be sensitive to the need to include LGBTQ voice in the classrooms.

**Summary**

This section discussed how principals kept abreast of LGBTQ topics and inclusive resources through ongoing learning, facilitating the learning of others through their instructional leadership and fostering content integration to help staff gain the confidence and comfort to broach LGBTQ subject matter within their classrooms. In this vein, participants used a variety of strategies to hone a critical consciousness in staff, students and parents to help them understand the need for LGBTQ inclusion and the need to represent LGBTQ equitably in the school and classrooms. However, participants expressed that they were cognizant that staff may be on different continuums with regards to LGBTQ content integration and noted that full content integration was a challenge. Within this context, Gabriel indicated that “pockets” of LGBTQ content were evident in the classrooms; a sentiment which also resonated with Veronica:

> When you talk about being the instructional leader and I take that very seriously and I felt like I did a really good job of it. But that part of integrating fully the LGBTQ issues, not so much. I think of more how strategic I would've liked it to have been- more wide scale that we make it happen across the school.

Thus, LGBTQ subject matter integration in the classrooms was not as prevalent as participants would have anticipated, despite their efforts in this area. Several participants expressed the need for additional resources and more intentional learning in this area of diversity to further support deeper LGBTQ content integration in elementary schools.
Exercising Strategic Advocacy

One could argue that principals in this study were strategic in all the actions they took to move the LGBTQ inclusivity agenda forward. Participants deliberately worked to forge school community relations; they intentionally communicated their mantra of inclusivity; and they purposefully found ways to hone school community members’ abilities to become critical thinkers and learners regarding equity and social justice topics. Albeit, participants were also very strategic and politically astute in how they went about ensuring this agenda stayed at the forefront of the equity discourse. This section focuses on underscoring participants’ deliberate and intentional strategies to ensure LGBTQ populations felt safe and accepted, to encourage learning about LGBTQ and to infuse LGBTQ themes school wide and in the classrooms.

Principals stressed that understanding the political contexts in their schools and organizations often dictated the pace and manner in which the inclusivity agenda moves forward:

So for me, it was very eye-opening in terms of the kind of community this was, and made me realize I really needed to infuse this in a very calm, quiet way, but steady, moving forward, moving forward (Mary).

Hence several participants concurred that forging ahead strategically was predicated on having a robust understanding of the school community. Some principals, like Gabriel, were counseled by colleagues into taking a “slower pace” because LGBTQ topics were uncharted territory for staff, students and the larger school community. Bernadette explained further that although her school had embarked on this journey several years ago, they still had much work to do. She elaborated that pace, time, commitment, and resources remained crucial considerations in carrying out a mandate that supports queer communities. Finally, Veronica emphasized that being strategic and successful with LGBTQ inclusivity does not always necessitate a large-scale project:
So people always think it's the big, big, things that make the change. It is the big things but the little things are just as important if not more important because I know that had a trickle effect.

In other words, a steadfast approach that implements the “little things” can also yield significantly positive outcomes in creating inclusive schools for gay populations.

Participants understood the politics of their organization in order to effectively exercise strategic advocacy to move LGBTQ inclusivity forward. This section explores how principals used their political acumen to strategically advocate for the moral imperative to support all learners. In addition, a discussion outlining how participants exercised strategic advocacy by applying the right balance of pressure and support followed by employing shared leadership strategies.

**Moral Imperative**

Participants all agreed that it is incumbent on educators to ensure that the moral imperative of creating safe, welcoming and inviting school environments is carried out for all individuals. This is perhaps best captured in the quote below:

I would say I am looking to provide the safest place that I can. I'm seeking to provide a safer place for students, families, and community that identify as LGBTQ so that it is safe and secure for all. The strategies that we employed have only helped us to move towards that goal of creating a safer place and a safer space in our schools (Jerome).

In this regard, given the exclusionary practices LGBTQ people continue to be subjected to, school leaders in this study strategically appealed to educators’ moral imperative to ensure that this goal of inclusion was realized. To this end, participants used entry points for social justice and equity that school community members could relate to in understanding the moral imperative to engage all learners. Additionally, data highlighting the plight of LGBTQ was shared to further magnify the moral imperative. Finally, principals ensured that certain measures
taken to support queer people were non-negotiable since educators have the moral imperative to be inclusive of all populations.

**Finding different entry points**

Principals strategically found different entry points that staff, students and parents could relate to in order to help them better appreciate the need for LGBTQ inclusivity. For instance, when Bernadette categorized LGBTQ work under the broader umbrella of “social justice and inclusion”, she discovered teachers were more amenable to integrating LGBTQ topics in their classes despite foreboding resistance from a traditionalist school community. Although Charles’s school goal centered on supporting “ELL learners”, he was able to guide his staff into changing the goals to encompass “all marginalized learners” to be more reflective of his changing school community. In doing so, the emphasis was placed on all learners including LGBTQ and, in particular, students experiencing intersecting forms of marginalization. Similarly, to open teachers’ minds to the moral imperative of acceptance and inclusion for all populations, David used special education as an entry point, which he elaborated on in this passage:

> And one of the biggest and best entry points is special education. You help people make that connection and many folks who just naturally have an understanding and a sympathy and affinity for folks who have experienced alienation because of their personal gender identification and their life. But with the special education piece -because it is so at the core of fighting and advocating for people that are on the outside or who don't have the resources they need -there is a natural connection.

Staff could not ignore students who were outliers, struggling emotionally, socially, physically, or academically.

Both Mary and Veronica used “gender stereotyping” as an entry point for staff and students to understand issues of LGBTQ exclusion. On the one hand, Mary used gender stereotyping as a “safe place” to initiate dialogue around sexual identity and expression with staff
and students. On the other hand, Veronica found students had a better sense of how gender stereotyping can negatively impact on the well-being of others. For instance, derogatory gender specific comments such as “that’s so gay” was the focus of school wide assemblies. This helped staff and students understand the negative impact gender stereotyping can have on others.

Elizabeth used yet another entry point to strategically impress upon her parent council that sexual minority populations deserved the same recognition and protection as other groups. She borrowed from the board’s theme “Year of the Ally”, which she explained in this passage:

Recently we are talking about setting up our own next year’s SSC [council] sessions for our programs. So we had a conversation with them because next year the board is looking at the “Year of the Ally”. So I said you know the “Year of the Ally” is for the student that is being bullied, or the “Year of the Ally” is advocating for the rights of those who cannot be heard which I'll throw in the SCC [council] meetings. I’ll say to them you know the student is being made fun of because he's gay. It just kind of worked its way in there because of the board’s “Year of the Ally”.

By incorporating the system wide theme of “Year of the Ally” in parent council discussions, Elizabeth intentionally made connections for parents to ensure the term ally also included LGBTQ communities.

Thus, helping staff make connections among different disenfranchised groups was strategic and purposeful in participants’ attempts to legitimize attention to LGBTQ populations. Participants’ strategic use of entry points supported their efforts to help others understand the moral imperative and responsibilities of school communities to include queer communities. Many individuals could better relate to different entry points participants used. These entry points consolidated the connections that staff, students and parents needed to better understand how LGBTQ individuals are also recipients of oppressive and exclusionary behaviours, just like many other populations.
Using data

To promote a sense of urgency for LGBTQ inclusion, several participants used data to strategically highlight the moral imperative for creating safe and welcoming schools. The data painted a dismal portrayal of the day-to-day obstacles faced by this population across the nation and how LGBTQ individuals continue to be plagued by substance abuse, suicide and depression. Participants felt that sharing this data would ignite a collective response for activism to improve conditions for queer individuals. For instance, Gregory would tweet snippets of data to remind people why their school partakes in Pink Shirt Day or the International Day Against Homophobia. In a similar fashion, Charles surveyed students at his school, which generated “rich data” corroborating that some students, particularly LGBTQ, felt unsafe in certain areas of the school. This data was the impetus needed to validate the creation of a plan that ensured all students felt safe in order to thrive in their school environment. David, on the other hand, surveyed staff to ascertain their learning needs in relation to equity:

We created a survey for staff, so it was a fairly straightforward survey but it encompassed, again it dealt with the [sexual] orientation piece but it also dealt with any issues that staff had. It came from a question of: what do you feel comfortable discussing, what do you feel prepared to talk about around issues that are going to be sensitive with your students, whether it is LGBTQ, whether it's mental health, whether it's social economics and poverty, whether it's split family, and divorce/separation, abuse in the family, special education and physical, mental learning challenges, whatever.

The purpose of the survey was twofold: it informed David of the time and resources needed to support staff professional development, in addition to highlighting the gaps in staff knowledge regarding queer populations. This data also helped David to establish a learning plan to equip his staff with the tools to support marginalized populations such as LGBTQ.

Several principals in the study effectively used data as a resource to substantiate the moral imperative that educators have to eliminate discriminatory practices against queer communities. The data clearly pointed out how LGBTQ students in their schools and across the
country continue to be victimized daily by exclusionary school environments. Several principals reported that using the data with staff opened the doors for discussion and collective action to make a difference for LGBTQ people.

**Making it non-negotiable**

Certain situations warranted that participants use their positional power to ensure that the moral imperative of creating an inclusive school for LGBTQ was non-negotiable. For instance, when a staff member informed Charles that she wanted to send out a letter to parents informing them of the family diversity books, including same sex parents that she would be using in the class, Charles responded that this was not a protocol he wanted to negotiate:

> We are not asking for permission; we’re informing them about the curriculum action you are going to take and how it supports the social, emotional well-being of the students and it’s responding to a need that comes from the kids.

Educators have a moral imperative to teach about all diversities and do not need to forewarn families because LGBTQ is part of the content. Sending home a letter would set precedence that parents needed a heads-up when LGBTQ topics were presented. Charles was happy to report that the teacher no longer felt the need to send home the letter after listening to Charles’s rationale. In a similar vein, despite the resistance that Gregory dealt with at times, he remained passionately stoic in his resolve to ensure that everyone is respected in his school building:

> And all I'm saying is the teachers in this building, the parent community, and the kids will be treated with respect. We may not agree with each other all the time but we will be respectful and supportive of each other here.

According to Gregory, people can park their beliefs outside the school doors since ensuring a safe learning environment for everyone was paramount and non-negotiable.

Through their positional power, principals also insisted on purchasing resources that were reflective of all diversities, including sexual minority populations. Gregory emphasized that it was important for LGBTQ populations to see themselves and their families reflected in the
resources around the school, noting however, “But I had to force the fact that it needs to be embedded so I had to purchase books for the school library; we have the safe spaces posters up everywhere” (Gregory). Jerome elaborated further that decisions to purchase inclusive resources were based on the premise that all students and staff in the JK to 8 continuums needed to have access to these resources because LGBTQ populations exist in all school communities:

And it influences all your decisions because it's infused in your purchasing decisions so they need the right resources in the hands of the teachers which can put them in the hands of the kids. You know whether it's through the early stages around diversity of families in the primary grades or in your junior/intermediate grades; that there are LGBTQ characters in the novels that they read. [So] we're using engaging materials for students that are reflective of the communities that we serve that reflect the identities that are represented in our world; whether there are LGBTQ students in our school and we know mathematically it has to be so.

Whether people believed LGBTQ individuals existed or did not exist in his school community, Jerome was ardent in his decisions to dedicate money to inclusive resources. It is evident in Jerome’s stance that, like the others above, he viewed the moral imperative to fairly represent all diversities as non-negotiable.

**Pressure and Support**

Using positional power to exert pressure and support proved beneficial for participants in their efforts to ensure different facets of LGBTQ inclusivity were carried out. Jerome contested that educators are being held accountable by students to make certain this area of diversity is given the due diligence it deserves:

You know our students are holding us accountable, for you know this is a subject matter and this is something that needs to be considered. So we do a lot of teaching and learning around bullying prevention, again positive climates for learning and you know creating an inclusive environment. So they, it's in their [students’] language now.

According to Jerome, students are becoming better versed in and more accepting of this dimension of equity, perhaps as a result of popular culture and social media, so schools need to
keep current: “I don't know if it's a result of a “popular culture” and the advent of things like Glee and Modern Family, [but] it's very much a part of [students’ experiences].” Gregory explained further that school administrators need to do their part to unequivocally support teachers who embark on LGBTQ inclusive measures: “It's empowering to know that if you step out on that limb, I'm there to catch you if a parent comes at you. I will back you 100%.” In other words, fear and insecurity can be overcome if administrators provide the preconditions for school staff to take risks when dealing with topics that may incite adversity for some parents and students.

However, participants also recognized that despite facilitating the conditions for staff to integrate LGBTQ themes in their school and classroom contexts, principals also needed to strategically apply different levels of pressure and support at times in order to fulfill this mandate. This section discusses how principals enacted various pressure and support tactics by equipping staff with appropriate and accessible resources, by mandating certain activities and through intentional follow up with staff.

Making resources available and accessible
Participants intentionally facilitated resource acquisition for their schools so that staff could readily access materials reflective of LGBTQ people. Participants were also strategic in which resources they purchased so that LGBTQ did not overshadow other diversity topics or become a principal’s “hidden agenda”:

I am very strategic about everything I do. I say [to teachers], “I like that”, and I say, “Have you considered purchasing these as well?” in order to make it more well-rounded. I won’t focus only on LGBTQ but it will be part of the conversation. But it is not the only thing that comes up but it will come up when I have conversations with staff. But it is not the only thing that comes up so they feel that I have an agenda. I don’t but I know that there are kids at the school who are questioning. They need support and they need to see themselves reflected in the building (Theresa).
Using a similar approach, Elizabeth was “always looking with an eye for resources that have equity topics.” In this way, principals in this study ensured that students and staff could see LGBTQ within the broader equity themes.

Several participants were strategic in their intentions to provide teachers and librarians with book lists that included LGBTQ topics. These lists also supported the school wide equity goals for which staff members were accountable. For example, Monica purchased a human rights book for all classroom teachers focusing on the rights of a child. Monica explained that this book aligned with their school focus and was also a “really great jumping off point” for staff to open up discussions around the rights of all human beings, including sexual minorities. Mary deliberately displayed LGBTQ resources in her office to share with staff and purposefully pointed to similar resources housed in the library that staff and students could access. Likewise, Theresa asked her teacher librarian to inventory the library so that a portion of the budget could be allocated to augment LGBTQ resources. David was strategic when optimizing the opportunity to purchase updated equity resources reflective of all diversities during library renovations. He also ensured that dated materials were culled to make room for the newer ones.

In all these instances, school leaders involved themselves strategically in the acquisition of equity related resources. In this vein, participants concluded that staff felt the pressure to integrate these resources since they complimented school equity goals and were readily available, approved and accessible.

In a similar vein, participants recognized that staff needed resources to deal with homophobic banter or complaints from school community members. In this way, principals could also hold staff members accountable for addressing issues that arose rather than feign
ignorance about how to deal with them. For instance, Charles introduced a “problem solving” resource card to teach staff strategies for confronting homophobia:

It gives the teachers strategy -something to refer to in order to address the language immediately and directly and say that “it is not okay!”. That the person who heard it would be responsible for dealing with it directly and also have the responsibility to communicate it to the office or members of the leadership team. They were posted in every classroom.

More so, this strategy supported Charles’ efforts to quash bullying because it held teachers responsible to respond directly to incidents in a timely manner. Other participants acknowledged the need for resources to support staff members who faced resistance from the school community. Francis emphasized the importance of working with staff to have “their sentence ready” in order to “challenge stereotypes respectfully and rapidly”. These types of resources obligated staff to respond to homophobic epithets because they had the resources to do so.

