HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING:
UNDERSTANDING TEACHER, LGBTQ YOUTH,
AND ADVOCATE PERSPECTIVES

by

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Abstract

Recent research shows that the use of derogatory terms, threats, and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in schools continues to occur (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Moreover, the frequency of LGBTQ youth suicides (McFarland, 1998) and the extent of short- and long-term psychosocial issues experienced by LGBTQ youth are concerning (Deisher, 1989; Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). Research involving teachers has found that teachers were frequently aware that homophobic bullying was occurring, but they didn’t know how, or were unwilling, to address it (Warwick, Aggleton, & Douglas, 2001). The current study was a qualitative investigation of teacher, LGBTQ youth, and bullying expert and advocate perspectives on homophobic bullying. Grounded theory methods were utilized to analyze the 18 semi-structured interviews. Four themes were identified around the participants’ understanding of what homophobic bullying is: Words as Weapons, Understanding “That’s so Gay”: Harmful Discrimination or Innocuous Slang, Exclusion as a Weapon, and It’s not Getting Better. Four additional themes emerged around how to facilitate positive change in the school system: Understanding Action: Explicit and Implicit Messaging, Understanding School Culture, Suggestions for Change: Stopping the Silence, and Creating Change: Top Down or Bottom Up? More specifically, the qualitative findings illustrated that verbal homophobic bullying is rampant and perceived as challenging for
school staff to address and lessen, and the climate for LGBTQ students continues to be viewed as negative and hostile. Teachers reported acting on homophobic bullying regularly, whereas LGBTQ youth participants felt teacher action was minimal. Homophobic bullying was considered by participants to be a broad issue that required attention from various micro- to macro-systems. From these findings, a model for conceptualizing the influences of change around homophobic bullying was developed and is presented here. This model utilized Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (1977; 1989; 1999) as a guide to capture the key players that participants felt were most influential on homophobic bullying, from the individual level to the larger socio-political influences.
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Dedication

~ For my Mila, the most wonderful, hilarious, loving, bright, goofy, strong, and utterly unique individual I’ve ever met. It is my greatest hope that you grow up in a world without bullying. But if that is not possible, I hope that you have the clarity and strength to be guided only by your own truth. I love you beyond words.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The pervasiveness of homophobic bullying, and its associated harm to students, has become more and more evident in recent years. This is seen through the increase in homophobic bullying research (Mishna & Van Wert, 2015; Morrison, Jewell, McCutcheon, & Cochrane, 2014; Rivers, 2011a), in modifications to school equity policies (Short, 2007; Toronto District School Board, 2015), and even in pop culture movements, such as the celebrity-endorsed "It Gets Better Campaign". However, despite this recent increased attention, homophobic bullying continues to be an ongoing problem in schools (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011). As the following literature review highlights, school staff and administrators often improperly or inadequately address homophobic bullying (Elze, 2003; Warwick, Aggleton, & Douglas, 2001).

Pre-existing data highlights that LGBTQ youth experience elevated rates of violence and homophobic bullying compared to their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011), and they report high levels of depression, psychosocial adjustment issues, and increased suicidality (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). Thus, the most fundamental core motivation for the initiation of this study was to contribute to improving this reality for LGBTQ youth through the contribution of enhanced knowledge and understanding of the relevant issues. This study qualitatively examined the phenomenon of homophobic bullying from the perspective of three sample groups: high school teachers, LGBTQ youth, and bullying experts and LGBTQ youth advocates. The reasoning behind including all three groups was to attempt to give a voice to those who experience homophobic bullying.
personally, or to those who witness it and feel unprepared or powerless to change it. The assumption is that listening to these voices will highlight the contributing problems and underscore the appropriate direction for change.

It is important to first review the existing literature to understand the context in which the current study rests. Thus, the researcher begins with an overview of general bullying and then hones in on the specifics of homophobic bullying research. These two sections follow similar trajectories, covering first the historical backgrounds of each research area, and then moving towards prevalence rates and correlates. This section continues with a review of teacher and school actions and initiatives around homophobic bullying, and concludes with a rationale for the current study.

**General Bullying**

General bullying has become a widely recognized problem in today’s schools. Increased media coverage and in-depth academic research on general bullying have greatly enhanced the understanding and awareness of this phenomenon. This section begins with a brief overview of the history and evolution of school bullying research, and then provides a general bullying definition. Following this, is a review of the existing general bullying literature, which includes prevalence rates, the impact of bullying, the correlating variables, teachers’ understanding of bullying, and the effectiveness of school-based intervention strategies.

**Bullying Research History**

Dr. Dan Olweus is considered to be the pioneering researcher in the systematic study of peer aggression (Hazeldon Foundation, 2007; Olweus, 1978). His 1970s research is believed to be the earliest observational study of aggression between school children; a phenomenon he
referred to as “mobbing” (Hazeldon Foundation, 2007, p. 1). Olweus was also the first to document important findings that have endured the test of time within the bullying literature. For example, he was the first to determine that ‘mobbing’ declined as age increased (typically after middle school), and that gender differences occurred between typical aggressive acts exhibited from boys (e.g., physical acts) and girls (e.g., name-calling) (Olweus, 1978). Over the years, following his primary work, he developed the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program that has continued to be an important contributor to bullying program implementation and research today (Hazeldon Foundation, 2007). In fact, statistics have shown that students in schools that implement the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program report a fifty percent or more reduction in being bullied themselves or participating in bullying, with peers and teachers also reporting similar results (Hazeldon Foundation, 2016).

Following Olweus’ initial research in the 1970s and 1980s, minimal bullying research was conducted outside of Scandinavia, until the 1990s (Hazeldon Foundation, 2007). According to Smith and Brain (2000), the late 1980s only saw the beginnings of research in Japan focusing on the topic of *ijime*, a word that loosely translates to bullying. Outside of this development, it wasn’t until the early 1990s that bullying research gained momentum internationally (Rivers, 2011a; Sharp & Smith, 1991; Smith & Brain, 2000). For example, a prominent U.K. study by Whitney and Smith (1991) surveyed junior, middle, and secondary students on the nature and extent of bullying and the researchers concluded that bullying rates were “disturbingly high” (p. 3). Following this research, The DES Sheffield Bullying Project (Sharp & Smith, 1991) was initiated in the U.K, modeled off the successful Olweus Program. Thus, sparking the development of early bullying prevention and intervention programs in U.K. schools (Smith & Brain, 2000).
During this time, North America was also witnessing increased research examining general bullying. According to a review by Dake, Price, and Telljohann (2003), bullying research in the U.S. became more extensive following a report by the Secret Service that evaluated 37 different school shootings and found that “two-thirds involved attackers who felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident” (p. 173). Even still, their 2003 review highlighted a lack of research from the U.S. on the extent and intricacies of school bullying and they stressed the need for increased examination in order to reduce the bullying problem in the United States.

In Canada, strides were also being made in bullying research innovations and discoveries. For example, research from Craig, Pepler, and Atlas (2000) enhanced the understanding of the complex dynamic between bully and victim, and an emphasis was placed on understanding the role of peers within the bullying phenomenon (O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Canadian researchers also contributed greatly to enhancing observational methodologies for school bullying episodes (Craig et al., 2000; O’Connell et al. 1999; Pepler, Craig & O’Connell, 2010). As well, Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener (2006) conducted one of the first assessments of bullying that revolved around the perceptions of victimized students, as well as their parents’ and their educators’ perceptions. Thus, moving bullying research from a focus solely on the individuals to a larger perspective of the social contextual influences of bullying.

Many studies during the 1990s also began to look more closely at gender differences and various types of bullying, including indirect bullying (Bjorkvist, Lagerspetz, & Kauklainen, 1992; Rivers & Smith, 1994) and expanded on earlier initial understandings. For example, Rivers and Smith (1994) surveyed over 7,000 primary and secondary school students in the U.K., using the same questionnaire that Olweus had used in his initial research (albeit some wording and cultural
reference changes). They acknowledged that Olweus’ version of identifying indirect bullying (e.g. “being alone at break-time”) was limited, so they enhanced this concept by including indicators such as “no one would talk to me” and “I had rumours spread about me”. An understanding of the subtle complexities and idiosyncrasies of relational bullying began to take shape.

A study by Bjorkqvist et al. (1992) not only examined gender differences of bullying, but they also assessed for the impact of age on gender differences. They assessed three different age cohorts, and found that for girls, only the two oldest cohorts (ages 11 and 15) utilized indirect means of aggression, whereas the youngest cohort (8-year-olds) tended to use mostly direct means of aggression. All of the boy cohorts tended to use direct means of aggression. This research enhanced the basic idea that girls use indirect bullying strategies, while boys use more direct methods, by clarifying that the 8-year old girls had not yet developed the indirect strategies (and did not significantly differ from the boys group), but the 11-year-olds did. They also concluded that aggressive behavior, whether direct or indirect, peaked at age 11. Their theory for this was that as students’ interest turn towards other things, such as dating, they have less concern over social structure and hierarchy (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). Continued research by these authors, focused on further understanding bullying as a group process (e.g., Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), and they introduced the concept of bullying roles, such as the Victim, the Bully, the Reinforcer to the bully, Assistant of the bully, Defender of the victim, and the Outsider.

In summary, generally bullying research was first initiated in Scandinavia, and, following an apparent lull in the 1980s, proliferated between the 1990s and the present time. School bullying appears to be an international phenomenon that has garnered ample attention and
concern. Subsequent sections will highlight the specific reasons for this concern, but first the researcher provides an overview of the difficulties researchers and policy-makers have had with defining this complex phenomenon.

**General Bullying Definition**

Researchers have found it difficult to agree upon a single definition of general bullying (Mishna & Van Wert, 2015; Rivers, 2011a). However, the majority of them agree on a few primary tenets, including: (a) a consistent and repetitive pattern of victimization with intent to inflict injury or discomfort, and (b) an imbalance of power between bully and victim (Olweus, 1994; Rivers, 2011a). Olweus (2013) added the third tenet that is focused on ‘intentionality’ of the perpetrator, meaning that the aggressive or hurtful act was not out of reactive aggression, but it instead occurs without provocation on the part of the victim.

Despite this general agreement, Olweus (2013) noted, in his most contemporary writing on the development of bullying, that even the three primary criteria for the bullying definition are not always consistently present. For example, he highlighted that there is difficulty with cyber bullying, in that a demeaning picture of someone being passed around can certainly constitute bullying, even though it may not be a repeated act. He noted that because of this, he has changed his bullying questionnaire so that it now reads: “these things may happen repeatedly” or “are usually repeated” (Olweus, 2013, p. 757). He highlighted that paying attention to the repeated and consistent nature of bullying is important in order for educators and school staff to more confidently determine the intentionality of the bullying. Certainly if an act is repeated over time, it is more likely to be intentional (as opposed to reactionary). His emphasis lay in the need for educators and school staff to pay attention to the power imbalance criterion, as he believed this
can decrease the tendency to evaluate such behaviours as just regular peer conflict (Olweus, 2013).

Due to these issues surrounding the bullying definition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014) recently determined that a global definition of general bullying was required. The authors stated,

The lack of a uniform definition hinders our ability to understand the true magnitude, scope, and impact of bullying and to track trends over time. Consistent terminology with standardized definitions is necessary to improve public health surveillance of bullying and inform efforts to address bullying. (Gladden et al., 2014, p. 1)

Because of these reasons, Gladden et al. (2014) put forth their own general bullying definition:

Any unwanted aggressive behaviour(s) by another youth or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners, that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social or educational harm. (p. 1)

Estimates of General Bullying Prevalence

Research has shown that bullying is most certainly prevalent. For example, a study by Nansel et al. (2001), which surveyed 15,686 U.S. middle school students, found that 29.9% of the youth reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying, either as the bully, victim or both. A Canadian study by Volk, Craig, Boyce, and King (2006) found that 6% of high school students endorsed bullying behaviours on a weekly basis, and 8% reported that they were victimized on a weekly basis. Hymel and Swearer (2015) concluded from their literature review that prevalence rates for victims of bullying lay anywhere between 10% to 33%, while 5% to 13% of students admitting to bullying others. Thus, it seems that the following statement by Smith
and Brain (2000) aptly summarizes a contemporary view of bullying: “Research to date suggests we can accept as a reasonable generalization that any school can anticipate bullying occurring, although with varying degrees of severity” (p. 2).

Bullying prevalence rates, however, vary significantly. For example, Dake, Price, and Telljohan (2003) completed a meta-analysis of the literature, and found a large range for international prevalence rates for elementary student bullying: from 11.3% in a Finland sample to 49.8% in an Irish sample. Much of this variation can be attributed to the different types of assessments given, as well as age, sex, cultural and contextual differences of participants (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Often bullying experiences are gathered through self-report measures or peer-nomination methods (Olweus, 2013). However, Craig and Pepler (2003) highlighted that prevalence rates can also be highly influenced by the way a question is phrased to participants or by the response time frame (e.g., the last 5 days versus the last 6 weeks). Thus, as previously noted, Canadian researchers Craig and Pepler (1998) developed their own methods of observing bullying interaction on the school grounds. With an inter-rater agreement of 90%, they found that bullying occurred regularly on the playground, with some sort of bullying episode occurring once every seven minutes. They also found that 68% of the bullying episodes occurred “within 120 feet of the school building” (Craig & Pepler, 1998, p. 41).

A review of the bullying literature (Craig & Pepler, 2003) highlighted that bullying was certainly an international issue, with Canadian prevalence rates akin (or possibly higher) to those of most other countries. For example, Canadian high school students in Grades 6–10 reported bullying rates that fell within the top quartile (compared to 35 other countries) for bullying others, and in the top third for experiencing victimization (Craig & Pepler, 2003). This idea was
reiterated Mishna and Van Wert (2015), where they described Canadian students as sitting between the 21st and 26th ranked country (out of 40 countries) for those involved in bullying.

It appears that differences also exist around when bullying behaviours appear to decrease. For example, Dake and colleagues (2003) noted that U.S. prevalence rates were estimated at 19% for elementary students, but were lower for secondary students. However, Nansel and colleagues (2001) found that frequency of bullying increased between Grades 6 through 8, but then decreased in Grades 9 and 10. As stated by Hymel and Swearer (2015), “Developmentally, peer bullying is evident as early as pre-school, although it peaks during the middle school years and declines somewhat by the end of high school” (p. 294). The latter, is in line with Olweus’s (1978) earlier conclusion that bullying tapers off after middle school. Conversely, recent research (Minton, 2014) found that there were no age-related declines in high school for participation in bullying (and homophobic bullying, in particular).

Many researchers who examined prevalence rates also queried gender differences in regard to bullying types and frequencies. For example, Nansel and colleagues (2001) found that males were more likely then females to be both perpetrators and victims of bullying. Craig and Pepler (2003) also concluded through their meta-analysis that boys’ involvement in bullying is more prevalent than girls. However, they noted “although boys may bully at somewhat higher rates than girls, the self-report data may not be reliable because girls are inclined to deny their exclusionary behaviours are a form of bullying” (p. 579). They highlighted that girls tend to report higher rates of being teased (79%) and having rumours spread about them (72%), than do boys (67% and 63% respectively), whereas boys report higher levels of physical victimization (45% versus 21%).
Recent research has examined whether bullying rates are increasing or decreasing, as often the impression, primarily portrayed through media coverage, is that bullying is getting worse (Rigby & Smith, 2011). Through an international meta-analysis of prevalence research between 1990 and 2009, Rigby and Smith (2011) concluded that overall results did not support the view that bullying had increased. In fact, they felt that bullying rates appeared to decrease in many countries, and they believed this was due to small changes from the implementation of anti-bullying programs. However, it is important to note, that they saw a significant increase in one particular type of bullying: cyber bullying (Rigby & Smith, 2011). Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor (2013), also examined the prevalence rates of cyber bullying and concluded that youth online harassment had increased from 6% to 11% between 2000 and 2010. Thus, it appears that general bullying is slowly moving towards improvement, with a clear need for anti-bullying programs to include the pressing issue of cyber bullying.

**Impact of Bullying**

Ample research has been conducted on the short- and long-term consequences of bullying (O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Rivers, 2004; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001) and it is believed that both bullies and victims endure psychological issues (Espelage, Low, & De La Rue, 2012). For example, a longitudinal study conducted in Finland by Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha (2000), followed boys and girls between the ages of 8 to 16 to assess for factors associated with bullying and victimization. The results indicated that both bullying and victimization were associated with various psychological problems, such as substance abuse, deviant behavior, low self-esteem, and issues in social competence.

With regard to the specific impact of being victimized by bullying, depression and suicidal ideation were common (Van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003), as were general mental
and physical health concerns (Rigby, 1998). More specifically, Litwiller and Brausch (2013) found that experiences of both physical and cyber bullying were correlated with increased rates of substance use, violent behavior, unsafe sexual behavior and suicidal behavior. Victimization has also been correlated with a decreased feeling of school belonging, reduced grade point average (Glew, Fan, Katon, & Rivara, 2008), and school truancy (Gastic, 2008).

Van der Wal and colleagues (2003) also found that the impact of depression from being bullied was actually higher for those who were indirectly bullied (e.g., socially isolated) than those were victims of direct (e.g., physical) bullying (Van der Wal et al., 2003). The researchers believed that this was one of the first studies to oppose the idea that direct bullying causes more harm than indirect. Mishna and Van Wert (2015) also highlighted the injuries caused by indirect bullying, such as damage to one’s self esteem and social status. As they stated,

Victims of indirect aggression might experience confusion at first, feeling unsure of what is happening to them. Other effects often follow, including psychological pain, distress, fear, and intimidation, problems with adjustment, and feelings of loneliness and isolation as well as depression into adulthood. (Mishna & Van Wert, 2015, p. 15)

The short- and long-term impact of bullying on those who bully has also been recorded. For example, these children experience high levels of anger and depression and are at risk for engaging in criminal behaviour as adults (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2001; Slee, 1995). It is believed that bullies endorse high rates of emotional and behavioural disorders (Van der Wal et al., 2003), and they have also have shown increased externalizing behaviours, more academic challenges and more negative attitudes than victims of bullying (Espelage et al., 2012). Research has also concluded that bullying behaviours is associated with long-term interpersonal violence and psychosocial problems (Craig & Pepler, 2003). For example, Espelage, Basile, and Hamburger (2012) conducted a longitudinal study where they determined a connection between
perpetration of bullying in the first phase of their research and sexual harassment at the second stage. They posited the idea that traditional bullying perpetration could ignite a pathway that leads to “more gendered harassment and aggressive behavior in the form of homophobic teasing and sexual harassment” (Espelage et al., 2012, p. 64). Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash (2000) also found a connection between bullying behaviours and increased aggression in romantic relationships. They stated, “The results confirm our hypotheses that adolescents whose peer relationships are characterized by bullying are at risk in their development of healthy romantic relationships” (Connolly et al., 2000, p. 299).

Despite the impact noted for bullies, and victims of bullying, many researchers agree that the most vulnerable group of individuals when looking at bullying tends to be those who experience both roles: those individuals are often labeled ‘bully-victims’. Meaning, sometimes they are bullied by others and sometimes they bully others. For example, Nansel and colleagues (2001) found bully-victims had higher rates of smoking, poorer relationships with classmates and increased loneliness. Glew and colleagues (2008) found that those who identified as bully-victims were more likely to endorse the idea of bringing a gun to school.

Finally, recent research has also highlighted the risks associated with those who witness bullying (Rivers & Noret, 2013). Rivers and Noret (2013) examined the relationship between potential suicide ideation and the various roles of bullying, and they found that students who observed bullying behaviours at school were significantly more likely to report negative psychosocial issues (interpersonal sensitivity, helplessness, and suicidal ideation) than those who were not involved with bullying. They concluded that perceived helplessness, for both boys and girls who witnessed bullying, was significantly associated with potential suicide ideation.
In summary, ample evidence exists that highlights the long- and short-term difficulties and adjustment issues for those involved in bullying. Not only does the previous research highlight the harm associated with those who are victimized first-hand by bullying, the evidence also sheds light on the negative consequences for virtually all students present when bullying episodes occur. Given the high prevalence rates, and such proof of significant harm, research initiatives to continue the understanding and create change are certainly warranted.