Similarly, staff at Mary’s school requested a script so that they could comfortably and confidently respond to parental complaints:

I’ve had people come and ask me “what would I say to a parent if a parent asked” and I’ve provided them with responses. It was interesting because at one of our staff meetings, we actually talked about creating a script so that we can all have the same words to share if a parent ever said anything to us.

Veronica went on to further delineate that, for some staff, a prescribed approach is required: “But you can't do that if you are a teacher that doesn’t understand or doesn't have the passion for that. You need a recipe for it, you know what I mean? It's got to be a prescription.” In this way, the resources principals provided played a key role in holding staff accountable to follow up with complaints or homophobic banter. This was strategic on the part of participants to ensure staff had the tools to deal with issues, rather than ignore them. Through this type of pressure and support, principals were able to ensure bullying was addressed and topics dealing with gay populations were explored in the classrooms.
**Mandating the work**

Using their positional power, principals mandated certain kinds of work as a tactic to move the LGBTQ agenda forward. The “school plan”, for which staff was accountable to implement, was strategically leveraged by several participants such as Gregory and Charles, who secured LGBTQ inclusive strategies within it. Several participants commented that this tactic afforded them the authority to force resistors into compliance. Additionally, it clearly messaged to parents and other school stakeholder groups that school equity goals included LGBTQ communities and grounded participants’ efforts in mandating certain activities.

In addition to using the school plan to advance LGBTQ representation, principals found different effective strategies to ensure LGBTQ inclusion took place in their schools. When staff and students at Charles’s school embarked on Pink Day activities, Charles mandated that each class participate in theme based activities around anti-bullying. On a similar note, teachers at Anthony’s school needed to assess student progress on anti-bullying units and include a mark on their report cards:

> We have a program in the board that stops the bullying and so all the teachers and all of the classes have to do this every year and at the beginning of the year. It’s age appropriate and they ask them to report on it on their report card so they are accountable for it (Anthony).

This strategy holds teachers accountable to explore LGBTQ themes with students in addition to assessing student work. Further to this, Anthony could apply pressure on staff who did not comply by reminding them of the implications of such actions:

> What you don't want to have happen is your class doesn’t do it. And everybody else does it and it comes back to you that you haven't done what you were expected to do and why are your kids missing out on it and what is it saying about you when everyone just does it? (Anthony)
Similarly, when staff acquired resources or attended workshops on equity topics, Gregory mandated that any new learning be shared with colleagues in order to build collective capacity:

So I think if there is again the balance of pressure and support where I'll support you by providing you things. I'll provide you with resources, I provided you with books, I've paid for people to go to the equity conference. I will support you and all of that but when you get back here you're presenting at the staff meeting on what you got out of it. You're going to be sharing the resources with the division you know all those kinds of things. That's what it is going to be; the pressure you're going to get from me. You can put all that in your portfolio that you've done all this but I'm not supporting it if I don't see it come back into the classroom.

This type of pressure and support demonstrated Gregory’s commitment to equity. Mandating the sharing also allowed staff to continue their shared learning around these important topics.

Furthermore, Gregory mandated attendance at certain events:

We brought in Chris D’Souza (guest speaker). He did presentations with Grades 4 and up and he talked about all dimensions of diversity and that was kind of mandatory attendance of all students and teachers. We did that again around the international day against homophobia. It was publicized for a couple of weeks. I was pleasantly surprised and pleased, there was no negative feedback. There was nothing -like nothing came.

Through such directives, Gregory could ensure that all staff and students were privy to the learning. This also impressed upon staff that learning about LGBTQ populations is not optional.

The actions taken by these school leaders to exert pressure and support by mandating certain tasks was influential in facilitating an inclusive environment for LGBTQ. Using their positional power, principals made certain that their school plans and activities resonated respect, equity and inclusivity for queer communities.

Following up with individuals

Despite mandating certain tasks, participants discussed the importance of following up with individuals to exert the pressure and support needed to carry through with assigned responsibilities. Several participants strategically employed “walkthroughs” to apply pressure
and hold teachers accountable to infuse LGBTQ topics in the class: “I think if you were to walk around and talk to my staff, I think they would tell you right away they know that I'm ensuring it, I'm always on the lookout” (Elizabeth). During her walk-throughs, Theresa would follow up with teachers by probing them with questions such as “Have you thought about this?” This facilitated staff’s ability to recognize the gaps in their teaching of equity topics. Additionally, Theresa took advantage of the teacher performance appraisal process (TPA) to hold staff accountable for embedding equity topics in their programs.

Francis also found that following up with staff helped him hold reticent teachers accountable for implementing LGBTQ activities:

I am interested in seeing what gets created for gay pride week, and I will have a conversation with a teacher who I think struggles a little bit and I think she struggles with her own religious convictions and her acceptance and promotion of LGBTQ issues. But I will ask her “What are your plans for gay pride celebration?”

These one-on-one conversations provided the impetus needed for all staff to move along with the school’s equity journey. Similarly, staff members at Gregory’s school were cognizant of the follow up that would occur:

Once every term, what I’ve asked the staff is to use either the [LGBTQ resources] or the marginalization documents that we've actually written and I just say I don't care how or what you use, but I expect a lesson to be done from that artifact and let me know the time and the date you're doing it because either the vice principal or myself will come in to observe (Gregory).

Gregory, however, would also take the time to follow up with teachers who could not find the “time” to implement the LGBTQ lessons by coaching and guiding them:

I've had to follow up with three teachers now. It wasn't a homophobia situation; it was just they didn’t have their [stuff] together. So they needed some coaching on ok, here's one that would work out well for you and you can go that route. But I mean we could pull things you know directly from the actual documents that we've done.
This pressure tactic reminded everyone that all staff had a responsibility to carry out the school’s equity focus since there would be follow-up. However, Gregory also took the time to guide staff in their implementation efforts.

Principals understood that pressure and support was warranted in certain cases to carry out the LGBTQ mandate. Notwithstanding, their follow up with staff was equally important, both collectively and individually, to ensure this work was carried out. In this way, participants could strategically and more effectively ensure a more systemic approach to LGBTQ content integration in the school.

**Building a Cadre of Equity Advocates**

Participants in this study recognized that LGBTQ inclusion work couldn’t be done alone. One of the key considerations in moving the agenda forward was principals’ capabilities to mobilize groups of dedicated individuals at all levels of the organization: “It doesn't have to be you, the principal, but you need to surround yourself with people who are willing to do the work. And do the work well” (Bernadette). To this end, principals strategically enacted various tactics to establish a committed group of allies and supporters who were willing to embark on this challenging work. Thus, participants were strategic in who they hired, in how they distributed the leadership and with whom they formed networks and alliances to support them in their LGBTQ inclusion endeavours.

**Hiring the right people**

As a principal, Anthony assumed responsibility to support new hires with classroom management, curriculum implementation and assessment. However, he recognized that changing their belief systems would be much more difficult. In this vein, while interviewing
candidates, Anthony deliberately asked questions about positive spaces to observe if the
questions elicited particular responses or reactions:

The other one is positive spaces and making sure that everyone feels safe regardless of
their sexual orientation or gender. So I'm watching for the reaction and many of them -
the ones that I have hired have jumped right in and say “well yes that is pretty important”
and start talking about it and they are starting to talk passionately about it – You’re in.

Such interview questions afforded Anthony the opportunity to hire staff members who genuinely
cared about all people, no matter their culture, sexual orientation and gender, religion,
disabilities, or ethnicity. On a similar note, David contended that hiring the right person for a
replacement position brought the energy and commitment required at his school to keep the
LGBTQ initiatives moving along:

We were strategic in the person we selected and we are lucky that we have a fantastic
person who is our LTO [long term occasional teacher], who is very open and high
energy, innovative in terms of searching for resources and also decided partway through
the year to try to direct more resources towards [LGBTQ].

In this manner, hiring the right people who have a deep appreciation for diversity and inclusion
constituted one way for participants to safeguard established equity and social justice practices at
their schools.

**Shared leadership approaches**

Participants strategically found ways to work with key and influential individuals,
distribute the leadership among equity oriented staff and leverage student leadership in their
inclusive endeavours.

**Key staff members**

Theresa explained that working alongside influential staff can impact how others at the
school move along the equity continuum: “I find that if you go to the staff who are easy to move,
they tend to influence their grade partners because they work together, they plan together”. In
this vein, despite a small teaching staff, Mary emphasized the power of one person to significantly influence others to embark on LGBTQ inclusivity:

Well thanks to our equity rep for the past few years, I know [who] was really phenomenal, we really did get the spotlight and the focus on LGBTQ issues and I think that was absolutely needed and necessary.

On a similar note, Jerome noted that one of his strongest allies was the kindergarten teacher who had expertise in the area of LGBTQ:

One of my strongest allies for the LGBTQ community is one of our kindergarten teachers and she has been a significant advocate both from a positive climate for learning at the school and system leadership perspective but also in terms of what this looks like in kindergarten.

By tapping into her expertise, Jerome observed how she influenced her grade-level partners:

With respect to this particular teacher’s approach, she just ensures that the language she uses around boy versus girl; around blue and pink is very inclusive. We’re not pigeonholing a student into one particular gender or stereotype that we’re breaking all of those pieces down and being very critical around the messaging.

In addition to impacting her colleagues in kindergarten, she also began to broaden her sphere of influence to other staff though presentations at staff meetings and modeling of inclusive strategies. Further to this, Gabriel acknowledged that starting on a smaller scale with influential individuals was strategic in helping him steadily harness school wide support for this equity work:

We needed to go broader, smaller information first, but then we needed to go broader because we also know that once you start with the smaller group, they go and talk and plant some seeds. And they become leaders in your building.

He confirmed that having some staff plant the seeds for LGBTQ initiatives boded well in helping him to establish and broaden inclusive practices at his school.

Other principals such as Veronica and Theresa tapped into librarians who took on different leadership roles in disseminating LGBTQ resources and curriculum connections to classroom teachers: “The teacher librarian takes a lead role. Especially at division meetings
where she shares books for units around community and family make up and sharing the books that are available for read alouds” (Theresa). Participants appreciated the efforts of these individual staff members who embraced LGBTQ inclusion. Additionally, the LGBTQ inclusivity agenda did not need to come solely from the school principal.

Distributing the leadership

In addition to relying on individual experts or committed equity advocates, participants also mobilized support from teams of individuals to strategically build capacity in enhancing LGBTQ inclusion. For example, equity teams at Francis’s school were instrumental in creating resources such as LGBTQ information PowerPoints for staff professional development. Further to this, Charles’ equity team provided supports for parents, staff and students through “prevention” and “appropriate programming” to meet the needs of same sex couples and students victimized by homophobia. They would help run staff meetings to guide staff in their inclusive endeavours:

We also had staff meetings where we spoke about students who were marginalized and we would break into groups to strategize, really based on grade divisions where the students were and that was always facilitated by members of the leadership teams…The committee would split up amongst the groups by division to problem solve and come up with recommendations or strategies for greater inclusion.

Several members on this team took it upon themselves to conduct research on appropriate elementary LGBTQ resources, which was “pretty empowering”, according to Charles.

In David’s experience working in a large school, his equity team regularly invited new members, which helped the team expand their scope of influence. According to David, this strategy helped build capacity among staff by increasing their confidence and comfort level when dealing with LGBTQ topics or issues. More so, David observed that having an expansive equity team yielded further benefits, as he outlined in this passage:
But the benefit is that you have people from all kinds of different experiences. For instance, one of our folks as an example is very involved and supportive, is a former child and family services youth worker and so coming from that background, where ever possible uses that experience and also resources and is a connection for resources because they have quite a few resources that are on related topics. So tapping into people that have had previous careers. We have also a couple of folks that are child and youth workers now at our school and have formerly had similar types of work but in group homes. So seeing that experience from an abuse perspective and unfortunately much of what impacts on sexuality of young people has to do with their experiences at a young age and if they have been healthy or not. So making those connections and dealing with our students in our classes are just a couple of examples. Try to tap into people’s professional and personal experience and interests.

This diversified team provided various levels of expertise and services for school community members at David’s school.

For some participants, using a distributive leadership approach entailed taking a back seat, loosening the reins of positional power and allowing others to take control: “Much of the workshop was teacher facilitated. I participated as a participant in the meeting, not as a facilitator or as a presenter - so again, distributive leadership philosophy of really empowering teachers to take on leadership roles” (Jerome). In this manner, harnessing the talents of inclusive minded individuals to work collectively in pursuit of common social justice goals was strategic and key in assisting school leaders to advance LGBTQ visibility in their school contexts.

**Student leadership**

Allowing students to be an integral part of the shared leadership approach also boded well in helping principals highlight LGBTQ inclusivity measures. Theresa leveraged her student led groups to focus on anti-bullying initiatives:

We have our anti-bullying group within the schools- it is student led with support from our CYW’s. They do bullying prevention initiatives within the school. They do bullying announcements every morning and they are inclusive of LGBTQ, so it is out there.
She noted that this strategy afforded students opportunities to give voice and leadership into matters dealing with safe school environments. In a similar approach, Jerome optimized student leadership to implement different safe school initiatives:

For example, we have a student leadership group that wants to start an elementary school Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in our school. So when your students become the champions for this work and they’re the ones that will target and address the schoolyard issues of “that's so gay”; when students start stepping up and taking on the role and saying we don't talk like that, it's not right. Your students become your strongest advocates because we know that students respond to the feedback and the interventions of their peers potentially even better than they would to an adult or to a staff member in a school.

According to Jerome, students had a positive impact on reducing incidents of bullying and homophobia. Likewise, the student council at Gregory’s school was instrumental in highlighting anti-bullying themes throughout the entire school, helping coordinate a Pink Shirt Day t-shirt design contest, which Gregory helped subsidize financially. To Gregory’s surprise, his school was a “sea of pink”, which demonstrated the power of student leadership in strategically promoting anti-bullying.

Part of Mary’s rationale for honing student leadership was grounded in her belief that schools must influence students to become responsible global citizens who are caring and inclusive, no matter where they live. In this vein, student leadership teams at Mary’s school were strategic in organizing spirit and fun days in addition to modeling positive and healthy relations among school community members, which she explained below:

I recognize the kind of community that I work in which is prominently WASP and certainly heterosexual, but that doesn't matter. We are a tiny little piece of a much bigger world and it's all about having that vision to what becomes of the children that we are educating every day. So are we creating the kinds of citizens that we want to move forward in this world or are we just creating them for the small little community where we are? So we have a student leadership team. You are student leaders, you need to set the path that is the right path, you need to model for the younger students.
These instances highlight that the power of staff and student shared leadership, voice and activism cannot be underestimated. This underlying theme magnified participants’ abilities to exercise strategic advocacy by distributing leadership at different levels to positively impact their efforts for LGBTQ inclusion.

**Networks and Alliances**

Participants’ strategic advocacy enactments also entailed networking and forging alliances that would intentionally facilitate inclusive school contexts. Monica spoke to the importance of involving community “officers” at her school to address important matters about safety and caring schools. Such alliances impressed upon the student body the seriousness of certain infractions such as bullying and harassment. During equity team meetings, Gabriel invited a “community lead” who brought a different lens to the discussions around creating positive spaces: “We have a community lead teacher as well that we are really excited about because that was a neat person to have at the table because this is their community”. Other principals emphasized the benefits of belonging to positive space pilot programs. David described how pilot schools have preferential treatment because of their access to professional learning, consultants, resources and outside agencies. Similarly, by chairing a system level committee, Anthony liaised with senior board officials to acquire financial support for the purchases of family diversity resources, professional development and safe space posters for his school and other schools in the board. Accordingly, through his system level leadership, Anthony was able to underscore the need to bring Positive Spaces to elementary schools, which was lacking:

During this time, I was one of the chairs for [system level equity] committee for schools. We have a few initiatives every year, one of initiatives is Positive Spaces. So we found out from talking to people, there are a lot of positive spaces happening in high schools but very little happening at elementary. So we decided to push, to get people to put it to the forefront. Through the support of our superintendent we had these positive spaces,
half-day for one administrator and one or more teachers to go to, and we have positive spaces reps…Well two of us were chairing this committee so we felt the need to make sure it happened. At the end of it basically, all the administrators and their teachers had to submit a plan for what they were doing for promoting positive spaces in their schools.