**Teacher Perspectives**

Teacher’s understanding of the complexities of bullying is vital in order to make positive change within the school system. Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener (2005) examined teachers’ understanding of bullying in the Canadian school system, including their ability to recognize and respond to bullying incidents. Their study determined that certain factors influenced how teacher’s characterized and responded to incidents of bullying. These factors included how seriously a teacher interpreted the incidents, whether or not they saw the victim as being responsible, whether the victim resembled typical characteristics of a ‘victim’, and whether they felt empathy for the victim. This research highlights the importance of teacher training that will alleviate the subjectivity of whether or not a teacher interprets a situation as harmful or serious, which likely relates to whether or not they choose to intervene.

A more recent Canadian study (Lopata & Nowicki, 2014) assessed pre-service teachers in regards to their understanding of the antecedents to bullying. This study found that teachers were accurate with certain antecedents but inaccurate with quite a few other antecedents. They highlighted that continued instruction and education in these programs were warranted to adequately prepare new teachers to accurately assess and address bullying and the potential for bullying. Teachers’ ability to predict bullying and intervene appropriately is very important, as
research has illustrated that students do not often report bullying to parents, teachers or school staff (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Van der Wal et al., 2003). This lack of reporting is likely due to fear of retaliation from the bully, not being believed, or having the situation be assessed as ‘normal’ (Van der Wal et al., 2003). Thus, victimization can potentially continue for years.

**Homophobic Bullying**

This section on homophobic bullying begins with a brief review of the history of homophobic bullying research and then moves to an overview of the issues surrounding the definition of homophobic bullying. Specific subsequent topics include the various manifestations of homophobic bullying (e.g., physical and verbal harassment) and related prevalence rates, a review of the current high school climate for LGBTQ youth and the impact on LGBTQ youth. This section ends with a reflection on the research that has been conducted around both teacher and school responses to homophobic bullying.

As noted previously, ample research has focused on understanding general bullying in high schools today. However, LGBTQ individuals are a specific population within the broader topic of bullying, who often experience ongoing victimization (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Homophobic bullying is qualitatively different than other bullying, in that it uses a person’s sexual preference as ammunition for the abuse. This particular type of bullying has become more and more evident in the existing international bullying research, and the victimization of LGBTQ students is clear (D’Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Elze, 2003; Kosciw et al., 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Despite the increased attention on general school bullying, and the recent increased media awareness of the high frequency of LGBTQ youth suicides, it remains
concerning how many questions still remain unanswered around the specific needs of the LGBTQ high school population and bullying.

**Homophobic Bullying Research History**

As general bullying research was beginning to gain attention in the early 1990s, some initial research endeavors exploring LGBTQ youth experiences in secondary school were starting to take place (see Rivers, 2011a). However, according to Rivers (2011a), many of the first studies were not peer-reviewed and were minimal in terms of scope and depth. A 1995 study, by Pilkington and D’Augelli, was one of the first to survey lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth across 14 different U.S. communities, and to document the extent of their peer victimization.

In 1996, a study by Mason and Palmer surveyed the extent of peer victimization for over 4,000 LGB youth in the U.K. The recognition that homophobic bullying can impact all students, even those who do not identify as LGBTQ, began to emerge and homophobic bullying expanded to include those who deviate from the traditional masculine/feminine gender roles (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). In 2005, Poteat and Espelage conducted what they considered to be one of the first quantitative studies merging the two fields of homophobia and bullying. They found that “homophobic content is prevalent in various forms of aggression and victimization, and that future research should examine the role of homophobia in bullying and victimization” (p. 513). Despite these and other initiatives reviewing homophobic bullying, Rivers (2011a) asserts that there is still not yet a clear and comprehensive picture of LGBTQ youth experiences of bullying.
Defining Homophobic Bullying

Herek (1988) was one of the earlier researchers to define homophobic violence, and he described it as words or actions intended to either harm or intimidate individuals because they are lesbian or gay. However, finding a clear definition of homophobic bullying proves much more difficult. In fact, even today, a search on Wikipedia (one of the world's most recognized encyclopedic search engines) for the term homophobic bullying, redirects you to a page defining “gay bashing”, giving the impression that homophobic bullying is still far from a ubiquitous term. Despite this, numerous academic research articles and literature reviews now use the term homophobic bullying frequently. As with general bullying, it is very important to gain a consensus of how homophobic bullying is defined by researchers, school staff, and policy-makers. And just as with general bullying, a concrete shared definition of homophobic bullying is challenging to find.

Often, homophobic bullying definitions focus on bullying behaviours believed to be motivated by prejudice towards LGBTQ individuals. For example, Prati (2012) defined homophobic bullying as “a specific form of bullying behaviour motivated by homophobia and directed toward students who identify as or who are perceived to be (but not necessarily identify themselves as) lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender” (p. 650). The idea that homophobic bullying is simply motivated by prejudice may be over-simplified, and likely does not take into account research that highlights the impact of group dynamics, social power, and conformity around bullying (Burn, 2000; Poteat, 2015a). A study conducted by Akhtar (2011) highlighted how current homophobic bullying definitions often are limited in scope and tend to omit issues such as social exclusion and emotional abuse.
Physical Victimization

The need for effective support against physical victimization of sexual minority youth in schools is apparent (e.g., D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2002; McFarland & Dupuis, 2001; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995). D’Augelli et al. (1998) found that 27% of LGBTQ youth reported being physically hurt by a peer because of their sexual orientation. Jordan, Vaughan, and Woodworth (1997) found that of a sample of LGBTQ students, 50% reported experiencing harassment at school related to their sexual orientation, and 47% of those stated that this led to a physical altercation. Results from the 2007 GLSEN [Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network] National School Climate Survey in the United States (GLSEN 2007; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008) indicated that almost half of the students surveyed reported being pushed or shoved because of their sexual orientation, and one quarter reported being punched, kicked or assaulted with a weapon in the previous school year. Six years later, despite improvements in these numbers, victimization statistics remained concerning: 36.2% of respondents reported being pushed or shoved because of their sexual orientation and, 16.5% reported being punched, kicked or assaulted with a weapon. Shields, Whitaker, Glassman, Franks, and Howard (2011) found that significantly more LGBTQ youth (12%) reported being in a physical fight that resulted in an injury than did their heterosexual peers (2%). These results illustrate that physical victimization continues to be a serious threat to LGBTQ youth.

Canadian data yields similar results. A national survey commissioned by Egale Canada (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere), entitled Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools (Taylor & Peter, 2011), found that 20.8% of LGBTQ youth reported being physically harassed, as compared to 7.9% of non-LGBTQ participants. They also found that
female sexual minority students were more likely to experience physical violence due to their sexual orientation (25.4%) than male sexual minority students (17%), and that the female numbers were more akin to trans students rates (25%). Transgender students were much more likely to be assaulted for their gender expression (37.1%), as compared to sexual minority youths (21.3%) and non-LGBTQ students (10.4%). Interestingly, students with LGBTQ parents also reported higher levels of physical victimization (27.2%) than did students without an LGBTQ parent (11.1%).

An Ontario study (Williams, Connelly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005) that examined students from five high schools found that LGBTQ youth reported significantly higher rates of physical abuse and sexual harassment from their peers, than heterosexual students. This study sought to understand the impact of contextual factors, such as victimization, familial experiences and peer support on the psychosocial adjustment of LGBTQ youth in Canada. They concluded that their results showed that depression and externalizing symptoms reported by LGBTQ youth “accrued largely because of victimization experiences and lack of support rather than sexual orientation on its own” (Williams et al., 2005, p. 471). Thus, the need for reducing victimization and increasing family and peers support for LGBTQ youth is clear.

Lastly, openness about one’s sexual orientation and being gender atypical were significantly correlated with increased direct high school victimization (Kosciw et al., 2008). Thus, fear of violence could stop LGBTQ students from coming out in high school and further aid the possible development of internalized homophobia. In response, school systems need to address these issues to combat the negative and oppressive environment that sexual minority students often endure.
Homophobic Slang/Verbal Abuse

Herek (1988) believed that discrimination experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) people is unique, in that it tends to be overt and unofficially condoned in governmental, religious, and social institutions. As an example, derogatory and heterosexist terms such as “fag” and “queer” are used regularly in schools (Burn, 2000; Taylor & Peter, 2011). According to one study (Burn, 2000), half of those who reported using homophobic terms did so because of “anti-homosexual” beliefs, while the other half engaged in this labeling behaviour for other reasons, including attempts to accrue social acceptance. Homophobic slang terms appear to be used so frequently that both heterosexual students (98%) and LGBTQ students (98.3%) alike report hearing “that’s so gay” frequently at school. Burn (2000) hypothesized that the use of slang terms that stigmatize gay men can often serve a social function for young heterosexual men; by helping them win approval and acceptance within their social group by demeaning others. Regardless of the reasons derogatory terms against LGBTQ individuals continue to be used, such overt discrimination perpetuates the negativity directed towards sexual minority youth.

Research has determined that verbal harassment is a common occurrence for most LGBTQ students. For example, an American study by D’Augelli et al. (2002) found that more than half of their LGBTQ youth sample had been verbally abused in high school, and nearly one-quarter had been threatened with violence. Jordan et al. (1997) also found that LGBTQ students heard derogatory statements directed at themselves, such as “dyke” or “faggot” at least once per day.

The GLSEN 2007 survey determined that “sexual orientation and gender expression was the most common reason students were harassed at school” (Kosciw et al., 2008, p. 29). They
also found that almost 90% of LGBTQ youth reported being called names or threatened because of their sexuality and two-thirds were harassed because of their gender expression. The Egale survey (Taylor & Peter, 2011) found that transgender students reported the highest amount of verbal harassment (68.2%) due to their perceived gender expression or sexual orientation, followed by female sexual minority youth (54.8%) and then male sexual minority youth (41.6%). It was theorized by the researchers that trans students are most vulnerable to such high levels of harassment, as they have an atypical gender expression and they are often perceived as also being lesbian, gay or bisexual, even if they are not (Taylor & Peter, 2011).

Not only are verbal harassment and homophobic epithets common problems for LGBTQ youth, sexual harassment has also proven to be an issue. Williams et al. (2005) found that compared to their heterosexual peers, sexual minority youth reported significantly higher rates of sexual harassment, such as hearing sexual comments or jokes directed towards them, or having sexual rumors spread about them. This finding was further solidified by the Egale survey, which found that levels of sexual harassment for LGBTQ youth were much higher than non-LGBTQ youth (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Specifically, 35.7% of female sexual minority youth, 41.4% of male sexual minority youth, and 49.4% of transgender youth reported experiencing sexual harassment in the past year, as compared to 16.6% of female heterosexual youth and 23% of male heterosexual youth (Taylor & Peter, 2011).

Cyber-bullying also occurs frequently for sexual minority youth, as the 2008 GLSEN survey found that over 50% of LGBT students reported falling victim to this type of bullying (Kosciw et al., 2008). It appears that time has had very little impact on cyber-bullying statistics, as the 2013 survey found that 49% of LGBT students had experienced cyber-bullying in the past year (Kosciw et al., 2014). Canadian data revealed a large discrepancy between those students
experiencing cyber-bullying, with more LGBTQ youth (27.7%) endorsing falling victim to cyber-bullying than non-LGBTQ youth (5.7%) (Taylor & Peter, 2011). With cyber-bullying fast becoming a popular modality for bullying, with seemingly little change over recent years, these statistics are certainly concerning and cause for attention.

A notable difficulty in making change around the use of homophobic slang in high school relates to the idea that it is not a serious issue. An American study by Thurlow (2001), examined the use of pejoratives among high school students, and the ones they considered to be the most ‘taboo’. The results indicated that homophobic verbal abuse was considered to be much less serious than other slang terms, such as racist remarks. If homophobic remarks are deemed less harmful, and more easily minimized in the school systems, there is a greater likelihood for them to persevere uncontested. Even further, a recent study by Peter, Taylor, and Chamberland (2015) found that the best predictor of homophobic physical abuse was non-physical abuse. Meaning that verbal abuse and harassment certainly are far from innocuous behaviours, and need to be considered a serious threat faced by LGBTQ youth.

In summary, physical and verbal bullying, as well as homophobic slang use, continues to be a serious issue threatening the well-being and safety of LGBTQ youth in schools. Not only are students at risk of being physically or verbally attacked, they are also at risk of significant isolation and exclusion socially and academically. The following section outlines how this victimization for LGBTQ youth impacts the general school climate experienced by these students.

**LGBTQ High School Climate**

The studies that have assessed the high school environment for LGBTQ students report relatively grim findings (D’Augelli et al., 2002; Williams et al., 2005). Research has highlighted
the difficulty that LGBTQ youth have in feeling socially connected (D’Augelli et al., 1998; Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, & Riggle, 2003) and supported in their schools (Elze, 2003). Moreover, issues of safety certainly interrupt one’s sense of belonging and connection to school. For example, Kosciw et al. (2008) found that more than 60% of LGBT youth did not feel safe in schools, and in 2013 this number only decreased to 55.5% (Kosciw et al., 2014). This lack of perceived safety seemed to be highly correlated with school truancy, as 30.3% of LGBT youth had missed school in the previous month due to safety concerns, and over a tenth missed four days or more (Kosciw et al., 2014).

The Egale Survey (Taylor & Peter, 2011) also found a large discrepancy between students’ feelings of safety at school, with 52.7% of LGBTQ participants feeling unsafe versus 3.4% of non-LGBTQ students. Lack of safety also equated to missing school for these sexual minority youth, as 30.2% of LGBTQ youth reported skipping class due to feeling unsafe, compared to only 11% of non-LGBTQ youth. A Canadian survey of LGBTQ youth on school climate, indicated that homophobic speech and harassment were widespread, and that “the more victimization reported by students known, or perceived to be, LGBTQ, the more deleterious were the consequences for their academic performance, social lives, participation in sports and extracurricular activities, and overall enjoyment of school” (Morrison et al., 2014, p. 1).

An additional study (Rostosky et al., 2003) found that sexual orientation was negatively associated with school belonging. This study collected data from 1,725 ninth graders and found that those who identified as LGBTQ reported significantly lower grade point averages and higher drug and alcohol use. Post-hoc analyses showed that these LGBTQ students also reported ‘less perceived privacy while completing the survey,’ which the researchers believed lent support to the idea that these students were generally less trusting of their school environment.
Research by Elze (2003) showed that LGBTQ students were still being ignored within the school environment. For example, she found that 56% of LGBTQ students claimed that none of their courses addressed gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues. As well, 42% stated that there were no gay and lesbian posters or brochures at their school, and 61% stated that they never had school dances where they felt LGBTQ students were welcome to attend with their partners. More recent research paints a picture that is relatively unchanged: Kosciw et al. (2014) concluding that “only 18.5% of LGBT students were taught positive representations of LGBT people, history or events in their classes” (p. xix), and less than half of the students surveyed could find information in their school library on LGBTQ related issues. Taylor & Peter (2011) reported that LGBTQ students felt significantly less ‘like a real part of their school’ than non-LGBTQ youth.

Not only does a lack of school safety and connection lead to LGBTQ youth missing class, but it also appears to cause a ripple effect to other academic issues. For example, multiple studies show an increased likelihood for LGBTQ youth to drop out of school (Remafedi, 1987; Savin-Williams, 1994), and it has been found that LGBTQ youth who experienced higher levels of homophobic bullying were twice as likely to say they would not go on to college or trade school (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Despite the above-noted findings, it should be noted that not all schools are considered equal, in terms of negative school climate for LGBTQ youth. For example, a U.K. based study found that 65% of LGBTQ youth experienced homophobic bullying, but this number rose to 75% when considering students who attended ‘faith-based schools’ (Hunt & Jenson, 2007). Regional differences also appear to impact school climate for LGBTQ youth. For a Canadian example, the Egale survey (Taylor & Peter, 2011) found that British Columbia ranked the lowest, in terms of homophobic school climates and the North, ranked the highest. However, it should be noted that
overall, the researchers found very few differences with regard to regional school variations (e.g., rural versus urban) in terms of homophobic bullying. In their 2015 research paper, Peter and colleagues (2015) examined the issue of regional differences further and stated, “While the presence of homophobia is prevalent across all Canadian regions, there are, nevertheless, many regional differences, which could be used to inform region-specific action plans” (p. 186).

Chesir-Teran and Hughes (2009) defined heterosexism “as a systematic process of privileging heterosexuality relative to homosexuality, based on the assumption that heterosexuality and heterosexual power and privilege are normal and ideal” (p. 964). The previous studies highlight that the high school climate experienced by LGBTQ students is wrought with heterosexist ideologies and beliefs that need to be immediately addressed and improved. Through ascertaining the perspectives of both LGBTQ youth and teachers, the current study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the problems, and potential remedies, with the aim of contributing to the improvement of the high school climate for LGBTQ youth.

**LGBTQ Individuals’ Psychosocial Adjustment**

Ample research has indicated the intense stressors often experienced during their high school years mar the psychosocial adjustment of LGBTQ youth. For example, a study by Williams and colleagues (2005) assessed the link between sexual orientation and general adjustment. They found that sexual minority youth reported more externalizing behaviours and increased depressive symptoms than did their heterosexual peers. Tharinger and Wells (2000) highlighted how LGBTQ students who are struggling to exist within a heterosexist environment, often experience increased levels of anxiety, depression and internalized homophobia. As well, LGBTQ youth are at an increased risk for a number of health problems, substance abuse, and declining school performance (Mufioz-Plaza, et al., 2002). When Rivers and Noret (2008)
compared 53 same-sex-attracted youth to 53 heterosexual youth who were compared on six demographic features and school bullying exposure, they still found higher likelihoods of engaging in some health risk behaviours by the same-sex attracted youth, as compared to the heterosexual youth. Homophobic bullying has also been documented to negatively impact LGBTQ youth’s academics. For example, Rivers (2000) found that 72 percent of the LGBTQ participants in his study had feigned illness or were truant in order to escape anti-LGBTQ abuse at school.

Research has also shown that LGBTQ youth are at significant risk of suicide, with prevalence rates ranging anywhere from three (McFarland, 1998) to five times (Saewyc, Poon, Homma, Smith, & Liebel, 2007), more than their heterosexual peers. Sadly, the McCreary Society Study conducted in BC, Canada, also found that compared to heterosexual peers, “a much higher proportion of LGB youth had also attempted suicide once in the past year” (Saewyc et al., 2007, p. 31). As suggested by Deisher (1989), many factors may affect the higher risk of suicide in LGBTQ youth, such as isolation, the absence of role models, the struggles with nonconformity, and depression.

With regard to the long-term psychosocial adjustment for LGBTQ individuals, research has identified ongoing negative consequences (Otis & Skinner, 1996; Rivers, 2004). For example, chronic depression, posttraumatic stress, and substance use has been found in many LGBTQ adults who experienced frequent and prolonged bullying at school (Rivers, 2004). It appears that homophobic bullying not only causes stress for youth as they experience it, but also as they live with the memories of continued victimization into adulthood.
Positive Buffering Factors

It has been stressed throughout this paper that the understanding and knowledge of the negative stressors faced by LGBTQ students in the school system today is vital. Such knowledge is a necessary tool in making progress toward change. However, it is also very important to look at the variables that help LGBTQ students to cope in a positive way with the challenges they face at school. Such positive factors need to also be recognized in order for teachers and school administrators to not only help LGBTQ students increase their protective factors around homophobic bullying, but to also easily recognize those students who may not have such positive factors in their life. Such students may be at greater risk and may need increased support. Until school staff members are able to recognize these students more easily, they will remain invisible and likely more vulnerable.