Anthony capitalized on this role as Chair to enhance positive spaces initiatives at his school in addition to holding other school teams accountable for their implementation plans.

Participants also expressed the need to network with board personnel, consultants, social workers, supervisory officers, Children’s Aid Society (CAS) and/or legal counsel. In Bernadette’s case, calling on all these individuals and organizations helped her navigate through unchartered waters involving the parents of a transgendered student who did not want to recognize their child’s needs: “I didn’t do any of this work alone. It was guided and supported.” As a result, Bernadette found more confidence and knowledge in her capabilities to deal with complex issues. For many participants, then, part of exercising strategic advocacy required the ability to network and forge alliances with different people and organizations that could support them in creating welcoming and safe environments for queer populations.

**Summary**

Participants were very strategic in their efforts to move the LGBTQ agenda forward: “We do need to move forward strategically but you don’t need to be apologetic for the work!” (Jerome). Highlighting educators’ moral imperative to support all learners reinforced that school staff members could not pick and choose who they wanted to include. All school community members have a right to be treated respectfully, equitably and with dignity. The majority of participants also noted that applying the right balance of pressure and support was needed to ensure LGBTQ visibility and topics were infused in their schools in order to keep the inclusivity agenda at the forefront and moving forward. Finally, participants understood that embarking on
this work alone would be extremely challenging and difficult. In this vein, they strategically found ways to harness the leadership of staff and students to champion different LGBTQ inclusivity initiatives.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored different strategies participants employed to overcome barriers to LGBTQ inclusion. In particular, I borrow from Ryan’s (2013; 2014) conceptualization of inclusive leaders who enacted different strategies to move the LGBTQ inclusivity agenda forward. Specific strategies used entailed fostering school community relationships, communication practices, critical learning strategies and exercising strategic advocacy. In doing so, principals were better positioned to create school environments that were safe and respectful places for LGBTQ. Additionally, through these strategies, principals promoted learning about LGBTQ needs and topics and found ways to encourage intentional topic integration both school wide and within classrooms.

Participants shared how they forged relations with sexual minority populations, allies and resistors in their efforts to create safe and caring schools that gave credence to LGBTQ voice and existence, despite some challenging school contexts. Participants noted the importance of ongoing open and transparent communication with all school community stakeholders to underscore the importance of sustaining a school ethos that is respectful of all diversities, including LGBTQ communities. However, in some instances, principals needed to embark on courageous conversations with resistors to clearly communicate their stance in support of gay populations. To move school community members along the equity continuum, participants honed the critical consciousness of staff, students and parents through critical learning strategies.
Through these efforts, participants endeavoured to engender in others a deeper appreciation and understanding for LGBTQ inclusion by embedding LGBTQ themes and topics within the school as well as in the classrooms. Finally, participants exercised strategic advocacy to harness the support of equity advocates to move this agenda forward. Additionally, participants strategically employed other tactics such as underscoring the moral imperative of educators to treat all individuals fairly and respectfully, in addition to applying pressure and support on staff and students to ensure LGBTQ populations are equitably represented in their schools and classrooms.

Although participants expressed concerns that considerable work still needs to be done to secure LGBTQ voice in their school contexts, they demonstrated that such work is possible. Participants recognized that a steadfast commitment, concerted efforts and a steady pace was needed to sustain caring and inclusive schools for queer communities. That being said, understanding the school community was a key factor in deciding how they went about enacting various strategies for inclusion. Additionally, participants observed that today’s student body, which is much more in tune with LGBTQ topics than past generations, also aided in realizing their equity and inclusive goals for this population. Finally, several participants observed the tangible benefits of their inclusive efforts on LGBTQ people in addition to broadening the perspectives of others around equity topics. Notwithstanding, principals all concurred that this work needs to remain at the forefront because of the various barriers associated with LGBTQ inclusive efforts. In the next chapter, I outline the additional supports participants identified for themselves and other school leaders in order to effectively sustain safe school environments, promote professional and personal learning around LGBTQ topics and ensure LGBTQ communities are fairly represented within curriculum content.
Chapter Eight: Supports Principals Require in their LGBTQ Inclusive Efforts

Data from this study has thus far established that, using a myriad of strategies, participants confronted prolific hegemonic structures to give voice to LGBTQ populations. Moreover, by adopting a social justice activist stance, these leaders committed themselves to promoting an LGBTQ inclusive agenda to minimize negative consequences for persons identifying as LGBTQ. Participants worked hard to create a safe school environment for LGBTQ and found ways to encourage learning about LGBTQ and intentionally integrate positive LGBTQ themes in the curriculum.

However, participants also voiced concerns that more robust supports are required in abetting efforts for inclusivity within their schools and districts. In that vein, participants discussed the integral components they believed necessary in creating school communities that fairly represent gay populations. Participants also outlined the necessity to have certain dimensions of LGBTQ inclusivity mandated in elementary settings. Additionally, participants underscored the resources and training required for all school community members in order to propel this equity agenda forward. Finally, some participants shared that society as a whole needs to be more inclusive of LGBTQ in order to effect positive and long lasting changes for this community. These findings are further explored in the sections that follow.

Components for LGBTQ Inclusivity- Connecting the Dots

Participants in this study shed light on the criticality of ensuring that their schools are safe and caring places; that learning around LGBTQ themes occurs; and that curriculum endorses and promotes LGBTQ existence. Through their LGBTQ inclusive approaches,
participants described how they managed to overcome barriers and obstructive attitudes and beliefs. Subsequently, their schools were safer places for LGBTQ populations and some school community members developed a deeper understanding for this population’s needs through critical learning opportunities. Participants also found ways to weave queer themes within school curricula and co-curricular activities. However, in order for their LGBTQ inclusive efforts to be sustained and woven within the fabric of their school communities, participants expressed that all three components - creating safe places, targeted professional learning and LGBTQ content integration - must occur in tandem. Theresa further expanded on this notion:

It is almost like the instructional core. You can’t have one without the other. You cannot do one and not the other. You can’t focus on curriculum without the professional learning. You can’t have a safe spot for students and families without the professional learning for staff and providing the resources. You can’t have one without the other. They are all connected.

Theresa’s statement strongly resonated with other participants who also expressed that all three components must be connected and activated concurrently to foster a cohesive approach to embracing LGBTQ communities.

Student safety is paramount; a belief all participants espoused. Veronica and Mary both emphasized that without safe school environments students become anxious and stressed, which can negatively impact learning. Hence, LGBTQ students need to be afforded the same safety and acceptance rights in order to enhance their chances for higher academic outcomes. Charles contended that professional learning can help others understand why safe school environments need to be fostered for LGBTQ:

You can’t have a resource without the background knowledge around the data, the statistics, the impact that it [homophobia] has at all age levels and without any of that professional learning or the curriculum, we won’t have a safe school.
According to Charles, sharing data that highlights LGBTQ victimization is advantageous in serving as a catalyst to validate that gay populations need to feel welcomed and safe in schools.

Further to this, Jerome noted that professional learning must be the precursor to curriculum integration, particularly since gay populations continue to be underrepresented and unsupported in different facets of school life and society:

And I do worry. I would be apprehensive of you bringing in an inclusive curriculum around LGBTQ with no professional learning or background knowledge as a staff member … That really is a critical piece. There can be harm done. You need to be equipped you know on how to handle questions. You don't have to have all the answers and you don't have to have them all immediately, but I think you do need to respond, you need to have a response. So there is sort of a basic level of understanding that needs to be infused through professional learning in order to tackle the inclusive curriculum you know because it is and continues to be a topic. There will be questions, whether they be on the part of students or the part of parents or the part of family members or on the part of a community… there will be questions.

Consequently, professional learning is key in helping staff understand the complexities associated with sexual identities, in addition to providing them with the tools to address concerns or questions that arise from different stakeholder groups. In this vein, many participants concurred with Jerome that LGBTQ curriculum integration must be preceded by professional development. Additionally, professional learning that encourages content integration is a key factor in helping LGBTQ feel acknowledged, as underscored by Elizabeth:

The focus is around the Ministry making sure students are reflected in the curriculum because students won’t engage in the curriculum unless they are reflected in the curriculum. So inclusive curriculum means it’s all linked to student successes as well. Just creating a nice caring school is one thing but if you don't do the things around the curriculum piece, you lose the achievement piece for kids.

When students see themselves reflected in classroom activities and resources, their self-confidence and sense of self-worth is enhanced; a belief many principals embraced. More so,
when LGBTQ positive images and content are weaved throughout the curriculum, the LGBTQ community as a whole benefits from inclusive school environments.

Nonetheless, as pointed out in the literature review, LGBTQ remains a significantly underrepresented population in school life as a result of many factors and barriers. Hence, LGBTQ inclusion necessitates concerted efforts on the part of professionals, as elaborated on by Mary:

It needs to be something that, the part that has to happen in spite of groups out there, it has to be done. You have to use the same patience, the same sort of relentless diplomacy in moving forward but it has to happen because until the institution makes it something that is acceptable, in reality it's still a peripheral entity and it's dependent on individuals to make it acceptable.

According to Mary, LGBTQ prominence can be secured through the diligent efforts of inclusive oriented educators who embrace all diversities. However, more backing at the provincial and district levels is needed to substantiate this population’s rights to belong. Additionally, mandating the work from higher authorities is required in order to defend LGBTQ inclusivity in public elementary schools; a strong belief expressed by principals in this study.

**Mandating the Work**

Although participants weaved a narrative of hope through their abilities to promote more welcoming and inclusive schools for queer populations, systematically advancing this work on a large scale and in a timely manner continues to be an uphill battle. Consequently, participants opined that all areas of the LGBTQ inclusivity agenda needed to be mandated within safe schools, professional learning and inclusive curricula. To this end, a clear message is sent to all community members, staff, supply teachers and visitors that gay populations are an integral part of school life, a statement reiterated by Charles and other participants.
In particular, participants underscored how the Ministry and board mandates and accountability procedures undergird this agenda’s ability to effectively move forward systematically across the province. Even in schools where LGBTQ populations are visible and more prevalently accepted, participants like Monica concurred that mandates are still required across the system. She stated that more can be done to deliberately highlight LGBTQ:

And do more that we can to support the students and families that are reflective of that. So I think it's just more tapping into the resources that are already there. And being explicit about what we are doing sometimes and you know saying that we have a positive space for children which we haven't done. So that's kind of like the next, natural next step.

To this end, Monica pointed out that LGBTQ needs to be “explicitly” mentioned as a legitimate topic. For example, Monica stressed that educators should be able to teach family diversity topics that specifically address LGBTQ families or confidently be able to say “we have a positive space for children” in any school community without fear of repercussions.

In this vein, participants recommended that Ministry and districts adopt clear and explicit policies and guidelines to warrant such inclusive efforts:

In terms of the Ministry, it has to start there. When they are redesigning curriculum, it needs to be explicit in the big ideas…Whatever they do, it needs to be inclusive of all groups. So that it is seen from the top. This applies really to all boards (Theresa).

For Theresa, it was important that her school community perceived that this work came from a higher authority so that it would not be associated as her personal agenda. Further to this, Mary shared that it would be beneficial for her teachers and support staff to hear senior staff endorse their commitment to this dimension of equity:

I think opportunities for that at different levels need to happen. I think if teachers ever had the opportunity to listen directly to our directors of education, I think that's really
important, not just to the [school] leaders. I think that's important that we break down the hierarchy sometimes and we all work together.

Hence, school employees need to see that this work is supported at higher levels, that it permeates other levels of the organization and that it is a collective goal all board employees need to work towards.

On a similar note, Charles demonstrated the power that certain policies and safe school legislation afforded him in quashing homophobic banter. In particular, he described how he was able to position recent anti-bullying Ministry regulations as his “authority” to combat homophobia by holding all staff, students, lunch supervisors and volunteers accountable for addressing it. However, as noted by several participants, homophobia is not consistently dealt with across schools and districts. As such, Charles contended that more robust policies are needed so that all schools are obligated to follow procedures to deal with ongoing incidents of homophobia. More so, according to participants, many safe schools and equity policies still lack clear connections to support and protect LGBTQ communities.

Bernadette explained the need to measure different levels of LGBTQ integration to hold educators accountable: “Yes we are told we need to have an equity goal, but what are people doing to really know they’ve created a safe and open space for everyone?” Bernadette implied that school equity goals need to clearly outline steps taken to include gay populations. Further to this, Gregory accentuated that equity goals need to be as equally valued as literacy and numeracy. Educators must be responsible for addressing equity and social justice themes throughout the curriculum. He cautioned that even well intentioned individuals would push the equity agenda aside if it does not appear to be at par with other Ministry and board initiatives. Other participants like Veronica expressed that LGBTQ inclusion should not be an “option”; that
it needs to be mandated so that school staff have no choice but to recognize and respect this
dimension of diversity. Anthony proposed that any “though shalt” statements be backed up by
tangible actions:

There needs to be, for example, something on the report card. If you don’t, if it’s not expected, you won't do it really. People do what’s expected of them. That’s it. If our superintendent or director says “you need [to put] it in one of these report cards- a comment about inclusivity and LGBTQ issues, whatever that is, whatever it looks like. It needs to be more explicit.

Participants were adamant that mechanisms be put in place to follow up with and hold school leaders accountable for their inclusive efforts. Otherwise, school administrators may embark on equity work that includes certain groups while excluding others.

Resources

In addition to explicit mandates, participants described an array of resources that should accompany LGBTQ inclusivity work including print and web-based resources, human resources, training and professional learning, and opportunities to network and share best practices. Each of these areas is discussed further in the following sections.

Print and web-based resources

Accessing mainstream resources that positively and equitably reflect LGBTQ communities was a belief communicated by several participants. However, as Charles cautioned, principals need to ensure they are “approved resources” in order to increase staff confidence and comfort in using them. Jerome further explained that gay populations have
evolved to include different gender identities. Hence, print and web based materials need to be current and “up to date” to encompass the multiple identities of this population. To support leaders and educators in integrating LGBTQ friendly resources, Veronica recommended a “prescriptive document” to clearly delineate what is appropriate and realistic for each grade level:

I think that if we had a prescriptive document that was able to lay out what these small successes might look like—then people would see the work as attainable. Right now it seems like “oh my gosh, how can I even go there?” But if you laid it out, the small [steps], this is; what to do, then it makes it easier to start in your school.

According to Veronica, it can be as simple as organizing a school wide Pink Day as a first step. Hence, the prescribed document can offer a continuum of activities that schools can implement to advance their equity goals for LGBTQ.

**Human Resources**

Participants expressed that schools need access to advocates or experts in the area of LGBTQ inclusion. Charles indicated that someone needs to champion this work at the system level so that it is protected and remains at the forefront:

You need to have somebody to champion it with consistency and while we have our teacher liaison, we need somebody else, maybe the director but if not the director, then maybe somebody on the board of trustees, and a superintendent and somebody in these key departments who are taking it on and championing it readily, actively, and ardently because it’s important to do so.

Jerome noted further that a “point person” or “consultant” at the board would be beneficial in responding to staff questions about implementation strategies and issues in a timely manner. In
addition, Jerome underscored the advantages of establishing a network for teachers and school leaders to go for LGBTQ guidance and information. Another significant human resource that should be consulted, according to Bernadette and Gabriel, are LGBTQ students. These leaders emphasized that so much can be gleaned from listening to and acting on the needs of students whose sexual orientation and gender identity require special attention. Both administrators learned a great deal about the needs of transgendered individuals just by listening to the students who identified as transgendered.