Research has been consistent with the buffers against LGBTQ discrimination and victimization many LGBTQ students face (Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Otis & Skinner, 1996). For example, Otis and Skinner (1996) found that social support and self-esteem positively contributed to buffer the effects of victimization on LGBTQ students’ mental well-being. Murdock and Bolch (2005) found, not surprisingly, that positive school environments and good social supports likely contribute to more positive school adjustment for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

More recent research in BC, Canada (Saewyc et al., 2007) found that the two strongest protective factors for LGBTQ youth suicide were family and school connectedness. In fact, when the youth reported both protective factors (high family and school connectedness), even in the presence of the two greatest risk factors behavior (emotional distress and sexual abuse history) their probability of attempting suicide was significantly reduced, sometimes by more than half.
Canadian data, as noted previously, indicates that school environments where such policies are well-known and communicated appear to fare better. For example, fewer than half the participants in the Egale survey (Taylor & Peter, 2011) knew whether their school had a policy for reporting homophobic incidents. Interestingly, the LGBTQ students who did know their school had an anti-homophobia policy were much more likely to feel that their school community was a supportive one, to talk with a counsellor, and to report homophobic incidents to staff and parents (Taylor & Peter, 2011). This research highlights the tremendous importance of a positive school climate and connectedness for LGBTQ youth.

**Teacher Perspectives on LGBTQ Bullying**

The continuous victimization of LGBTQ youth highlights a dearth of consistent support and protection from within the school system. Teachers, who are at the forefront of the school environment, are in an ideal position to make positive change for LGBTQ youth. However, many different variables affect a teacher’s ability and willingness to address homophobic bullying issues in school (Dowling, Rodger, & Cummings, 2007; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). The following section outlines research that aims to understand the impact teachers and school staff are having on homophobic bullying and what enables them to work positively to create change.

Early research on school staff action around homophobic bullying focused less on teachers and more on school counsellors (Fontaine, 1998; Price & Telljohann, 1991). For example, Price and Telljohann found that 20% of school counsellors felt that working with LGBTQ youth would not be rewarding to them, and 20% did not feel competent when they had counselled a sexual minority youth. The researchers (Price & Telljohann, 1991) also found that 26% of school counsellors strongly agreed that teachers exhibited significant prejudice toward
LGBTQ students. In fact, the researchers suggested that the beliefs and attitudes of all school staff, including administration, towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students should be studied in order to fully understand and eliminate the negative school atmosphere that these students experience.

In regards to knowledge about LGBTQ students, 66% of school counsellors believed that the percentage of homosexual students in their school was between 1-5%, while 16% believed that there were no homosexual students in their school (Price & Telljohann, 1991). In contrast, research (Sladken, 1985) showed that the actual realistic percentage of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students in schools was above 10%. This discrepancy highlights the lack of recognition for this often targeted population, and therefore can result in an absence of support for them.

Elze (2003) assessed LGBTQ high school students’ willingness to seek assistance around homophobic bullying. She found that over half (57%) did approach a school professional around issues related to sexual orientation. The majority of the students noted this assistance was helpful; however, 16% found the school staff to be very unhelpful. Only 12% of the students studied sought help from the school principal. Unfortunately, of these students 29% found the principal to be unhelpful. Thus, these studies highlight the need for all school staff and administration to be aware of LGBTQ issues, and to be prepared and able to handle these issues if called upon.

A similar outcome was shown from the GLSEN survey (Kosciw et al., 2008) “When asked about what school personnel did after learning of incidents of harassment or assault, students most commonly said that staff did nothing to address the situation” (p. 10). Little had changed by 2013, where 61.6% of students who did report an incident also stated that staff did nothing (Kosciw et al., 2014). Taylor & Peter (2011) also addressed teacher’s ability and
willingness to act from a Canadian sample. They found that only 25% of LGBTQ youth had seen staff intervene when homophobic comments were made. Whereas, 30% of LGB youth and 43% of trans youth never saw a teacher intervene when such comments were made. However, one positive indicator was that current students were less likely than past students, from their previous study, to report that school staff never intervened.

Even more concerning findings came from one study that found 41% of LGBTQ students reported that teachers told homophobic jokes in the classroom (Elze, 2003). The Egale survey (Taylor & Peter, 2011) relayed similar results, when they found that 10% of LGBTQ youth reported hearing teachers make homophobic comments daily or weekly. Because teachers have an exceptional opportunity to act as role models for students, such discriminatory behaviour is concerning. Research has also shown that supportive educators are a “critical piece toward improving school climate” for LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2008, p. 121). More specifically, LGBTQ students who had supportive educators reportedly felt safer in schools, were less likely to miss school because of safety concerns, had higher grade point averages and educational aspirations and a greater sense of school belonging than those without supportive educators.

A U.K. study (Warwick, et al., 2001) examined teacher’s perceptions of homophobic bullying and found that even though teachers were aware that homophobic bullying was occurring, they did not know how to address it or were unwilling to address it. More recent research (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014) found that knowing LGBTQ individuals, awareness of general (and anti-LGBTQ) bullying and harassment policies, and self-efficacy related to intervention strategies with homophobic remarks were significant predictors of teacher intervention around homophobic bullying. Interestingly, teachers’ sense of obligation to ensure safe schools for LGBTQ youth was not predictive of intervention. This research is telling, and
shines a light on the need for teachers to be knowledgeable and feel self-efficacious around homophobic bullying intervention strategies.

An Ontario study by Schneider and Dimito (2008) examined the teachers’ experiences (both LGBTQ and heterosexual) around their comfort in addressing homophobic bullying issues in school. The results did not yield much difference between the LGBTQ and heterosexual participants, but it was determined that participants felt more supported, comfortable and protected if their school district had an anti-LGBTQ harassment policy. Results from Rinehart and Espelage (2015) reiterated this idea, when they examined teacher and student perspectives on homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment. They found that when teachers perceive the school as more committed to bullying prevention, the students report less homophobic bullying. As well, these researchers found that when schools promoted the prevention of gender inequality and sexual harassment, there were fewer reported experiences of homophobic name-calling (Rinehart & Espelage, 2015). In summary, this research is highlights the need for school administration and teachers to work together to create an environment that is protective of LGBTQ students.

Teacher training is an important issue in ensuring that teachers are entering their profession with all the knowledge and tools needed to adequately address these issues. While it does appear that many teacher-training programs do provide training and/or courses on diversity and equity issues, problems tend to arise given most tend to electives or many do not focusing much on homophobic bullying (Hansen, 2015; Hyland, 2010). An article written by Laurie Hansen (2015), a pre-service education instructor at the University of California, reviewed this disparity between coverage of LGBTQ issues in textbooks and actual course material for teachers to gain the knowledge to address these issues effectively. She developed and
implemented class sessions that were used at the undergraduate and graduate level for pre-service students, and revolved around GLSEN research and suggestions. The article explained the different exercises and activities utilized in class, but did not provide any outcome measures for how well the information was received or the changes that occurred in class. It also did not explain whether the exercises were implemented in elective or mandatory courses. This information is crucial to understand whether these teachings are actually creating the change need to prepare all pre-service students.

Similar Canadian research (Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, & Tompkins, 2014) can be found that looked at a pre-service program at St. Francis Xavier University, which incorporated workshops on how to help students create LGBTQ safe spaces and promote allies in schools. This research was explicit that it was provided to a class that was mandatory and yielded positive results for students. More specifically, they found that this training allowed pre-service teachers to reflect on their own experiences, attitudes and questions in relation to enhancing their abilities to create inclusive and safe schools. They highlight that without specific and mandatory workshops on this topic, a gap will continue between the ‘well-meaning policies’ and the unsafe climate for LGBTQ youth in schools.

**High School Action Against Homophobia**

A review paper by Walton (2004) examined the politics of homophobic bullying in Canadian schools and the extent of related policies and programs. He concluded that although general bullying programs and “safe school” policies had recently proliferated throughout Canadian high schools, there was still an absence of programs specific to homophobic bullying. He challenged educators and school leaders to initiate measures that will confront homophobic bullying in order to promote a safe environment for all students.
An Ontario study by Short (2007) also examined the impact of ‘formal’ laws, policies and regulations on the school’s culture (including gender codes, sexuality, race, and religion) and he determined that “successful policies to blunt the problem of bullying of LGBT students in Canadian schools remain elusive” (p. 44). He acknowledged that although the Toronto District School Board had instituted equity/anti-bullying policies, bullying of LGBT students continued. He noted that the simple perspective of many educational policies that focus on punishing those responsible for bullying was not enough, and he believed that the most important contribution to new policies is a joint effort from strengthening the voices of students and rallying the support of teachers. He stated:

Formal law, policies, and codes of behavior are a necessary first step. Nonetheless, what schools must do to ensure the safety of queer students is to educate and re-educate the actors in the setting. The curriculum must include courses that study gender and sexuality in order to implicate the heterosexual students. Otherwise, heterosexual students (and teachers) receive information about queer students and react to the response of the law to the harassment of queer students from their distanced, normative positions. (Short, 2007, p. 45)

National and provincial legislation has worked to ensure the safety and security of students within the school system. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, from the first part of the Constitutions Act in 1982, ensures that,

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex or mental and physical disability. (Constitutional Act, 1982)

In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education initiated the *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. They stated, “In an increasingly diverse Ontario, [improving outcomes for students at risk] means ensuring that all of our students are engaged, included, and respected, and that they see themselves reflected in their learning environment” (Ministry of Education,
The guiding principles for the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* revolved around ensuring that inclusive education met individual needs, identified and eliminated barriers, promoted a sense of belonging, enhanced previous and existing initiatives and involved the whole school system and the broader community (Ministry of Education, 2009). The plan included a 4-year plan that led up to the end of 2011.