Training and professional learning

The need for ongoing training and professional learning specifically around queer communities was a reoccurring motif in the data. For instance, Jerome pointed to what he perceived as the absence of LGBTQ topics in teacher training programs:

I don't recall this being a facet of my [initial teacher] training. I think it needs to be infused in teacher training. I think it, something from the Ontario College of Teachers. People need base understanding, basic knowledge and understanding from the very early stages of their career. Because now we're playing catch-up…So I think from the very early stages of their career, they need, there needs to be a requirement for certification to teach in Ontario that you will have [this training].

It is important that teacher candidates and novice teachers understand the complexities of teaching in highly diverse school communities so that they can more effectively serve their school communities. Charles contested that although school administrators have been receiving equity training on a more regular basis, LGBTQ needs to be “on the radar” more consistently during these learning opportunities. Further to this, Gabriel described the positive impact job embedded learning has on teacher professional development. He stressed that time and money to release teachers for critical learning sessions would bode well in supporting staff’s ability to
dismantle heterosexual structures in their pedagogical practices and resources. In addition to school staff participating in training and professional learning, Francis emphasized that training should occur for all levels of the organization: “All people, all stakeholders at all levels. We need to continue to educate [them].” Senior team, trustees, caretakers, educational assistants, school secretaries and so forth need to be exposed to these topics to better meet the demands of their changing school contexts. For instance, caretakers can accommodate restroom and change-room requests for transgender and gender variant individuals. Office secretaries can be more inclusive in their approach to addressing and welcoming same sex parents. In this way, board employees can all gain a better awareness and understanding through ongoing training of the different dimensions of diversity that exist in their work environments, an opinion many participants expressed.

**Networking and sharing best practices**

Networking and sharing best practices are catalysts for effective learning experiences, according to several participants. Bernadette, for instance, was excited to hear that a story she shared at a principals’ meeting about how her school supported a transgender student was shared with delegates in other provinces:

I shared with you that I did a session for Principal’s Council; sharing this particular story and they took it out to PEI and they shared it across their delegates. I did it with trepidation. I don't know if I've been doing the right stuff, but I just know that it's on the agenda. It's huge, it's making people talk. If you talk about it, something’s going to happen. Good or bad.

She further exclaimed: “Bring it on. We need successful stories!” Educators need to hear that different schools and boards of education have in fact successfully embarked on creating welcoming and inclusive schools for queer populations. Likewise, Gregory shared resources and
success stories regarding LGBTQ inclusivity at meetings and conferences in hopes of engendering the same enthusiasm and support for this work among educators across different districts. Veronica excitedly imparted her school’s journey in establishing one of the first elementary GSA’s with other jurisdictions. The possibilities for learning through networking and sharing success within one’s district and beyond particularly resonated with Francis:

We have to look to our neighbors on the west coast who are doing brilliant work. We have to look to the province of British Columbia and to our neighbors just south of us; a school board who with all their struggles continue to be our leaders…as their journey has started so many more years ahead of us. We need to encourage brilliant principals…who are truly inclusive and who truly care [to share].

By casting the net wider and broader to network and share success stories, participants found that learning from others who have successfully integrated LGBTQ topics can inspire educators, both locally and globally, to embark on this work.

**Societal Acceptance**

David asserted that LGBTQ presence also needs to be visible and embraced in organizations and institutions across the province so that there can be more acceptance of sexual minority populations in society:

So if we have it constantly improving, getting better through the education system, starting with early daycare, all the way through to whatever form of education- whether it's apprenticeship or postgraduate. Whatever it ends up being but then what about your entry point into the workforce. What about as part of this, you have health and safety training for people -why do we not have equity training for every single career? Every single job or profession and again whether I'm a contractor, I'm a florist, hair design, whatever I do, that it has to [be] legislated. That’s part of the training.

Since society can often dictate how certain populations are perceived by ascribing certain values to a particular group like LGBTQ, it becomes very important to educate individuals about LGBTQ beyond their formal school years: “So I guess my point is expanding beyond education, expanding beyond elementary, secondary, university, colleges to institutions. That’s important
and it has to get better and improving the resources whatever form that they take” (David). Hence, in order to positively impact on the lived realities of queer communities, concomitantly, schools and society need to change the negative attitudes that are prevalent in many institutions by educating people about the importance of nurturing equitable spaces for all diversities.

On another note, Elizabeth brought into focus the notion that hierarchical structures in education and society need to also change to allow for LGBTQ voice to be heard:

We need it to be prepared to take a look at the power dynamics and structures within our society in terms of themselves that are causing those things. I tend to find we are okay with equity issues as long as they exist outside of us. People can talk about equity sometimes when they’re part of the equity equation, because the equity includes you in there; you're factored in

More people from a wide array of backgrounds need to be invited to the table to dialogue so that different voices are heard. If voices continued to be silenced by the dominant discourses, then heterosexual regimes will continue to perpetuate in educational institutions and in society at large.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined various supports that participants described as key to further facilitating their abilities to forge ahead with their inclusive efforts for queer communities. LGBTQ themes should be integrally woven within safe school initiatives, professional learning and school curricula. According to all participants, focusing on all three components simultaneously will provide for a more robust, meaningful integration of LGBTQ populations in school life. Resoundingly, participants believed that the LGBTQ inclusivity formula must include safety, learning and content integration. Each one impacts on the other and when addressed in tandem, can more effectively promote the urgency for LGBTQ inclusive measures.
In order to carry out this inclusive mandate, participants noted that Ministries and boards need to ensure policies and guidelines explicitly reference sexual minority populations. To complement their efforts, participants additionally expressed a need for appropriate and approved resources, system wide training for all stakeholder groups and opportunities to network and share best practices. Notwithstanding, however, implementation pace can impact how the work moves forward. As such, Gabriel cautioned that, in his experience, moving too fast can be a deterrent to the success of such an initiative:

So I think it would be a slow roll out on how it happens. I think we need to realize that the learning here, there is a wide continuum of learning here but we need to respect that. So if we try to go too fast and ask folks to do too many things at once, or expect it right away, it’s just going to be another ball in the air that may not actually get caught, right

Thus, as noted by several participants, mandates, supports and time are major factors to strategically push the LGBTQ inclusivity agenda. Also, some principals remarked that society also needs to embrace LGBTQ populations in order to compliment the inclusive work schools have embarked on.
Chapter Nine: Discussion

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s equity strategy, *Realizing the promise of diversity: Ontario’s equity and inclusive education strategy*, outlines its mandate to create inclusive schools for all forms of diversity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b). Although the Ontario education system advocates for embracing diversity in all of our schools, the province still has much work to do to equitably and fairly represent all minority groups. As illustrated in the literature, LGBTQ communities is one group that continues to be significantly underrepresented and marginalized in schools and in society. Sexual minority youth continue to face exclusionary practices which have negatively impacted on their academics, social, emotional, and physical well-being (Kosciw et al, 2012; Taylor et al, 2011). In light of this, themes around social justice and equity need to be infused in elementary settings so that our young students can learn about notions of respect and acceptance of all diverse groups and misconceptions surrounding this population can be demystified early on (Dewitt, 2012). Hence, this study was undertaken to explore how elementary principals create inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations. In particular, the findings highlight how thirteen inclusive elementary school leaders, working in diverse school contexts, promoted the inclusion of queer communities by employing various strategies.

This study employed a critical theoretical perspective, which affords educators with opportunities to unveil and critically analyze both the school, systemic and societal barriers impeding LGBTQ inclusivity. The study reveals how inclusive principals attempted to address issues of LGBTQ inclusivity by creating safe and caring school climates, ensuring professional learning occurred around LGBTQ topics and facilitating an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum. When these areas were addressed in tandem, principals demonstrated the potential for meaningful
Inclusion. In this vein, principals employed a variety of methods to overcome barriers in promoting safe and welcoming environments, training and learning and content integration. Borrowing from Ryan’s (2013) notion of inclusive leaders, participants employed different interrelated strategies: fostering school community relations, communication strategies, critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy, to move the LGBTQ agenda forward. Documenting these practices adds to the knowledge base around creating inclusive schools for disenfranchised populations such as LGBTQ and is both timely and significant given the exclusionary conditions faced by this population in our schools and our society.

In this chapter, I will examine three prominent themes that emerged from the study. Firstly, I discuss the principals’ commitment to an integrated vision of LGBTQ inclusivity. Secondly, I explore principals’ understanding of the barriers to LGBTQ inclusion and needs for further support. Thirdly, I look at how principals overcame the barriers to LGBTQ by employing a variety of tactics: fostering school community relations, communication strategies, critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy.

**Principals’ Commitment to an Integrated Vision of LGBTQ Inclusivity**

Principal leadership is critical to creating and maintaining inclusive schools that support all students and include all school community members (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006; Ryan 2006b). In this study, I have presented thirteen dedicated individuals who understand issues of inclusion and exclusion and have committed to an inclusive leadership vision and approach that embraces LGBTQ populations. There are many leaders in Ontario who lead for social justice and inclusion; however, locating individuals who include LGBTQ in their pursuit of equitable schools has been challenging because of the various controversies associated with this population. Findings in this study indicate that participants’ conviction to LGBTQ inclusivity
derived from a variety of personal and work related experiences. Another key point is that principals were committed to creating a more fulsome experience of inclusion for LGBTQ populations by endeavouring to create safe spaces for them, facilitating professional learning on LGBTQ themes and working towards weaving a curriculum that honours LGBTQ voice and existence.

**Commitment**

When educational settings silence, oppress and pathologize individuals, then education is exclusive, diminishing hopes and opportunities: “Too many young people do not experience schooling in the ways that allow them to thrive” (Ryan, 2006b, p. 9). Principals in this study understood the negative impact that exclusionary practices have on students and school community members at large. Despite gains made locally and globally in the area of LGBTQ inclusion (Bertram, Crowley, & Massey, 2010), central to participants’ beliefs is that the journey of acceptance and respect for this community is far from over. Schools and society continue to perpetuate hegemonic heterosexual regimes that favour straight people and “gay men and women [and other gender identities], despite marginal progress in the past few years, continue to be excluded in ways that straight people are not” (Ryan, 2006b, p. 43). Society often looks through the lens of male/female binaries, often neglecting other dimensions of sexual identity and gender fluidity that exist (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1990; Pinar, 1998). Hence, evident throughout the study is the school leaders’ drive to ensure LGBTQ individuals receive equitable and fair treatment which privileged populations enjoy.

Theoharis (2007) depicts social justice leaders as “principals who make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States [and other nations] central to their advocacy, leadership practice
and vision” (p.221). Principals in this study took issue with the oppressive structures impacting on LGBTQ youth and families. They became committed to eradicating them so that LGBTQ had access to the same opportunities for success as their heterosexual counterparts. They embodied principles of social justice and inclusionary leadership through their commitment to ensure all students are afforded equitable opportunities for academic and social success (Ryan, 2006a; Ryan 2006b; Theoharis, 2007). Additionally, principals wanted to create schools that honour and celebrate LGBTQ presence.

What motivated participants’ commitment for LGBTQ inclusion? Scores of studies continue to highlight the negative impact school environments have on LGBTQ students, contributing to low academic achievement, absenteeism, social ostracism, dropping out, thoughts of suicidal ideation and depression (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Kosciw, et al, 2012; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Savage & Harley, 2009; Taylor et al, 2011). Resoundingly, principals’ call for action was influenced by their knowledge of the unjust conditions LGBTQ persons faced. Additionally, personal experiences and work related experiences involving LGBTQ situations propelled participants to safeguard this dimension of diversity. Some principals who identify as LGBTQ experienced firsthand discriminatory practices both in school and society. Others witnessed the unjust treatment of sexual minorities in different contexts. These experiences further solidified participants’ commitment to LGBTQ populations.

Further motivation stemmed from principals’ staunch belief system that in order for children to succeed in school, they need to belong, feel safe and be free from harassment, a stance underlined in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s equity strategy and supported by many researchers (Dei et al, 2000 & 2002; Glaze et al, 2012; Ryan 2006 a; 2006b). Further to this,
scholars like Freire posit that education can be transformational and emancipating. In various studies, creating welcoming schools for LGBTQ communities has been proven possible and transformational (Bertram, Crowley, & Massey, 2010; Bishop & Casida, 2011; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Heinze & Horn, 2009; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009). Participant views aligned with these beliefs - persistence and commitment to this cause can potentially bear positive outcomes for sexual minorities in the short and long term. This is why many school leaders articulated that they would “fight the good fight” because they could not abandon the needs of LGBTQ. By creating inclusive, welcoming and safe environments and sustaining conditions for success at school, principals envisioned a population that could feel empowered and free to be themselves.

**Integrated vision for LGBTQ inclusivity**

“What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.” Paulo Freire

*We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*

Superficial practices such as celebrations and cultural events do not create inclusive environments (Ainscow, 2005), nor does teaching about diversity as a standalone or an add on (Dei, 2002). Instead, inclusive schools infuse culturally relevant curriculum, histories and traditions in the curriculum to meaningfully represent all diversities (Burt, Gelnaw, & Lesser, 2010; Dodge & Crutcher, 2015). More so, curriculum is robust and accessible to all students (Theoharis, 2007) and the principles of respect and acceptance for all are evident throughout the school ethos (Ainscow, 2005). These characteristics represent a vision of inclusive schools to which principals in this study aspired and participants’ passion to ensure all students have equitable opportunities for success was central.
In order to create an inclusive environment for LGBTQ, principals understood that LGBTQ individuals needed to feel safe in their buildings (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010). They acknowledged that through learning and training, debunking many of the fallacies associated with this population could lead to greater acceptance (Dowling, Rodger, & Cummings, 2007). Principals also believed that positive images of LGBTQ histories needed to be incorporated in different facets of student learning and curriculum content (Dewitt, 2012). Hence, participants’ integrated vision incorporated three key areas: creating safe and caring spaces, facilitating professional learning and training, and infusing curricular content that reaffirmed this population’s existence.

Why is it important to consider all three areas in tandem? Studies have shown that adhering only to safe school protocols to protect LGBTQ youth is insufficient in helping create a respectful and caring setting (Almeida et al., 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Albeit, feeling safe is critical to one’s health and well-being but when individuals are not valued, respected or understood by others, feelings of acceptance and belonging can never truly materialize. Participants commented that homophobic banter like “That’s so gay” from students was commonplace (Kosciw et al., 2009) and that staff, parents and community members would also make inappropriate comments about LGBTQ. Principals addressed incidents of harassment but also recognized that different stakeholders lacked insight into what they were saying or the harmful impact it had on sexual minorities. Charles and Gabriel highlighted the need for staff to understand students’ experiences of oppression because of intersectionality. In Charles’s school, the black, gay student, from low socio-economic status with a single parent whose religion denounced gay populations, endured multiple forms of discrimination. Educators need to be cognizant of and skilled in unpacking the intersecting identities of their students and school
community members, who do not conform to societal images of normalcy, in order to meet their needs for acceptance and belonging (Blackburn, & McCready, 2009; Daley et al, 2008).

In this regard, participants deemed it necessary to facilitate learning and training opportunities on equity topics that included LGBTQ communities. They were committed to unveiling the inequities faced by this population, providing accurate information about LGBTQ and exploring ways to meaningfully include them in their school communities. However, one of the challenges was accessing learning opportunities for school leaders and teachers in this area of equity and social justice (Bower & Klecka, 2009b; Brown, 2004; Burt, Gelnaw, & Lesser, 2010; Dewitt, 2012; Garrett, 2012; Goldstein et al., 2008; Horn, et al, 2010; McKenzie et al, 2008, Theoharis, 2007). Although different diversities topics are covered in social justice and equity training, seldom are explicit links to LGBTQ made (Allen, Harper, & Koschoreck, 2009; Bower & Klecka, 2009b; Garrett 2012). Consequently, principals took on the role of “instructional leader” to ensure school community members received accurate information about the needs of LGBTQ.

In order to increase their own confidence level, principals embarked on their own “informal” personal learning journeys (Ryan, 2013). Much of their knowledge was acquired through participants’ own personal research interests and voluntary involvement in different professional development activities. They found ways to link this learning for teachers to the broader training for diversities education so that LGBTQ inclusion was not perceived as an add on (Dei et al, 2000) to staff workloads. For other school community members, principals optimized on opportunities to include LGBTQ content at information evenings, council meetings, workshops and during informal conversations. Some participants were also perceived as experts while they facilitated learning for different employee groups across the system.
Where possible and feasible, during formal and informal training or conversations, principals leveraged opportunities to challenge the thinking of others to critically examine their biases towards LGBTQ communities. Honing a “critical consciousness” (Ryan, 2006b) in others was one way principals were able to underscore the need for more LGBTQ inclusive approaches.

In order to realize participants’ integrated vision of inclusion, principals also expressed that the socialization of LGBTQ, their presence and voice needed to permeate the school and classrooms; a conception reiterated by scholars:

> When we see curriculum as the bodies, cultures, spaces, objects, positions, beliefs, sights, sounds and smells within schools, then an inclusive curriculum, represented through the cultures and experiences of all students is one that has the broadest range of academic possibilities.” (Dei et al, 2000, p.175).

Central to this idea of LGBTQ curriculum integration is Taylor’s (2008) study revealing that training around LGBTQ topics requires supplementation with resources so that meaningful levels of LGBTQ integration can be materialized. Notwithstanding the dearth of appropriate LGBTQ curricular content (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Burt, Gelnaw, & Lesser, 2010; Dewitt, 2012; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Macgillivray, 2000; Macgillivray, 2009; Smolkin & Young, 2011; Temple, 2005), principals pursued various avenues to ensure materials were accessible to staff and students. Through their resourcefulness, principals displayed resources in their offices, purchased books for the library, partnered with different organizations which supported sexual minorities, called in consultants, created displays, invited guest speakers, co-taught with colleagues and supplied lesson plans for teachers to use with students.

Hence, school leaders’ vision for inclusivity set the course for priorities and processes that crafted educational spaces for all learners and families in their school communities. By strategically presenting a cohesive and integrated approach to LGBTQ inclusion, principals demonstrated their commitment and pledge to ensure that this population received the same
respect and acknowledgement as other marginalized groups. Through this integrated vision, school leaders moved LGBTQ equity out of the realm of theoretical possibilities to practical oriented actions. As a result, principals attested to the positive impact their efforts for inclusion had on LGBTQ communities.

**Towards LGBTQ Inclusion—Understanding the Barriers and Supports Needed**

Well documented in the literature is that inclusive minded leaders face many barriers in their equity and social justice pursuits (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Ryan, 2012; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). Frequently cited in these studies are the stressors and pressures inherent in the principal’s role. Lack of time, resources, complex student needs, balancing competing interests, agendas and initiatives, standardization and accountability measures are just some of the responsibilities that principals juggle (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Lugg and Soho, 2006; Ryan 2012; 2013). More disconcerting are consequences such as exhaustion or burn out that leaders with proclivities for social justice work face (Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). However, this is not a deterrent for many inclusive leaders who are propelled by a deep sense of purpose to ensure all students, especially those who are most vulnerable, are afforded the same opportunities to reach their full potential.

Given that LGBTQ inclusion continues to be laden with additional barriers, politics, and controversy (Cooper –Nics & Bowleg, 2010; Dewitt, 2012; Macgillivray, 2004; Taylor, 2008), participants in this study still chose to forge ahead and navigate through these unchartered and rough waters. They undertook huge risks in challenging the status quo and combating injustices toward LGBTQ communities while balancing a myriad of accountability and managerial roles. However, they also alluded to the fact that society is more accepting of and positive toward sexual minority populations (Hicks & Lee, 2006), having granted them legal protection and the
same rights and privileges as heterosexual couples. Social media is also portraying positive images of this community and there is a sense that students today are ready for this work. Hence, they confirmed that the time is now for educators to embark on this work.

Inclusive approaches entail the identification and removal of barriers (Ainscow, 2005). Building on this, principals in this study endeavoured to understand and unpack the barriers to determine the best course of action to take. This section discusses the system and school level barriers that principals needed to overcome and also identifies the supports principals deemed necessary to assist them and other educators in their pursuit of equity for LGBTQ persons.

**System level barriers**

**Ministry and boards**

Despite the Ontario Ministry of Education’s equity strategy (2009a & b), which underscores that students should not be discouraged from or hindered in achieving academic success and feeling included, principals in this study highlighted that this is not always the case for LGBTQ. In order to support LGBTQ inclusive efforts, according to principals, Ministry policies and guidelines need to make explicit mention of LGBTQ populations and their rights to an inclusive school environment so that all stakeholders understand LGBTQ inclusion is not an option. Unless change is mandated from higher authorities (Meyer, 2010; Schrader & Wells, 2004; Short, 2010), principals agreed that the LGBTQ agenda would continue to face inconsistencies in implementation across Ontario. Further to this, principals discussed that at the system level boards need to follow up by making schools more accountable for their equity goals, not just their student achievement scores. Leveraging standardized data to help move marginalized students forward (McKenzie et al., 2008b) or using surveys or equity audits (Kosciw et al., 2009; Skrla et al., 2004; Taylor, 2008) to measure goal achievement are tangible
strategies to monitor the academic, social and emotional needs of LGBTQ. As such, Bernadette asserted that “actionables” are required to hold allies and resisters accountable in measuring the impact that school equity goals have on LGBTQ communities.

**Professional learning and curriculum resources**

Insufficient and inconsistent professional learning and training for board and school personnel about sexual minority populations continue to impede inclusive efforts (DePalma, 2009; Dewitt, 2012; Goldstein, et al., 2007; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Taylor, 2008). As a result, participants noted that myths and misconceptions are perpetuated, and that teachers and principals continue to lack confidence to address LGBTQ content in curricular and co-curricular activities. To this end, study participants emphasized a number of supports that would enhance the learning of others that are also reflected in the literature. Optimizing on existing learning opportunities by infusing LGBTQ topics for new and tenured principals, novice and experienced teachers is one strategy. Mandatory training should occur for all school and board personnel (DePalma, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000; Taylor, 2008), the rationale being that all stakeholders come into contact with LGBTQ individuals, and need to treat them respectfully and acknowledge them through inclusive language. During learning sessions, principals suggested that LGBTQ topics be kept current and weaved throughout the training rather than be addressed in isolation. Transgender and gender variant students have specific needs that vary from other sexual minorities (Macgillivray, 2009; Noret & Rivers, 2008). In this vein, principals revealed the criticality of ongoing learning about LGBTQ so that educators are kept abreast of these varying needs.

Several participants expressed the need for consultants or champions/experts in this particular area of equity. Additionally, they raised the issue of an absence of consideration for schools that lack monetary resources to release teachers for equity training, or schools that are
geographically disadvantaged from attending training. Participants like Francis also noted the rich learning that can occur through networking and sharing best practices with other boards across different provinces. Finally, as emphasized by David, learning about LGBTQ communities has to transcend all institutions and workplaces (i.e. pre-school and universities, medical facilities) in order to facilitate a more robust societal understanding and acceptance of this community.

Parental pressures to ban LGBTQ subject matter, educator resistance to integrate LGBTQ themes, lack of access to materials and negative portrayals of LGBTQ populations continue to overshadow inclusive curriculum implementation efforts (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Dewitt, 2012; Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Macgillivray, 2000 & 2009; Murray, 2011). Participants concurred that learning around LGBTQ subject matter must be accompanied by resources (Taylor, 2008), otherwise efforts to meaningfully integrate LGBTQ within the equity dialogue will continue to fall short. Hence, principals observed that LGBTQ topic invisibility continues to be a deterrent in their social justice endeavours to create inclusive schools.

What participants deemed necessary is the explicit mention of LGBTQ weaved throughout policy (Kosciw, Palmer & Kull, 2015) and curriculum documents to normalize LGBTQ themes (Dewitt, 2012). Several participants stressed the need for prescribed, age appropriate curricular implementation benchmarks so that school community stakeholders can be apprised of what topics are explored in the different grades and subject matter. If LGBTQ topics are not to be perceived as optional or add-ons, “Thou shalt” statements must accompany the curriculum materials as Veronica underscored. Concomitantly, approved print and web based resources for classrooms and libraries that are endorsed by both Ministry and boards of education
are required. Resources need to be current to reflect the complex and changing identities of queer populations.

**Hegemonic frameworks**

Scholars note that power and privilege continue to exclude marginalized populations (Dei & James, 2002; Freire, 2000; Ryan, 2012; Tooms, 2009) and oppress those groups who do not conform to the norm. Educational systems can be very oppressive institutions (Apple, 1990; Dei et al., 2000; Foster, 1986; Giroux, 2001) through the perpetuation of dominant heteronormative cultures and traditions, hegemonic programs and discourses that silence populations like LGBTQ. These systemic forces work to protect the status quo, typically steeped in traditions of the dominant culture.

Probably one of the most monolithic and overpowering barriers to LGBTQ inclusion, as observed by principals, are the heteronormative structures that systemically permeate educational organizations (Dewitt, 2012; Grace & Wells, 2005; Macgillivray, 2000; Murray, 2011; Savage & Harley, 2009; Schrader & Wells, 2004). According to principals, these dominant “hegemonic conservative structures” (Riehl, 2000) are so powerful at maintaining the status quo, especially in suburban or faith based schools, that they can often dictate the pace and success of LGBTQ inclusive approaches. However, within urban settings, one principal observed that LGBTQ people are more visible and accepted within her school community. Aligned with principals’ remarks are studies that also confirm how school context and location influence the success of LGBTQ implementation efforts (Bishop & Cassida, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw, Palmer & Kull, 2015).

The “hidden curriculum” (Apple, 1990) and heteronormative discourse are two powers that proliferate dominant interests and regimes. Principals expressed concerns about the power of the hidden curriculum in putting up barriers to LGBTQ existence. Dominant interests continue to
be infused in educational programs, resources, symbols and visuals (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 2001; McLaren, 2007), thereby perpetuating LGBTQ invisibility. O’Connor argues that “Discussions of heterosexism, homophobia, and the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth have been noticeably absent in the educational literature” (O’Connor, 1995, as cited in Dewitt, 2012, p. 49).

One participant was hard pressed to find visuals displaying same sex parents. Others commented on the absence of visuals in schools such as positive images of sexual minority populations and celebrities as well as symbols such as positive space stickers or gender neutral washroom signage.

Discourse, which legitimizes power and domination (Kincheloe, 2007; Tooms, 2009), also favours heterosexual frameworks in educational settings. Hegemonic language structures infiltrate many facets of board and school records and practices (Bower & Klecka, 2009b; Macgillivray, 2000). Participants emphasized that language in Ministry documents (policies, Ontario Student Records) and school documents (office information cards, registration packages) reflect hegemonic language structures that reinforce male/female binaries. This form of social exclusion continues to undermine LGBTQ existence, diverse family compositions and other forms of non-confirming gender identities.

Studies substantiate that marginalized populations are challenged by hierarchical educational structures that make it difficult to meaningfully include their voices (Ryan, 2012). On a similar note, principals in the study shared that prevalent hegemonic systemic structures that propagate heteronormative agendas exclude LGBTQ participation. Participants stressed such long standing structures can only be dismantled when LGBTQ presence infiltrates different levels of educational governance. Concerted efforts, which Elizabeth reiterated, need to be made
to invite LGBTQ voice at Ministry and board policy and curriculum tables. By supporting such actions, principals believed that sexual minority interests can be better highlighted and served.

**School level barriers**

In addition to system level barriers to LGBTQ inclusivity, principals identified several school level barriers. Principals shared that school leaders, teachers, support staff, educational assistants, office staff and caretakers were not always receptive to sexual minority populations. Aligning with the existing literature, numerous reasons were delineated for staff unwillingness to embrace LGBTQ: homophobia, personal biases, cultural and religious beliefs, fear of repercussions from the school community and lack of confidence in dealing with LGBTQ issues (Garrett, 2012; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010). Teachers displayed resistance to implementing school wide initiatives, embedding LGBTQ themes in classrooms and supporting transgender students. Principals noted that allies were also reticent to proceed with LGBTQ initiatives because they lacked comfort with LGBTQ terminology, identities or they feared repercussions from colleagues and parents. In one school, allies were so overzealous in their inclusive efforts that they created a deeper chiasm between supporters and non-supporters. Principals also observed fellow colleagues who did not attend training sessions or quashed LGBTQ programs such as GSAs or popular events such as Pink Shirt Day. Principals in this study, who identify as LGBTQ, admitted to slowing down LGBTQ initiatives for fear of being perceived as promoting their own personal agendas, confirming that the actions of leaders and school staff can significantly impact on inclusive efforts.

Similarly, principals noted that parents and students put up obstacles to LGBTQ inclusion because of personal biases, cultural or religious beliefs and lack of knowledge about queer
populations (Bertram et al., 2010; Kosciw et al. 2009). Parents, who were also well intentioned, held common misconceptions that if homosexuality is taught in schools, it may influence their child to adopt such a lifestyle. In some cases, parents, whose children identified as LGBTQ, refused to accept school support because parents believed this was a developmental phase their child would outgrow. While participants did express an overall sentiment that many more students today are much more accepting of sexual minorities than in the past, student resistance to gay populations continue to be manifested through homophobic attitudes with some students refusing to share change rooms or washrooms with transgender students. These barriers are significant in impeding efforts to creating welcoming and supportive educational environments for this population.

In order to address these issues, participants listed various supports to facilitate welcoming and supportive schools for queer communities. Although some principals alluded to using their positional power when warranted, other layers of support were highlighted such as legislative and policy frameworks mandating LGBTQ rights in public schools (Kosciw, Palmer & Kull, 2015). Direct mandates from the Ministry and board, clear accountability measures to track how homophobic incidents are addressed, equity goals tied to school plans and teacher performance appraisals were some strategies participants deemed necessary to support this work. Although participants accepted that such stringent approaches may not change deeply entrenched beliefs against this population, such measures send a clear message that public schools are inclusive of LGBTQ.

Hence, adding another layer to the conceptualization of Inclusive Leadership entitled “supports” better represents the process of inclusive leadership for LGBTQ. This is illustrated by the diagram in Figure 2.
Throughout the study, principals alluded to the challenges associated with promoting LGBTQ content and themes. For examples, events such as Pink Shirt Day would face opposition in
comparison to other equity-oriented initiatives that would face no opposition such as ethnic, religious or cultural celebrations or events that highlight awareness of autism or mental health. Participants needed to resort to legislative, Ministry and Board policy mandates to remind school community members of the rights of LGBTQ persons to meaningfully belong. However, principals pointed out that current supports need to more explicitly message that LGBTQ have the same rights as other groups. In this vein, more school leaders may gain the confidence to include the LGBTQ agenda in their quest for social justice given more effective backing.

Nonetheless, study participants forged ahead with their endeavours to welcome and include gay populations despite the lack of robust supports availed to them. School leaders’ commitment towards an integrated vision for LGBTQ inclusivity and their understanding of barriers were underlying factors that supported participants’ quest for social justice. The next section explores how principals overcame many of the barriers associated with creating equitable school environments for queer populations.