In 2011, The Legislative Assembly of Ontario initiated Bill 14, The Anti-Bullying Act, (approved in 2012), as an amendment to the Education Act (McLeod, 2012) The purpose of the Act was “to designate Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week in schools and to provide for bullying prevention curricula, policies and administrative accountability in schools” (McLeod, 2012). This Act required the Ministry of Education to enact a model of bullying prevention to assist school boards with managing the issue of bullying, and made it mandatory for the schools to deal with bullying that occurs onsite, within 50 meters of the school, or on a school activity off-site. It also required teachers to report any bullying they see to the principal.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) established a Gender-Based Violence Office in 2009 (TDSB, 2009), and was the first of its kind in Canada. The core function of the office was to prevent and address gender-based violence, homophobia and sexual harassment in schools. According to the TDSB (2009), professional workshops and training for staff and students are conducted through workshops, students’ leadership roles and prevention planning. They also highlight how through this office, they have implemented Safe and Positive Spaces in many Toronto schools. The TDBS also has a specific Equity Foundation Statement and a Gender-Based Violence Policy from which it acts.

A school initiative that is becoming more common for improving school climate for LGBTQ youth is the addition of a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). The purpose of a GSA is to
“promote and provide acceptance and integration of students of all sexualities in the school setting” (Clarke & MacDougall, 2012, p. 143). Ample research has found positive outcomes for the inclusion of such programs in schools, including providing a safe place for all students, encouragement for LGBTQ allies and another way for a school to send the message that students of all sexual orientations are of value and to challenge heterosexist and hetero-normative ideas (e.g., Clarke & MacDougall, 2012; McFarland & Dupuis, 2001). Research by Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, and Russell (2011) confirmed that GSAs could contribute to the reduction of depression, victimization, substance and suicide in LGBTQ youth. They also found that GSAs were associated with positive well-being and educational attainment in young adulthood. However, they found that even positive participation in a GSA was not successful in buffering the direct associations between high levels of victimization and these negative outcomes. The authors highlight that, of course, “it is likely that some GSAs are more effective than others in promoting safe school climates and challenging the heteronormative culture within a school” (Toomey et al., 2011, p. 182), and they encourage future researchers to explore the specific facets of GSAs that preclude positive outcomes during and after high school.

As noted by Clarke and MacDougall (2012), recent educational legislative changes in Ontario’s Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13) (Broten 2012) have included a mandate that supports the creation of GSAs in all publicly-funded schools, given there is a request for one. Clarke and MacDougall (2012) highlight how the rest of Canada, at the time of the article, did not have similar legislation. Clarke and MacDougall (2012) not only argue for the inclusion of GSAs in all schools, but they also address the general need for schools to provide curriculum changes, LGBTQ resources and counseling to address homophobic bullying in schools.
The Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13) (Broten, 2012) is an amendment to the Ontario Education Act, which updated many things including the definition of bullying and adding behaviours that are considered cyber-bullying. It also noted that it is the schools duty to promote positive school climates for all pupils including those with diverse sexual orientations or gender identities. It also outlines the requirements for annual professional development for teachers around bullying prevention and promoting positive school climates, as well as implementing supports for students who have been bullied or have been exposed to bullying in some way. Bullying awareness and Prevention Week was mandated (third week in November). Section 303.1(2) states that neither the board nor the principle shall refuse to allow a pupil to start a GSA and to use the name gay-straight alliance or a similar name (Broten, 2012).

Even more recent changes come from Ontario’s updated 2015 Health and Physical Education Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2015), which has updated the health and sexual education curriculum to be much more inclusive. The changes expand learning about health and sexuality issues for each grade, with gender identity and sexual orientation issue being introduced in Grade 8 (Ministry of Education, 2015). Other additions include learning about substance use, addictions and related behaviours ad well as contraception and decision-making in relationships and intimacy. These changes though largely supported by most, have garnered a lot of attention and opposition from some religious groups and parent who have threatened to remove their children from school. For example, the Campaign Life Coalition (2015) describes the changes as “radical” and graphic” and oppose the idea that gender could be taught as a changeable social construct and that homosexuality and homosexual family structures could be normalized. They also oppose the idea of teaching children about contraception, masturbation, and anal and oral sex.
Encouraging heterosexual peers and teachers to identify as LGBTQ allies is also an important issue that needs further attention in the fight against homophobic bullying. Observational studies by Pepler and colleagues (2010) indicated that peers are present to witness at least 85% of bullying incidents. Thus, rallying the bystander to become, and act from a place of, an ally seems a reasonable and appropriate change agent. Research has begun to focus more on the variables that increase the likelihood of individuals acting as allies (e.g., Poteat, 2015a) and some interesting findings have emerged. For example, Poteat (2015a) found that critical thinking skills, increased self-reflection, lower sexual prejudice, having more LGBTQ friends, and engaging in more discussions about sexual orientation were associated with more ‘LGBTQ-affirming behaviour’. Poteat (2015b) also noted that the association as stronger with youth who felt that the conversations about sexual orientation were positive. He concluded that a need exists for research to focus on other factors that prompt heterosexual youth to act, and identify, as an ally.

If LGBTQ students cannot find allies, or struggle to benefit from the above-mentioned laws and policies, they still have an option allowing them to gain their high school diploma: The Triangle Program. The Triangle Program (2015), also part of the TDSB, is Canada’s only LGBTQ High School. It is clear from the Triangle Program website that it is a school offered to students who have been marginalized in mainstream schools and have “all experienced a broad range of homophobia in their former school setting” and due to teachers and schools not being able to cope effectively with this harassment and discrimination these students “could no longer survive in those circumstances”. Of course, participants who comment on the program believed that it was certainly necessary in order to provide a safe space for those intensely marginalized youth. However, almost all experts and teachers who spoke about the Triangle Program (even
those who were current teachers there) noted a idealized wish that it was not needed: that segregation of LGBTQ students was not sometimes the only option. They spoke about the sad reality of this, and how it clearly highlights the depths of the struggles for some LGBTQ youth.

**Study Rationale**

Ample research has focused on the difficult experiences for LGBTQ individuals trying to cope within a heterosexist world. However, it has become clear that the high school environment is exceptionally trying for many LGBTQ youth, given the apparent likelihood of a negative and exclusive school environment (Connolly et al., 2005; D’Augelli et al., 2002) and the higher rates of violence experienced, as compared to their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011). LGBTQ youth also report high levels of depression, psychosocial adjustment issues, and increased suicidality (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). Thus, as previously noted, it is this continued discrimination, oppression, and marginalization of LGBTQ youth that has served as the most fundamental motivation for the current study. The researcher’s aim was to enhancing the knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of homophobic bullying. The subsequent paragraphs further outline the rationale behind the initiation of this study.

It cannot be disputed that homophobic bullying is a severe and concerning issue in Canadian, and international, schools. However, it appears that teachers are not always responding to, and treating all students equally (Mishna et al., 2005; Dowling et al., 2007). Thus, if a teacher views a gay student in a negative light, would they be less inclined to protect them from bullying? If a school administrator doesn’t see the severity in students using words like “fag” or “queer”, are they less motivated to enforce their equity policy guidelines? If students are being mistreated and improperly protected because of the subjective attitudes and beliefs of
school staff, then a great injustice is being done. In order to better protect LGBTQ student in high schools, a deeper understanding of what the problems are within the school system, and where change is needed most, is required. Teachers, LGBTQ youth, and LGBTQ advocates and bullying experts likely have differing perspectives of what the core issues around homophobic bullying are, and it is imperative that all viewpoints are accessed in order create change that is both broad in understanding and specific to the true dynamics at play.

Despite the increased attention on this issue over the years, researchers in this area continue to express the need for further studies on key areas that have seen very little improvements (e.g., Solomon, 2015). In fact, UNESCO recently emphasized the need for more international research on LGBTQ youth, particularly in developing countries, and initiated the first international consultation on homophobic bullying occurring in schools (Kosciw & Pizmony-Levy, 2016). Given the research that examines teacher, LGBTQ youth, and expert perspectives on homophobic bullying is also limited, especially from the Canadian perspective, the most rational starting place is from an exploratory qualitative level. As previously noted, the purpose of this dissertation was to provide a platform for the perspectives from those who personally experience homophobic bullying, or for those who witness it, with the additional aim of taking guidance from these perspectives to direct appropriate change. The interviews conducted with high school teachers, LGBTQ youth and bullying and LGBTQ activist experts allowed the researchers to capture the participants lived experiences around homophobic bullying. More specifically, participants shared their ideas of what was most problematic with the school systems, what was most helpful, and how to reduce homophobic bullying, both at a micro (e.g., school system) and macro levels (e.g., political and societal). As well, the study
aimed to understand whether teachers and LGBTQ youth shared the same or divergent perspectives on homophobic bullying.

This understanding could assist in developing a roadmap for how the Canadian school system can create change that is effective and critical for the well-being of LGBTQ youth. The possibilities for future development from this research then may include changes in school policies, stronger implementation of school policies, increased teacher and student education on the subject matter, and improving relevant supports for LGBTQ youth. However, before moving towards implementing change, a fundamental understanding of the core processes and issues is vital. The research presented here provides a starting point for gaining such knowledge and shedding light on the path that will provide the most direct route to effective and necessary change. All students have a right to feel protected in the classroom. Gaining a broader understanding of what will help provide safety and respectful treatment to LGBTQ youth is our responsibility and our duty.
CHAPTER 2
MY BACKGROUND & STUDY METHODS

My Motivation, and My Social Location to Homophobic Bullying

In this section, I explain my motivation behind studying homophobic bullying in high schools and why I chose to focus on LGBTQ youth experiences. I also outline my social location in relation to the LGBTQ youth in this study.

During my own high school experience, I was unaware of my privilege. I am Caucasian, heterosexual, middle class, and able-bodied. Despite this privilege, I was still acutely aware of the looming threat of being ostracized in high school, as most students are. The social dynamics and the social learning that occur during the high school years are exceptionally impactful, and I remember learning very quickly about what was needed in my social world in order to feel safe: I had to be like everybody else. I saw how individuals so often became victims of bullying if they were different in any way. Even within my own privileged social circle, bullying occurred. It came predominantly in the relational form. There was one girl within our friendship group who did the majority of the bullying, and she was also the one to decide who would get bullied that day. I remember going to school each day, anxious and hopeful that it wasn’t my ‘turn’. That I wouldn’t be the one relentlessly picked on, ignored, or had mean tricks played on her. I also, regrettably, experienced being the observer and even participating in the bullying myself. When it was not my turn to be bullied, the safest place to be was allied with the bully. Despite feeling shame for this experience, I can also first-hand understand the intense drive to stay safe, and when allied with the bully your safety is most certainly increased. It never dawned on any of us within the friendship group that we had the strength in numbers to over-rule her. We were all too scared. Moreover, we couldn’t even name it as bullying; the bullying education was not there at
that time and we all just assumed this was what happened in schools. Thankfully, in the later high school years, I recognized the bullying. I made better choices with new friends and was able to move away from this girl socially.

It wasn’t until I started university when I learned more about sexual and gender diversity, and I reflected on the fact that I couldn’t recall a single student who was LGBTQ from my high school. Not a single one! I graduated with over 400 students in my class. Through meeting more friends in post-secondary who were LGBTQ themselves or connected with the LGBTQ community, and through taking university courses that addressed sexual diversities, I started to become astutely aware of the high levels of homophobia that ran all around me.

During my final year of my undergraduate degree, I worked as a Research Assistant to Dr. Kim Bartholomew, a social psychology professor at Simon Fraser University, who was conducting a study on gay men’s experiences of coming out to family. My work was to code these qualitative interviews. And I can easily say that this work changed my life and led to the academic road I am on now. I can still recall sitting in the small dark room with my headphones on being repeatedly moved to tears while listening to these men’s experiences of discrimination, harassment, violence, abuse and isolation due to their sexual orientation. I also learned of their associated internalized homophobia, poor self-esteem, depression, and rampant suicidality. It was then that I knew I wanted to do what I could to create change in an area where such overt discrimination often went unattended. I wanted to be an active ally.

My master’s thesis research focused on whether pre-service teacher’s homophobia scores impacted their willingness and/or ability to assist LGBTQ and questioning students. During this graduate work, I also worked in the university’s counselling center, where I created and presented workshops to university students on issues to consider when coming out at work or at
school. Lastly, while working at various counselling internships throughout my graduate work, I provided psychotherapy to many LGBTQ individuals during their post-secondary years, and I learned even more about the impact of homophobic bullying and sexual orientation discrimination. All of this work has enhanced my passion in this area and has led me to the current research questions presented here.

**Qualitative Analysis and the Use of Grounded Theory**

American sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed the grounded theory method to describe a type of qualitative research inquiry that began with no preconceived hypotheses. They moved away from the popular topics in sociological research at that time, which often focused mostly on verifying theories. Instead, their focus was on discovering what concepts and hypotheses were relevant for the area being studied that then led to theory development. The theory, which is a reverse approach (compared to positivist research methods), starts from the bottom of the data and emerges as the researcher works their way up, as an inductive process. This involves putting aside preconceived notions of the research content as much as possible so that the results are considered ‘grounded’ in the current data being collected (Rennie, 2006). This qualitative methodology leads the researcher from individual realities to a broader conceptual understanding (Charmaz, 2003).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) described grounded theory as "a general method of comparative analysis" (p. 2). Their constant comparative analysis of the data is viewed as a primary tool used to generate theory explaining how aspects of the social world work (Ke & Wenglensky, 2010).

The constant comparative method consists of four stages: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each theme that emerges from the data; (2) integrating themes and
their properties; (3) delimiting the theory; and (4) writing the theory. Sampling, data collection, and analysis proceed concurrently. (Bowen, 2008, p. 139)

Although Glaser and Strauss (1967) were the first to formally introduce grounded theory, they soon parted ways due to scholarly differences. In fact, Babchuk (1996) argued that, “two somewhat distinct methodologies have evolved based on the original work, each with its own underlying epistemology and attendant properties” (p. 1). He goes on to explain that Glaser’s approach appears to be more committed to principles and practices inherent in the qualitative paradigm, and that “a more laissez-faire” approach to grounded theory, one that is flexible in nature and led by the socially constructed realities of informants, results in the natural emergence of the participant’s world (Babchuk, 1996, p. 2). In contrast, Strauss appeared more focused on retaining the “canons of good science” of grounded theory, including “replicability, generalizability, precision, significance, and verification,” to which Glaser argued risked leading to a forced result (Babchuk, 1996, p. 2).

The decision to use a certain methodological perspective involves understanding the basic assumptions that underlie it, including the worldview and beliefs and attitudes regarding the world we live in (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory emphasizes the varieties “of human action, interaction, and emotional responses that people have to the events and problems they encounter” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 6). Thus, using such a perspective to understand the dynamics of homophobic bullying includes gaining a specific understanding to how people respond, cope with, and impact the nature of homophobic bullying. It also includes understanding how a phenomenon, such as homophobic bullying, may change over time or within different contexts.
Corbin and Strauss (2008) stressed the importance of considering that humans shape, create, and change their institutions through action and interaction. Thus, grounded theory fits well with a study that explores how LGBTQ students and teachers experience and respond to the multiple dynamics of homophobic bullying. For example, it became apparent that some schools had strategies and methods that were thought to decrease the phenomenon of homophobic bullying, while other schools had underlying issues that appeared to potentially increase it. Understanding the ways that individuals impact this social phenomenon is an important goal of this study, and the researcher chose to use the grounded theory methodology because of the apt fit with the research area being explored. More specifically, as previously mentioned, the primary purpose of this study was to gain a broader and more thorough understanding of the issues that play into homophobic bullying. Thus, using aspects of the grounded theory method were well suited to such an exploratory study looking to further understand the social phenomenon of homophobic bullying.

Having said this, grounded theory has expanded from the theoretical differences of Strauss and Glaser to include a number of different approaches within it, including constructivist grounded theory introduced by Charmaz (Ramalho et al., 2015). I chose to follow Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory methodology as a primary guide for this research, as it appeared to be well-suited for the topic of homophobic bullying, and for the purpose of attaining the varied perspectives of teachers, LGBTQ youth, and experts.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Charmaz (1993, 2006, 2014) is the leading voice from the constructivist grounded theory methodology. Charmaz (2006) believes in the perspective that as human beings, we participate in constructing our world, rather than just simply objectively observing it. She shared this sentiment
when she stated, “We are a part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (p. 10). The data is specific to the participants’ time, place and culture, but is also reflective of the researchers thinking and process.

As opposed to a positivist approach, which rests on the belief that there is one single truth, constructivism asserts that there are multiple realities. A constructivist approach in interviewing emphasizes, “eliciting the participant’s definition of terms, situations, and events to try and tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings and tacit rules” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 32). The current study utilized this idea through inquiring how participants defined homophobic bullying and how they perceived situations in the school system that helped or hindered the phenomenon of homophobic bullying. Charmaz (2006) outlined a series of tools to use in guiding the data collection and analysis process, from the initial opening research questions to the writing of the first draft. She encourages researchers utilizing this method to be flexible in their use of this research process and to view it as shared commonalities of the craft rather than a strict recipe that must be strictly adhered to (Charmaz, 2006). These tools, which will be discussed in the subsequent Methods section, were the researcher’s primary guides throughout the analytic process. Figure 1 offers a brief overview of these tools and stages.
Despite the use of Charmaz’s (2006) guide in the current study as the primary guide, it is important to note that not all of the stages of analysis could be utilized in the typical concurrent fashion, due to some logistical issues that arose during the data collection and analysis periods. For example, data analysis did not start immediately after the first interview was conducted, mostly due to a delay that occurred in the interview transcription. In fact, four interviews had been collected by the time the transcription of the first interview was completed. Thus, delaying the initiation of line-by-line analysis of the texts. Having said this, it could be argued that initial analysis began at the outset from the first interview, as the researchers reflected on the process of
each interview, was open to questions that needed to be changed or improved, and reviewed her written interview notes for initial ideas while the interviews were being transcribed.

Teacher and LGBTQ youth interviews occurred over the same five-month period, and occurred when the participants could allow the time to complete the interview, which required more interviewing to occur during this time than analysis. Therefore, although there was some overlap in the data collection and analysis process, the majority of the analysis of these interviews occurred subsequent to the initial data collection. An additional, and unfortunate, issue within the analysis stage was that the researcher experienced was a residential robbery, which included the theft of the research computer and a number of back-up storage devices. Thankfully, the primary data, including the recorded interviews, the transcribed interviews, and the initial analyses remained in the researcher’s possession, yet a number of initial researchers notes were lost. Needless to say, this interrupted the analysis process and required a period of recalibration for the researcher. Furthermore, through the progression of analysis of the teacher and LGBTQ youth groups, the researcher recognized that further data collection would not only strengthen the rigour of the study,

During the research analysis process, the researcher experienced a period of analytical ‘stuckness’. As Charmaz (2006) highlights, researchers often venture down a particular analytical path before discovering a need to explore other paths, and this is often when she suggests theoretical sampling. This is precisely what happened during the analysis process for the current researcher, where ample data had been obtained but the researcher determined that further sampling was needed in order to more thoroughly and confidently fill out each of the categories to reach theoretical saturation. Having said this, the next hurdle was to determine the appropriate target of the theoretical sampling methods.
Initially, the researcher believed that recruiting more teachers and LGBTQ youth could likely provide the saturation needed. However, with further consideration, it became clear that the researcher was experiencing somewhat of an epistemological conundrum, as the constructivist grounded theory approach utilized had appeared to contribute to some limitations around answering particular questions that participants either struggled to answer themselves, or clearly exhibited a wide range of variance in perspectives. For example, such limitations included difficulty with participants’ developing or providing definitions of homophobic bullying, as it appeared that they themselves often struggled themselves to fully conceptualize what homophobic bullying is, what it entails, and what to do about slang terms, such as ‘that’s so gay’.