**Overcoming Barriers**

But not all administrators struggle in the same way or to the same extent. Their struggles depend on many things, including the skills and knowledge they bring to the job. These struggles also are associated with the kinds of priorities administrators promote. (Ryan, 2012, p.1)

Studies have shown that districts and schools that have adopted inclusive measures have positively impacted on the sense of belonging and well-being of queer populations (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Kosciw, et al, 2012; Macgillivray, 2004). Research has also underscored the significant influence school leaders can exercise in removing barriers for disenfranchised populations (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006a, 2006b; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). The thirteen equity-oriented leaders in this research project, propelled by a strong sense of social
justice for all, overcame many hurdles in the contested terrain of LGBTQ inclusivity. These participants adopted the principles of inclusive leadership (Ryan, 2006a; Ryan 2006b; Ryan, 2007; 2012; 2013) to challenge the status quo and courageously navigate the barriers to transform educational experiences for gay populations.

In this section, I highlight Ryan’s (2013) conception of inclusive leadership practices that study participants employed to overcome obstacles in advancing the LGBTQ agenda. These interrelated strategies are: fostering school community relations, communication strategies, promoting critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy. Given the nature of their inclusive agenda and the associated resistances, principals were very strategic in their activist approaches to ensure LGBTQ populations are given the same rights and privileges as other school community members. Principals possessed a high level of political acumen that scholars underscore as necessary in dealing with controversy and highly complex situations (Ryan, 2014). Participants in this study demonstrated political astuteness while employing various strategies.

**Fostering school community relations**

Nurturing relationships in educational settings is critical to “strategic activism” (Ryan, 2014). School leaders cannot effectively function in isolation – a collective process (Riehl, 2000; Ryan 2006a; 2007; 2013; Ryan and Rottmann, 2007) is needed to achieve educational goals focusing on improved student outcomes and wellness. Hence, relationship building with all educational stakeholders constitutes a critical component in school leadership (Dantley, 2003; Ryan 2006a; 2006b; Shields, 2004). Evidence from this study illustrates that principals worked diligently to forge relational trust and hone relations with different school community members which positively influenced participant inclusive endeavours. They used different strategies to
build relations with both LGBTQ allies and resistors. The next section will explain how
principals created welcoming and inviting educational spaces, employed outreach strategies and
balanced competing interests.

Principals created school environments that were welcoming by visually celebrating
different diversities. Among these displays were positive images of LGBTQ and same sex
families, positive space posters and gender-neutral washroom signage. As an integral part of the
social justice agenda, principals modeled the use of inclusive language to become embedded as
part of the daily lexicon. For example, principals challenged names of deeply entrenched
traditions such as Mother’s or Father’s Day by referring to these occasions as Special Person
Day or Family Day. Forms were also scrutinized to ensure they reflected different family
compositions such as same sex parents to move beyond the protected Western nuclear family
images prevalent in schools (Bower & Klecka, 2009a & 2009b).

A variety of outreach strategies were also utilized so participants could better understand
their school community dynamics. Gregory surveyed his school community to discover several
same sex parents resided in their catchment area. Others like Elizabeth were strategic in
ensuring different voices comprised her school council. She deliberately tapped LGBTQ parents
on the shoulder to encourage their involvement. Participant Jerome reached out to other
principals who struggled with LGBTQ issues because he was perceived as an expert and
“credible” among colleagues (Ryan, 2014). Veronica established one of the first elementary
GSAs and facilitated workshops for other elementary schools within and outside of her district.
Several participants supported LGBTQ communities by reaching out to other colleagues, outside
agencies, experts and guest speakers who were conversant with equity, mental health and anti-
bullying topics. Principals strategically leveraged these resources to support LGBTQ as well as
educate others about this population. By and large, participants found ways to include and extend their support to LGBTQ students, parents and questioning students which was significant in creating caring and welcoming schools (Cooper-Nicols & Bowleg, 2010; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010). In doing so, principals built relations with various organizations, LGBTQ communities and allies. Forging relations with LGBTQ and allies had many positive outcomes. LGBTQ students, parents and staff felt safer and more confident in participating in different facets of school life, as noted by participants.

Establishing relations with resistors presented different challenges. As described in other studies, influencing others to change personal, cultural or religious convictions against queer populations is no easy feat (Goldstein et al., 2008; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010). Despite principals’ efforts to communicate that all communities are respected and accepted under the equity umbrella, some parents, staff and students remained steadfastly homophobic. However, confrontation was not used to deal with resistors (Ryan, 2006b). Instead, principals endeavoured to understand the dynamics of competing interests and perspectives to find common ground. In doing so, many participants appealed to the emotional side of resistors and most could empathize with personal stories of oppression or data depicting harsh lived realities (Garrett, 2012; Goldstein et al., 2008; Kosciw et al., 2009; Taylor, 2008. When participants like Mary asked resistors how they would feel being subjected to exclusionary practices, she found they were more accepting of LGBTQ inclusionary approaches. When Charles shared his experiences of exclusion, staff became more motivated to support him (Greytak, & Kosciw, 2014). Bernadette found common ground with an irate parent by balancing the parent’s needs with her school’s goals for inclusion. When the parent demanded that positive space posters be removed,
Bernadette redesigned them to meet the needs of the parents while preserving their symbolism for LGBTQ individuals at her school.

Although building relations with educational stakeholders positively impacted on LGBTQ’s sense of belonging and self-worth, principals were also cognizant that different tactics needed to be used with opponents. As taxing as it was to work with resistors, principals tried to maintain relations with them rather than confront them. Participants understood the importance of fortifying relations with all school community stakeholders in order to garner their support for social activism (Brown, 2004; Ryan, 2014) toward LGBTQ inclusive school environments.

**Communication strategies**

Dialogue is important in contexts of diversity. Among other things, it can assist marginalized groups to be meaningfully included in cultural institutions like schools. (Ryan, 2012, p. 55)

Principals were very strategic in how they communicated and dialogued with different stakeholder groups regarding equity goals for LGBTQ inclusion. Various communication strategies were utilized such as ongoing proactive communication, open and honest communication and courageous conversations. These strategies allowed for both allies and resistors to express opinions and concerns.

According to participants, as a result of ongoing and transparent communication, LGBTQ students, staff and parents expressed enhanced feelings of safety and belonging. Through ongoing communication, LGBTQ presence was magnified, opening the doors for more active school participation. How did participants achieve this end? They ensured that all stakeholder groups were apprised that equity initiatives, school vision and goals encompassed sexual minorities as well as other groups. LGBTQ topics were communicated to the broader school community through a number of means: announcements, school websites, twitter, assemblies,
memos, letters, e-mails, visuals, newsletters, school wide events. Participant Mary called on the media to communicate that Pink Shirt Day can be celebrated in a conservative suburban small town. These inclusive communication strategies boded well in recognizing and acknowledging LGBTQ presence in different school contexts (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Savage & Harley, 2009; Schrader & Wells, 2004).

Moreover, principals needed to apply different tactics during difficult communication exchanges. Rather than use their positional power to silence opposition, they instead espoused an open communication stance to respectfully challenge biases and assumptions. Scholars have underscored that power and privilege in hierarchical institutions impact dialogic practices (Foster, 2004; Kincheloe, 2007; McLaren, 2007) by controlling who speaks, who listens and what is communicated. Those with the power have the ability to facilitate dialogue or stymie it. In this study, participants opted to open the lines of communication to invite counter narratives and criticism from non-supporting dominate groups or minoritized populations who held strong beliefs against LGBTQ.

Inclusive leadership puts structures in place that allow for different voices to be heard (Ryan, 2012). Principals recognized that people are on different continuums with regards to LGBTQ inclusive efforts; hence they needed to be cognizant of using communication practices (e.g.: patience, openness to criticism, paraphrasing, active listening) that allow for conversations to flow from non-supporters or uniformed individuals. Rather than quash their opinions, participants adopted a non-judgmental and non-confrontational approach. Through probing, gentle prompts, paraphrasing and active listening, principals were often able to help resistors look at issues of LGBTQ inclusivity through different lenses while keeping dialogue professional and respectful.
Many participants displayed patience through their genuine attempts at seeking to understand issues that were raised. Often times, principals were able to collectively deconstruct myths and misconceptions with parents, staff and students by seeking to unpack their concerns. Gabriel ascertained that a complaint about LGBTQ topic integration stemmed from parents’ beliefs that teaching about LGBTQ could influence their child’s sexual orientation. By unpacking the true issue at hand, Gabriel was able to appease parents’ concerns by providing them with accurate information. Some participants like Gregory found that candidness facilitated conversations with opposition. When he admitted to being victimized as a gay person, the parents could relate better to him as an administrator who understands issues of marginalization. Similarly, other principals found that sharing their personal experiences of oppression with school community members opened up the channels of communication to speak truthfully about the negative experiences of other disenfranchised groups (Shields, 2004) like LGBTQ.

When conversations became overly challenging and unpleasant, principals resorted to using their authority to control the situation. According to Ryan (2012), “dialogue needs to be directed at circumstances that prevent diverse groups from fully participating in what schools and communities have to offer” (p. 60). To this end, through courageous conversations with resistors, participants endeavoured to protect the LGBTQ agenda and, in certain cases, principals resorted to using their power to quash unwanted comments and homophobic epithets. Principals also relied on policy and legislative frameworks to endorse their work. Backlash from irate stakeholders or parents who left the school did not deter participants. They expressed that fighting the good fight (Ryan, 2014) warranted these difficult conversations to uphold tolerance and acceptance of all diversities.
Of importance is that during these exchanges, maintaining a high degree of emotional control was critical to sustaining professional composure when doing social justice work (Ryan, 2014). In the social justice leadership arena, leaders often experience a wide gamut of emotions and possessing the ability to control and manage these emotions is a significant asset (Zembylas, 2010). In particular, discussing issues around LGBTQ can at times create emotionally charged discourses. Participants noted the importance of projecting a professional demeanor by remaining firm and civil when standing their ground on an issue. Whether principals embarked on a courageous conversation with staff who insulted a child, a trustee who challenged LGBTQ initiatives or a contractor who mocked gay populations, participants addressed manners professionally, respectfully and exercised a high degree of emotional intelligence and control by effectively managing their emotions. Possessing such skills boded well for school leaders in their equity work.

**Critical learning strategies**

Leaders for inclusion use social justice as a lens to unveil disparities and inequalities that hinder the fair representation of some groups in schools (Theoharis, 2007). Hence, in this study, overcoming barriers to LGBTQ inclusivity was additionally realized through principals’ abilities to hone the critical consciousness of school community members. In particular, participants nurtured their own awareness and the critical consciousness of others through personal learning and teaching, LGBTQ resource acquisition and curriculum integration.

Developing a critical consciousness supports leaders’ abilities to reflect on their own power and privilege, and unpack inequities to break down barriers for inclusion (Freire, 2000; Ryan, 2006b; Ryan 2013). Participants shared that their personal learning journeys around LGBTQ topics helped hone their equity lens to unpack their own privilege, biases and
inequalities inflicting queer communities. By embracing a learner stance, participants acquired the knowledge and skills necessary to embark on LGBTQ integration. They optimized on learning from both formal (workshops, conferences) and informal (reading, connecting with colleagues, parents and students) opportunities, in addition to drawing on their experiences working in highly diverse school contexts. Some principals who identified as LGBTQ learned about this population’s plight through their own lived experiences. This commitment to ongoing learning influenced their capacity to develop critical learning skills in others.

The lack of training in equity and social justice topics for educators and leaders (Theoharis, 2007) also propelled participants to embrace a teacher stance to fill this void. In this vein, principals used different strategies to develop a critical school culture in different school contexts to highlight the needs for LGBTQ inclusivity. A critical perspective in education can help others unpack oppressive power dynamics and engender a collective activism towards social justice reforms (Apple & Jungck 1993; Carr, 1995; Foster, 1986; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 2005; Kincheloe, 2007; McLaren, 2007). In order to deconstruct the hegemonic structures, curriculum and traditions of schooling (Apple, 1990) that oppress LGBTQ, participants guided staff through direct teaching and questioning. By maintaining a culture of questioning and risk taking in a non-threatening environment, participants like Theresa were able to help staff understand how to enhance lessons and resources to be more reflective of LGBTQ. Anthony worked directly with staff and students to unpack the missing voices in family diversity resources. Veronica described the effectiveness of questioning and probing in creating “dissonance” (Ryan, 2006a) and discomfort to push staff members’ thinking about power, privilege and exclusion. Many principals also supported the learning of others by facilitating workshops on LGBTQ topics at their schools or the system level. Being mindful of varying degrees of understandings around
LGBTQ helped participants gauge the teaching approaches to use. Principals celebrated the “aha” moments staff experienced during workshops and observed that the learning helped reticent staff or resisters move out of their comfort zones to more openly embrace the needs of LGBTQ populations.

LGBTQ resources for elementary schools are lacking or not always readily available (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; Schrader & Wells, 2004). In this way, participants leveraged external and school level resources that could support staff and students in honing their equity lens to examine discriminatory practices. Principals sent staff to workshops, invited guest speakers and activist students to impart the realities of LGBTQ exclusion and found ways to connect families, victimized or questioning students with outside agencies. When Bernadette allowed a transgender student to speak to her staff about the stifling male/female binaries in teaching practices that undermine his existence, Bernadette expressed the impact of learning of firsthand from students. Participants also understood that the lack of appropriate resources could be a barrier to embedding LGBTQ themes within curricular and co-curricular activities. Hence, principals were politically strategic in working with staff, librarians and consultants to ensure school budget was allotted for purchases that included LGBTQ resources. Additionally, principals posted resources for staff and parents on their school websites, displayed resources in their offices and ensured that LGBTQ books were included in library and classroom displays.

According to participants, the next level of work was embedding these resources in the classroom on a regular basis and not as an isolated entity (Dei et al, 2002). To facilitate this, participants encouraged staff confidence in broaching these topics through job embedded opportunities, by providing prescribed lesson plans, team teaching, and co-planning units with staff. This commitment to action allowed for more meaningful and authentic integration of
LGBTQ content in the class, which Jerome deemed as necessary to normalize this population’s existence in the mainstream (Tooms, 2009). These inclusive oriented leaders illustrated that broaching what some consider sensitive or inappropriate topics, could be weaved into the elementary school curricula (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; DePalma, 2009) to broaden elementary students understanding of this population. Albeit, participants concurred that full LGBTQ topic integration across all schools is needed in order to bring about systemic change for LGBTQ populations.

**Exercising strategic advocacy**

Principals drew on their political acumen to exercise strategic advocacy in their efforts to include and safeguard sexual minority students and populations:

While the use of political acumen is part of the struggle for inclusion, it is also a tool that principals employ to navigate the contested terrain in which they work, and it can help them survive the inevitable struggles associated with the pursuit of inclusion in their institutions. (Ryan, 2012, p.118).

Implicit in their strategic activism was developing an understanding of the politics of their school context, community dynamics and broader system structures (Ryan, 2014). Being politically astute and aware of these factors aided participants in their strategic action to deal with resistance. Evidence presented in this study highlights that for many participants, their school context and culture dictated the pace of implementation for LGBTQ initiatives (Bishop & Cassida, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2009). Such was the case with Gabriel who was counseled by board staff to move at a slower pace given his school demographics and mono-cultural context. In this vein, participants exercised strategic advocacy while drawing on their political savvy in pursuit of LGBTQ equity in different school contexts. Some tactics entailed strategically
underscoring the moral imperative of the work, using pressure and support and building a cadre of equity advocates to enhance and distribute the leadership.

In their strategic activism to promote LGBTQ rights for inclusion, several participants framed the work in terms of educator moral responsibility to support all students. To legitimize LGBTQ needs, principals elicited empathy from others by drawing comparisons with other disenfranchised groups. David, for instance, used special education students as a springboard to help others understand that school communities are morally obligated to respect and support all learners. Gregory and Charles used data to highlight the lived realities of LGBTQ youth and populations in order to persuade individuals of the moral imperative to eradicate discriminatory practices (Kosciw et al., 2009; Taylor, 2008). Participants found that this strategy allowed others to come to their own conclusions (Ryan, 2014) about the need to support queer populations rather than feeling that they were being forced to adopt someone else’s agenda. When resistance was steadfast, to uphold the moral imperative of education, some principals like Mary and Elizabeth articulated that issues of equity, dignity and respect are non-negotiable in public educational settings.

Strategically using pressure and support to deal with reluctant or resistant individuals also helped ensure that this mandate stayed the course. In this vein, principals involved themselves directly in different micro school level structures (McKenzie et al, 2008) in order to closely monitor the progress of equity goals. Principals provided money and input into LGBTQ resource acquisition for classrooms and libraries. Homophobic banter could not be easily ignored as participants equipped staff with various discipline strategies. A “question and answer” document was also created so that staff could deal with school community complaints. Some participants mandated attendance at certain activities or assigned school wide projects
dealing with equity themes. For instance, after an anti-bullying assembly, Gregory provided follow up activities for each class. Francis would take it one step further to follow up with reluctant staff in order to assess their progress with Pride Week preparations. Other leaders optimized the teacher performance appraisal processes to ensure teachers embedded equity goals in their programs. Strategically including goals aligned to LGBTQ inclusion in the school plan compelled staff to be accountable for their implementation. Principals concluded that these pressure and support tactics effectively pushed staff into action and integrate such initiatives in their programs.

Inherent in an inclusive leadership ethos is a leader’s ability to persuade others and imbue social justice activism. Equity work cannot be done in isolation. It requires leadership that inspires a collective process. Principals in this study demonstrated the effectiveness of leading alongside other inclusive oriented individuals to achieve their mandates. In this vein, participants strategically hired like-minded people to build a cadre of equity advocates (Theoharis, 2007). Gabriel concurred that some key allies and staff “planted the seeds” (Ryan, 2014) to influence others to incorporate LGBTQ content in their planning. By surrounding themselves with staff willing to do the work, school leaders in this study distributed the leadership through equity teams that created resources, presented workshops and provided supports for LGBTQ populations. Other leaders found student leadership to be very impactful. Student GSA representatives from Veronica’s school and Gregory’s student social justice committees spearheaded school wide events like Pink Shirt Day or anti-bullying assemblies. Distributing the leadership among students and staff was beneficial in advancing the LGBTQ agenda. Participants also expressed the need to network with other activist minded leaders who support the work (Theoharis, 2007). Additionally, seeking alliances with board personnel and
social agencies afforded principals the opportunity to access resources and supports to promote LGBTQ communities. Political astuteness and strategic activism afforded participants opportunities to create conditions needed to include LGBTQ populations in different facets of school life.

Chapter Summary

Ryan’s (2013) conceptualization of inclusive leadership provides a springboard for actions that school leaders can adopt to enhance inclusionary practices. Borrowing from this framework, this chapter highlights how participants employed specific strategies to allow for more meaningful integration of LGBTQ populations into their school communities. In doing so, they created more caring and welcoming school environments, facilitated learning around LGBTQ themes and infused LGBTQ topics within mainstream programs.

LGBTQ persons exist in our schools and society. Despite barriers and challenges that these school leaders faced in their social justice endeavours to honour this community, they did not give up in the face of adversity and chose to “fight the good fight” (Ryan, 2014). As a result of their noble efforts, it suffices to say that each participant, based on their observations and interactions with LGBTQ people, created an environment that celebrated and acknowledged queer populations in addition to finding ways to legitimize their existence within co-curricular and curricular activities. Principals understood that changing negative attitudes and beliefs about LGBTQ can have long term implications for this population’s societal acceptance. Collectively, if more leaders espouse a vision of inclusivity that includes LGBTQ, then hopefully LGBTQ existence in elementary school settings can be normalized.
Chapter Ten: Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to explore how elementary principals created inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations. Although research in the area of inclusive leadership continues to grow, studies highlighting how elementary school leaders include LGBTQ in their pursuit of equity are largely missing from the literature. The purpose of this study was to locate elementary principals who have integrated this dimension of diversity in their inclusive efforts. The findings from this study highlight how thirteen equity-minded elementary school leaders, working in diverse school contexts, promoted the inclusion of LGBTQ by employing various strategies. The data also highlights factors such as participants’ political savvy, strategic mindset and emotional control that contributed to their abilities to make positive changes for LGBTQ populations in their school contexts. Subsequently, the present study has implications for informing the work of elementary school leaders as well as those educators working in different school contexts by demonstrating that LGBTQ inclusive efforts are achievable despite educational and societal barriers that exist. It also has the potential to provide timely insights for governments and boards to develop robust policies and programs that advocate for queer populations.

My inspiration for undertaking this study was influenced by my personal and professional work in equity and interactions with many inclusive oriented principals. Principals cannot pick and choose whom to include in their pursuit of equity. All diversities must be included, not just select marginalized groups. At the core of participants’ belief system resided the desire that everyone feel included, respected and treated with dignity regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and identity, socio-economic status, and disabilities. According to principals in this study, LGBTQ people deserve the same right to feel welcomed and included as any other population. They understood that any form of “social exclusion” (Ryan, 2006b) is detrimental to
the social, emotional and well-being of individuals because it restricts them from fully participating in school life and in society. More so, intersecting marginalization has the potential to further disenfranchise students and their families (Blackburn, & McCready, 2009; Daley et al, 2008). One cannot purport to lead for inclusion if they do not espouse a vision that supports all diverse learners and school community members.

As noted in the literature, it truly takes a special educator to lead for inclusion since the terrain of inclusive leadership comes with resistance and obstacles (Theoharis, 2007). Ryan (2014) highlights further some of the inherent risks associated with inclusive leadership:

As representatives of their organizations, it may be difficult for them to champion a cause, like social justice, that may contradict valued initiatives, violate the culture of their organizations, or offend powerful colleagues. Beyond the risks mentioned above, obvious and persistent objections to favored organizational practices may not always be effective. Those leaders who take part in these sorts of activities can find themselves marginalized and impotent.

For many inclusive minded leaders, forging ahead to overtly include LGBTQ can be a daunting task. Even at the best of times, school leaders who steadfastly advocate for social justice find the work emotionally and physically draining. Adding LGBTQ inclusive efforts intensifies the complexity. Evident in this study is that leading for LGBTQ created significant challenges for participants because of the stigmatization associated with this population. Participants faced many barriers generated by the pressures from staff, parents, board personnel, and trustees who openly challenged LGBTQ inclusive initiatives for a variety of reasons. Additionally, those who identified as LGBTQ were concerned about being perceived as pushing forward their own agenda. However, the consequences of inclusive leadership were overshadowed by participants’ ardent commitment and drive to ensure LGBTQ existence is highlighted in their school communities.
Research has confirmed that when students feel a sense of belonging and safety, their opportunities for academic success are increased (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009 a & b). Moreover, addressing socio-emotional and well-being by creating schools that are safe, welcoming, inviting and inclusive of all diversities open up the doors for different school community members to become more meaningfully involved (Ryan, 2006 a & b). Principals in this study understood that student achievement and well-being go hand in hand. Participants imbued a sense of moral imperative that all students deserve the same opportunities to reach their full potential. Hence, key to participants’ leadership success was their ability to directly and indirectly influence a school environment that enhances student outcomes and well-being (Leithwood, 2013). Even in mono-cultural schools, participants stressed the importance of teaching about diversity because diversity exists everywhere, be it visible or invisible. In such communities, appreciating the makeup of the greater global community is key in helping individuals move from myopic views of society to ones that embrace the existence of social diversity.

The present study on inclusive leadership for LGBTQ populations has also identified a number of central factors to better support other leaders and educators in this endeavour. Firstly, inclusion needs to transcend all facets of school life. Participants aspired to a robust and cohesive vision of inclusion and their efforts were directed at ensuring LGBTQ students and families felt safe and welcomed in their schools. They also facilitated learning around LGBTQ topics to debunk the myths and misconceptions surrounding this population and facilitated curriculum integration to engender in others a greater appreciation and respect for this population’s culture and history. When these areas were addressed in tandem, principals demonstrated the potential for meaningful inclusion.
This study also confirmed that participants adopted a variety of strategies to operationalize this comprehensive vision of LGBTQ inclusion. Ryan’s (2013) conceptualization of inclusive leadership provided an effective framework to translate theoretical notions of inclusive leadership into practical, tangible actions. Through fostering school community relations, communication strategies, critical learning strategies, and exercising strategic advocacy, principals were better poised to create a school environment that facilitated the infusion of LGBTQ voice throughout the school ethos. In this manner, participants clearly articulated that LGBTQ communities belong under the equity umbrella and deserve the same rights and privileges as all other members in their school communities.

In adopting these strategies, participants also demonstrated political savvy and strategic activism (Ryan, 2014) to navigate barriers to their inclusive efforts. Using their positional power to mandate directives was seldom part of their repertoire of leadership enactments. In fact, principals’ success was predicated on their political astuteness, which helped them to better understand the complex dynamics at play in their school contexts and organizations. In turn, this often informed the strategies employed and pace at which they moved the LGBTQ agenda forward. In addition, principals in this study were very strategic in how and with whom they built relations, how they communicated with different stakeholders, how they infused a critical perceptive in their school cultures and how they exercised advocacy. Hence, a significant part of their success can be attributed to their persistent strategic activism rather than the adoption of authoritarian approaches. Notwithstanding, in some instances, principals needed to resort to using their positional power to quash homophobia outright. This was one way to send a strong message to all stakeholders that including LGBTQ is a non-negotiable. However, resorting to an authoritarian approach was usually used as a last resort.
Along with political savvy and strategic activism, inclusive leadership entails a great deal of emotional intelligence. A common theme that ran through this study was participants’ ability to maintain emotional control to effectively connect and interact with people in emotionally charged situations. Research speaks to the importance of being socially and emotionally intelligent, especially during highly contentious situations (Goleman, 2002; 2006; Zembylas, 2010). Portraying this view, participants expressed the need to take the high road, stay calm and engage in civil conversations when addressing exclusive language and practices. Possessing a high degree of emotional intelligence boded well in helping principals navigate through difficult and tricky situations.

Thus, by modeling an inclusive ethos, participants demonstrated their ongoing commitment to issues related to equity and social justice. However, leadership that is committed to equity does not guarantee a leader’s success in creating inclusive school environments. Political savvy, strategic activism and high levels of emotional management are key factors that can impact on the success of inclusive mandates, as evidenced in this study. Participants were cognizant of the political climate in their organizations, selective of the strategies employed and navigated through controversial situations with an elevated degree of emotional intelligence.

We also know that inclusive leaders cannot work in isolation (Ryan, 2006a). Principals found ways to garner support from different stakeholder groups to move different components of LGBTQ initiatives forward. This is where meaningful change can occur. By forging alliances with other stakeholders and equity-oriented individuals, participants harnessed the support needed to move this agenda forward. Perhaps even more importantly, finding others to work alongside them was one way participants could manage the pressing demands of their daily role
and responsibilities while realizing their inclusive vision for LGBTQ and other disenfranchised populations.

Consequently, participants’ passion, perseverance and commitment to inclusion, their political astuteness, emotional intelligence and resolve to realize these ideals despite the barriers along the path to LGBTQ inclusion serve as inspiration for others who are embarking on similar inclusive journeys. There is even more hope for change in that students today are more ready than ever before to partake in LGBTQ inclusive measures (Hicks & Lee, 2006); a sentiment expressed by participants and acknowledged in the literature.

**Implications for Future Research**

The focus of this study was to unveil how inclusive minded principals overcame barriers to LGBTQ inclusion by adopting various strategies that effectively lead to creating more welcoming and inviting school communities. During my analysis, additional topics for further research were generated to add to the body of knowledge for inclusive leadership needed to safeguard this dimension of diversity in our schools.

Additional studies are required to explore how leaders successfully sustain a vision for LGBTQ inclusion in various school communities in Ontario and beyond. Particular attention should be paid to the school contexts and locations. By broadening the scope of the study to include more school communities across Canada and other countries, research can highlight considerations for diverse leadership tactics that might be required in urban, suburban, rural communities and conservative faith based communities.

Studies should also focus on how LGBTQ inclusive measures occur in private schools or schools affiliated with different religions denominations, unveiling how this occurs can further legitimize queer communities within the greater global society. More specifically, Catholic
schools in Ontario, which are publically funded, are responsible for adhering to equity and inclusivity policies like all other publically funded schools in Ontario. Exploring how they interpret and implement equity policies and initiatives as they relate to LGBTQ inclusivity may shed light on how they navigate Church doctrine, community pressure, personal religious beliefs and competing human rights to ensure that gay populations are recognized and respected like all other minoritized populations.

This study specifically focused on principals’ perceptions and understandings of the need for LGBTQ inclusion. Although participants employed a variety of strategies to this end, there is a need to look at the overall impact that these strategies have on LGBTQ students and populations. Further research should consider triangulating the data to include LGBTQ community members’ perceptions (e.g.: staff, parents, students) of the impact such efforts have on them. Additionally, longitudinal studies can be conducted to see the impact of inclusive praxis on LGBTQ youths’ academic and social emotional well-being. Where schools have created safe and caring environments for LGBTQ, revealing the long-term implications for LGBTQ students could justify the moral imperative of this work. This can be achieved through both qualitative research methodology and quantitative, large scale surveys. Studies should also investigate the impact of intersecting forms of oppression on LGBTQ students and how school leaders and staff are addressing the needs of students with multiple identity needs. Intersectionality is a relatively new area of focus in the literature and has significant implications for staff professional learning, policy and programming for students with complex forms of intersecting identifies.

It would also be worthwhile to gauge the impact inclusive minded principals have in boards of education that have put in place comprehensive policies and programs that safeguard
LGBTQ inclusion. Understanding the positive impact that inclusive school environments have on LGBTQ youth can be the impetus needed to support other inclusive oriented leaders to push the LGBTQ agenda forward.

Another area of interest could be to explore the impact that school leaders have on teaching pedagogy. In particular, additional studies might further detail how inclusive leaders hone a critical lens amongst their teaching staff so that teachers can independently unpack the biases and stereotypes affecting sexual minority populations. Possessing a critical lens can complement and support the leaders’ vision for LGBTQ equity; however, transferring that critical lens to other educators can help build the capacity needed to influence viewpoints and change biases. Teachers who are aware of the heteronormalizing structures, discourses and curriculum resources that oppress queer populations are better positioned to influence other staff and students to unpack these injustices. As highlighted in the existing literature, in order move out of the realm of surface inclusion to authentic inclusion, students need to experience LGBTQ existence in curricular content. Further exploration in this area will additionally justify the need for inclusive minded school leaders to build a cadre of equity advocates who work collectively to realize inclusive goals, which is more effective than a leader pursuing this agenda in isolation.

Exploring school leaders’ resiliency and emotional management may also shed light on how some inclusive oriented leaders are able to deal effectively with confrontation and barriers to stay the course. Resilience is a trait that can help principals expend their energy wisely when faced with adversity (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005). Looking at factors that contribute to a school leader’s ability to stay resilient in challenging circumstances may help reduce the stress, anxiety and burn out inflicting inclusive oriented leaders. How inclusive leaders manage their emotions
when dealing with emotionally charged situations or address competing interests in diverse school communities is another area of study worth pursuing.

Additional research points to personal resources that leaders can use to navigate the murky waters entailed in equity work. Leithwood’s (2013) research on personal resources identifies the following areas that can be developed and nurtured so that leaders can deal efficaciously with the demands of their workloads and school contexts: cognitive, which necessitates problem-solving expertise and knowledge about school and classroom conditions with direct effects on student learning; social, which results in perceiving emotions, exercising control over emotions, acting in emotionally appropriate ways; and psychological, which entails optimism, self-efficacy, proactively and resilience (Leithwood, 2013). Empirical evidence suggests that school leaders who have robust personal resources are more likely to deal effectively with ambiguous, complex, and challenging situations. Although these researchers do not explicitly link these attributes to inclusive leadership, the nurturing of these personal resources can further support inclusive leaders in their quest for social justice. Considered together, these critical personal resources can provide the strength and guidance a leader needs to contend with obstacles encountered along their LGBTQ equity journey. Understanding how inclusive minded leaders foster the development of these personal resources and how they help in dealing with the myriad of challenges and responsibilities of equity work can support other leaders in honing their ability to deal with complex situations.

When moving an equity-oriented initiative or agenda forward, school leaders need to be committed to their goals as evidenced in the study. In addition, school leaders can employ various strategies to realize their goals. However, when an agenda such as LGBTQ inclusivity presents additional considerations, controversy and barriers, leaders need to draw on other tools
and resources that will support their efforts. In this study, participants possessed a strong degree of political savvy, high degree of emotional intelligence and an ability to purposefully strategize in order to effectively include LGBTQ communities in their schools. Further research to understand how leaders hone these skills and resources would be beneficial.

**Conclusion**

It is my hope that this study serves to motivate other educators and school leaders to embrace the same ideals for inclusion and forge ahead to find ways to honour LGBTQ voice and presence in their school communities. As the participants in this study have demonstrated, principals can indeed adopt and enact a cadre of inclusive approaches which have the potential to significantly enhance the lived experiences of LGBTQ students and communities. Such leadership brings hope of expanding school community members’ understanding of diversity, educating educational stakeholders about the needs of LGBTQ people and altering biases and misconceptions associated with this population. If more elementary school leaders begin to strategically legitimize the existence of LGBTQ people, we can be optimistic that our younger students will more openly embrace this population. Starting early can be transformational for LGBTQ populations by engendering in elementary students an appreciation for embracing all diversities with the goal of wider social change in attitudes and acceptance towards LGBTQ people that normalizes their existence.
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Appendix A - Letter of Informed Consent

OISE
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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study
Creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations -
A study exploring strategies school leaders employ for LGBTQ inclusion

From Clelia Della Rovere
Doctoral Candidate
The Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education (LHAE)
OISE/University of Toronto
Supervisor: Dr. James Ryan

Please consider this opportunity to participate in my study, which explores the ways in which elementary school principals facilitate the inclusion of LGBTQ populations. As a current school principal in Ontario, I am aware of both the challenges and the growing importance of creating inclusive environments for this often-marginalized population. As such, the aim of this study is to identify particular strategies principals make use of in forwarding this agenda in their schools in order to extend our collective understandings of this complex task.

You have been identified as a potential participant in this study because of your inclusionary leadership practices as demonstrated through your involvement in creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ populations. I am seeking your participation because I believe that your inclusive leadership approaches will provide many meaningful insights that may assist other educational leaders who are pursing similar endeavors as well as giving you an opportunity to reflect upon and extend your thinking about your own work in this area. All the information collected will be used to understand the nature of the principal’s role in LGBTQ inclusion in the Ontario context. This would be an opportunity to gather best practices in order to support our LGBTQ students and LGBTQ school community members and, as such, will be very helpful to principals as they strive to address the challenges of leading diverse schools, in particular as it pertains to this dimension of equity.

This study is being conducted in fulfillment of the thesis requirement for my doctorate in Educational Administration at OISE/UT, under the supervision of Professor James Ryan. The specific objectives of the study are to explore the following research question and sub-questions:

Research Question:
How do inclusive-minded principals understand and address issues related to creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations?
Sub-Questions:
1. How do principals understand issues of inclusion for LGBTQ populations?
2. How do principals go about facilitating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations?
3. How do principals navigate through barriers while creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations?
4. What supports do principals report that they need when creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations?

If you choose to participate, the interview will be approximately one hour to one and a half hours in length and will focus on the aforementioned areas. The interviews will take place during the spring of 2014, at a time and location that is convenient for you. I will use an interview guide to outline the topics but expect the conversation will flow naturally according to the participants’ interest and experiences. The interviews will be audio taped with your permission and later transcribed.

Although anonymity cannot be absolutely guaranteed, every possible step will be taken to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity. Information provided by the participants will be used in the research study but no personal information will be used in the report. I will be using pseudonyms for you, your school, and your board. I will not use any information that would reveal your identity. Furthermore, the interview materials, transcriptions, audiotapes, and analyzed data will be kept in a locked file in my private residence for no more than five years. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this data. After that time, they will be destroyed. At the end of the project, the results of the study will be made available to all participants. The final dissertation will also be housed on University of Toronto’s online thesis database, T-Space.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary and, if you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the process at any time and all your transcripts and data will be destroyed. Participants are not required to answer any question that they are not comfortable answering. As an interviewee, you also have the option of asking that the recording be stopped at any time and you will receive a copy of the transcript of your interview to check for clarifications. Any section, which you request to have deleted from the transcript of your interview, will be deleted. At no time will you or any participant be judged or evaluated or be at risk of any harm. There will be no value judgments placed on your responses.

If you are willing to participate, please email me to discuss time and location. At that time, I will ask you to complete and return the consent form below. If you have any questions, I can be reached at clelia.dellarovereproia@mail.utoronto.ca. My supervisor, Professor Jim Ryan can also be reached at jim.ryan@utoronto.ca.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request. Your consideration is appreciated.

Sincerely,

Clelia Della Rovere
Creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations -
A study exploring strategies school leaders employ for LGBTQ inclusion

I agree to participate in the above study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty or consequence.

The following information has been provided to me:

- The purpose of the study is to provide valuable insights into the strategies school leaders employ in creating inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations.

- My participation involves a one-hour to one-hour and a half interview that will be recorded, with my permission, and transcribed. I will be given a copy of my final transcript to review for clarification and any section that I do not want to be included will be omitted.

- I am not required to answer any question that I am not comfortable with and I can ask that the recording stop at any time.

- All of the data collected will be strictly confidential and only the primary investigator (Clelia Della Rovere) and her supervisor (Dr. James Ryan) will see my responses. My name or other identifying information will not be used and the data and identifying information will be kept under lock and key. All data and transcripts will be destroyed after 5 years of the completion of the study.

- Results of this study will be made available to all participants through an email link to the final dissertation.

Please initial each space to indicate consent of the following terms:

_____ I have read and understand the information and the conditions of the study
_____ I agree to participate in the research and understand that I may withdraw at any time.
_____ I understand and agree to be audio taped for the purposes of data collection.

Participant’s name: (please print): ______________________________________________

Participant’s signature: _______________________________________________________

Date: _______________ ________________________________________________________

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The researcher has kept a copy of the signed consent form.
Appendix B - E-mail Invitation

E-mail Invitation to Potential Participants to take part in the Research Study
(distributed via email to be used if snowballing necessary)

Subject Line: Creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations: Invitation to participate in a research study.

Dear Principals,

The following email has been forwarded to you on behalf of Clelia Della Rovere:

This email is an invitation to principals to participate in a research study. The research study is being conducted by me, Clelia Della Rovere, a principal in York Region District School Board, for my doctoral studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The purpose of the research study is to understand your experiences in creating inclusive school environments to support LGBTQ populations. More specifically, the study explores the particular strategies inclusive principals utilize in order to understand the nature of the principal’s role in LGBTQ inclusion in the Ontario context and gather best practices in order to support our LGBTQ populations.

Please note that participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants are being sought who are inclusive leaders for LGBTQ populations and if you choose to participate you will be asked to take part in a confidential audio-taped interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes with me. The interviews will be completely confidential and my final report will not identify any boards, schools, or individuals so you can feel comfortable to speak freely. Additional details about the nature of the interviews and the ethical considerations of your rights as a participant are provided in the attached letter of invitation.

If you are interested in participating or simply interested in getting more information, please contact me directly.

Thank you for considering this request.

Clelia
clelia.dellarovereproia@mail.utoronto.ca or proia@hotmail.com

IMPORTANT: This information is intended only for the use of the individual or entity to which it is addressed and may contain information that is privileged, confidential and exempt from disclosure under the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. If the reader of this message is not the intended recipient or the employee or agent responsible for delivering the message to the intended recipient, you are hereby notified that any dissemination, distribution or copying of this communication is strictly prohibited. If you receive this communication in error, please notify me immediately by telephone.
Appendix C - Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

Main Research Question
How do inclusive-minded principals understand and address issues related to creating inclusive schools for LGBTQ populations?

Background Information

1. How many years have you been working in the field of education? How many years have you been a principal? Can you briefly describe your career path that led you to where you are now?
2. Can you describe your school context (e.g.: location, demographics, achievement results, parental relations and involvement, staff relations, ethnic makeup of school community, socio-economic status).
3. What are your core beliefs around inclusive leadership for LGBTQ populations (e.g.: personal values, vision, leadership style, motivation)?
4. Why are you motivated to do this work around creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ?
5. How have you supported your own professional learning around this area of equity?

Strategies

6. How do you ensure your school community is a safe place for LGBTQ populations?
7. How do promote professional learning around LGBTQ topics with your school community?
8. How do you go about ensuring that curriculum resources are reflective of LGBTQ content?
9. Do you think there is a relationship between creating safe schools for LGBTQ populations, promoting professional learning and inclusive curriculum around LGBTQ topics? If so, elaborate.

Barriers

10. What barriers do you face in creating an inclusive school environment for LGBTQ populations? From where? Why?
11. How do you deal with resisters to LGBTQ inclusion? (e.g.: school level, community, board).
Supports

12. What are some supports at the school and system level that you would need to create inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations?

13. Are there recommendations you would like to make to Boards of Education or the Ministry of Education regarding LGBTQ inclusion?

14. Is there anything else that you would like to add that we have not touched on?

Additional prompts if required for the “strategies” section:

Communication Strategies
- What communication strategies do you use to promote topics around LGBTQ inclusion? (e.g.: conversations/dialogic exchanges with different school community stakeholders).

Critical Learning Strategies
- What strategies do you use with staff and school community members to promote ongoing critical learning and reflection around the need to create inclusive school environments for LGBTQ populations?

Fostering School Community Relations
- What strategies do you use to increase LGBTQ voice and representation in your school?
- What are some outreach strategies you employ to support LGBTQ populations?

Exercising Strategic Advocacy
- Do you think you use your leadership/position to strategically move the LGBTQ inclusion agenda forward? In what ways?
Appendix D- Common Terminology related to the LGBTQ Community

**Ally:** A person, regardless of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, who supports and stands up for the human and civil rights of LGBTQ people. They believe in the dignity and respect of all people, and are willing to stand up in that role.

**Biological sex:** Refers to the physical characteristics that one is assigned at birth and that we label as being male or female.

**Bisexual/Bisexuality:** A person who is attracted physically and emotionally to both males and females. A bisexual may not be equally attracted to both genders and the degree of attraction may vary over time.

**Closet/Closeted:** Hiding one’s sexual orientation or gender identity from others in the workplace, at school, at home and/or with friends.

**Coming Out:** The process through which LGBTQ people recognize and acknowledge their non-heterosexual orientation and integrate this understanding into their personal and social lives. The act of disclosing this orientation or identity to others.

**Gay:** A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. The word “gay” is used to refer to both males and females or to males only.

**Gender Identity:** Refers to one’s inner psychological sense of oneself as being male or female.

**Heterosexism:** Refers to the belief that being heterosexual is superior to or more normal than being gay, lesbian or bisexual.

**Homophobia:** Refers to an irrational fear or hatred of people who identify as gay or lesbian. The terms biphobia and transphobia are used to indicate similar attitudes towards bisexual and transgender people respectively.

**Homosexual/Homosexuality:** A person who is sexually and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. Because the term is associated historically with a medical model of homosexuality and can have a negative connotation, most people prefer such other terms as lesbian, gay or bisexual.
Intersectionality: Similarly, to the point on a graph where lines cross being called a point of “intersection,” the fact that categories of identification—such as class, ethnic origin, gender expression, gender identity, physical and mental ability, race, religion, sexual orientation, or other factors—are experienced simultaneously and cannot genuinely be separated from one another is referred to as “intersectionality.” Often, people are discriminated against with regard to multiple categories: for example, a racialized lesbian could be subjected to heterosexism, homophobia, lesbophobia, misogyny, racism, and transphobia or any other form of discrimination, such as ableism, ageism, and classism, depending on both how she identifies and how she is perceived to be.

Lesbian: A female who is attracted physically and emotionally to other females. Lesbian is usually the term preferred by the gay and lesbian community when referring to gay/homosexual females.

LGBTQ: An acronym which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning individuals.

Outed: When someone else accidentally or deliberately discloses another’s sexual orientation or gender identity, usually without permission.

Outing: The public disclosure of another person’s sexual orientation or gender identity without that person’s permission or knowledge. Such disclosure is very disrespectful and is potentially dangerous to theouted person.

Pansexual: A term of choice for people who do not self-identify as bisexual, finding themselves attracted to people across a spectrum of genders.

Queer: Historically, a negative term for homosexuality. More recently, the LGBTQ movement has reclaimed the word to refer to itself. Increasingly, the word queer is popularly used by LGBTQ youth as a positive way to refer to themselves. A person who does not want to have their sexual orientation reduced to an either/or term such as heterosexual or homosexual. Lots of different people identify as queer (including people who are heterosexual), and many of them think that a binary gender system is too limiting.

Questioning: Refers to individuals who are still exploring their sexual identities and who remain unclear about their sexual orientation.

Reclaimed Language: Taking terms or symbols that have had a derogatory connotation and using them in a positive way to name one’s self or one’s experience. For example, LGBTQ persons often use the words “dyke” and “queer” in a positive and affirming way to refer to themselves. Pink and black inverted triangles that were once used to identify gay and lesbian prisoners in Nazi concentration camps have been reclaimed to serve as an enduring symbol of gay and lesbian pride and as a reminder to the world to speak up against abuses directed at gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.
**Sexual orientation**: Refers to a deep-seated and enduring emotional, relational and sexual attraction to people of the opposite sex (heterosexual), the same sex (homosexual), or both sexes (bisexual).

**Sexism**: Discrimination and unfairness based on biological sex or gender and usually perpetrated against females. Sexism may be evident in organizational and institutional structures, policies, procedures, and programs, as well as in the attitudes and behaviours of individuals.

**Transgender**: Refers to individuals whose inner psychological sense of themselves as male or female and how they express their gender are different from what would be considered traditional for their biological sex.

**Transphobia**: Unreasoning hatred and suspicion or fear of anyone whose gender identity and gender expression does not conform to society’s expectations for one of her/his biological sex.

**Transexual**: A transgendered person who has had treatments to alter the sex of his or her body. Many transsexual people report feeling “trapped in the wrong body” such that their internal feelings and emotions do not match their external biological sex.

**Two-Spirit/Two-Spirited**: Some Aboriginal people identify themselves as two-spirited rather than as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or transsexual. A term whose definition varies across Native American cultures, but which generally means a person born with one biological sex and fulfilling at least some of the gender roles assigned to both sexes; often considered part male and part female or wholly male and wholly female; often revered as natural peace makers as well as healers and shamans.

**Source:**