With constructivism being staunchly subjective, the researcher acknowledges that her stance throughout this paper is not, and cannot be, entirely subjective. The reasons for this is that, as noted previously, despite the primary focus of illuminating and giving voice to participant perspectives, at times, participant perspectives vary or cannot provide the answers sought. After much researcher reflection, and awareness of the above-noted limitations, it was determined at this point in the analysis, the researcher would depart from the constructivist approach and recruit expert opinions on these issues to shed further light and enhance understanding of teacher and LGBRQ youth participants. As well, the expert opinions were able to also provide confirmation of the emerging themes, thus far. Due to these reasons, data collection was re-initiated for the purpose of theoretical sampling to recruit bullying expert and LGBTQ youth advocate perspectives, which required the researcher to make an epistemological shift and adopted a theoretical perspective more akin to Critical Theory that relied on expert opinions.
Critical Theory & Social Justice Research

This section briefly addresses the importance of Critical Theory, an epistemological perspective that often is utilized in research areas related to social justice. Critical Theory originated from Max Horkeimer’s 1930’s essay entitled Traditional and Critical Theory, and is defined as a “social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only to understanding or explaining it” (Crossman, 2014, p.1). As stated by Kincheloe and McLaren (2005), it is difficult to explain precisely what critical theory is given the numerous existing critical theories and the continuously evolving nature of such theories. In general, the focus of the theory is on questioning the assumptions and norms that take away from the true understanding of the world, by examining how society came to be at any specific point in time through the integration of all the major social sciences (Crossman, 2014). More specifically, “it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals” (Crossman, 2014, P.1). In short, “it approaches [the goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge] by promoting the role of criticism in the search for quality education” (Leonardo, 2004, p.11).

Critical theory is relevant to the paper presented here, as the researcher has previously emphasized her desire to contribute to creating change within the phenomenon of homophobic bullying (as critical theory states), and homophobic bullying certainly fits within the realm of social justice research, which so often takes a critical theory perspective. As previously noted, the addition of expert and advocate participants required a methodological shift away from a constructivist ontology, towards a critical perspective actively seeking out the expertise of those who have been in the field and studies these issues for a lengthy period of time.
It is important to note that despite the epistemological differences between a constructivist approach and critical theory, Charmaz (2012) did attempt to address and acknowledge this dilemma when she explained how she believed constructivist grounded theory aptly fits with social justice research:

The grounded theory emphasis on empirical scrutiny and analytical precision fosters creating nuanced analyses of how social and economic conditions work in specific situations, whether or not researchers take their work into explicit theory construction. Such analyses not only contribute to knowledge, but can also inform those practices and policies that social justice researchers seek to change. (Charmaz, 2012, p.2)

Charmaz (2012) goes on to say that the constructivist version of grounded theory is especially useful in social justice research because it rejects claims of objectivity, it includes a reflection on the researcher’s and participants’ relative positions and standpoints, and it emphasizes reflexivity. She added that this method also encourages the adoption of sensitizing concepts, such as power, privilege, equity and oppression. These sensitizing concepts then direct the researcher to explore their relevancy and fit. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) stated that Charmaz’s contributions to social justice research are important as she “paves the way for researchers to use constructivist and critical perspectives as both an epistemological framework but also as a methodological approach” (p. 78). In the current study, the concepts of power, privilege, equity issues and oppression all come in to play, as is seen within the findings section.

Despite Charmaz’s above-noted emphasis on the benefit to using constructivist grounded theory for social justice research, there are still many critical theorists who disagree with such arguments. One important reason for this is the fact that critical theory research aims to create transformative action and is not simply interested in “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” (Schofield Clark, 2016, p. 1). While, constructivist perspectives aim to construct further
understanding through the dual perspectives of researcher and participant, critical theory researchers “seek analytically to place [participant] actions in a wider context that is limited by economic, political, and ideological forces, forces that may otherwise remain unacknowledged” (Schofield Clark, 2016, p. 1). Meaning, critical theory opposes the theoretical position of constructivism due to the inherent plausibility that biases and widespread cultural assumptions may be embedded in the constructions of those not acknowledging such assumptions. Sandra Harding (1995) exemplified this when she questioned how researchers can identify “widespread cultural assumptions about both nature and social relations that have distorted so much of what heretofore has passed as universally valid scientific knowledge?” (Harding, 1995, p.332). On the other hand, critical theorists have been criticized themselves for a tendency toward elitism, with critics alleging that critical theorists assuming “they are not only more capable of analyzing a situation than most; they are better equipped to offer a proscriptive plan of action” (Schofield, 2016, p.2). For the purposes of the current study, accessing the perspectives of expert and advocates aided in moving through the ‘stuckness’ that the researcher experienced, by using their sophisticated knowledge to create a necessary clarity.

**Thematic Analysis**

Despite the researcher’s efforts to conduct a thorough constructivist grounded theory study, the researcher and supervisory committee recognized that due to the previously noted interruptions and process detours, the analysis cannot be considered a pure constructivist grounded theory method. As Charmaz highlighted in a recent interview (Gibbs, 2015), the simultaneous data analysis and collection is a key aspect of constructivist grounded theory. Therefore, the analysis presented here can at best be considered a ‘modified grounded theory approach’ that emphasizes thematic analysis. Therefore, this section provides a brief overview of
thematic analysis, in the context of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) introduction of it as its own methodology. They stated that “through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data” (p. 78). Thematic analysis involves a series of choices that “are often not made explicit but which need explicitly to be considered and discussed” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The following section outlines each of these decisions as they pertain to the current study.

Researchers were encouraged to identify whether their themes emerged as “a rich description of the data set, or a detailed account of one particular aspect” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because the current study was an exploratory study aiming to gain a greater understanding of the participant perspectives around homophobic bullying, it is believed that the themes presented in the results section, as well as the accompanying model, are an accurate reflection of the entire data set. Because this is an under-researched area, utilizing this approach is considered particularly useful (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The next question that needs clarifying when using thematic analyses is whether the themes are identified as inductive or deductive. Because the researcher employed a grounded theory approach, the answer here is simply, and obviously, an inductive approach. Another decision revolves around whether themes are identified at the semantic or latent level. This exploratory study falls within the area of semantic level of analyses. Meaning, the analyses starts at the level of description, to show the key players occurring within the data and to show patterns within, but then moves towards interpretation, “where there is an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications, often in relation to previous literature” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Braun and Clarke (2006) also outlined six
phases of thematic analysis. Please see Appendix G for a table that explains, in further detail, how the researcher specifically met each of these phases.

Method

The aim of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon of homophobic bullying, gleaned through the perspectives of LGBTQ youth, teachers and expert/advocates in the field. Individual interviews were conducted to address how participants defined homophobic bullying, what the school environment was like for LGBTQ youth, descriptors of first-hand, witnessed experiences of homophobic bullying and how they felt the school system and staff were addressing the issue. This section includes an explanation of the overarching areas of inquiry for all participants, and reviews the factors related to why individual interviews were conducted (as opposed to focus groups). Following this, the researcher describes the procedure of the study, the participant demographics, and finishes with a thorough explanation of the analytic process.

Overarching Areas of Inquiry for All Participants

The interviews for all participants addressed three core areas: (a) the quantity and quality of homophobic bullying, and the subsequent impact on the environment for LGBTQ youth (b) teachers' and school staff’s willingness and abilities to recognize homophobic bullying and effectively intervene, and (c) the varying micro and macro environmental factors involved in increasing or decreasing homophobic bullying. The questions posed were asked in order to gain a broader and more thorough understanding of the issues and influences that play into homophobic bullying, and to ascertain whether the perspectives of teachers and LGBTQ youth were similar or divergent. Allowing those individuals who are often victims of, or witnesses to,
homophobic bullying to share their views and experiences will give further voice to the important elements of this phenomenon.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How have participants personally experienced or witnessed homophobic bullying occurring in Ontario high schools?

2. How have participants experienced teacher and school action around homophobic bullying?

3. How do participants view the high school environment in general for LGBTQ youth?

4. What are the perspectives and attitudes of teachers and LGBT youth around the issue of homophobic bullying?

5. Do teachers and LGBTQ youth have similar or differing ideas of how homophobic bullying is enacted in high schools and the areas where changes need to be implemented?

Because teachers have direct contact with students, it was viewed as imperative to also examine their attitudes and knowledge around homophobic bullying, as well as comparing this data to the perspectives ascertained from LGBTQ youth. As previously noted, Beran and Shapiro (2005) stressed the importance of being acutely aware of perspectives of bullying before implementing an anti-bullying program in order to know where and at which level to initiate change. From their evaluation of an anti-bullying program, they concluded that many factors contribute to bullying, such as home, school and individual factors and a comprehensive program is needed to effectively combat bullying. The current study aims to give voice to those who are
often on the frontlines of homophobic bullying and to understand their perspectives on the various contextual factors that may influence this phenomenon.

A final step in this study was the inclusion of four additional interviews with experts and/or activists in the area of homophobic bullying and LGBTQ research. Following a grounded theory approach, these interviews validated the coding of themes and provided additional input on solutions that could be enacted. According to Bohm (2004), seeking such subsequent data to “confirm or modify the provisional categories of the theory that have already been developed” is an important element of theoretical coding (p. 270). This process is an important component of Grounded Theory, and it follows the iterative process of continuing to adapt and focus the data collection as the researcher gains ideas through the analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Theoretical sampling involves using the process of collecting data coding and analyzing in an overlapping or simultaneous fashion in order to further develop theory by allowing it to direct the sampling process (Schreiber & Stern, 2001). They stated, “A good grounded theorist will seek out more than one data source to provide a wider perspective on the phenomenon of study” and added, “As categories emerge, the researcher targets certain groups or subgroups for data collection, first to test and refine the emerging categories, and then to elaborate and saturate them” (p. 64). It was this logic and process that led to the decision to conduct additional expert/activist interviews.

The final reason for the inclusion of the bullying experts and LGBTQ youth advocates was triangulation. Researchers often use the term triangulation to mean combining “multiple methods, data sources, theories, and/or investigators in order to reveal the varied dimensions of an area of interest” (Breitmayer, Ayre, & Knafl, 1993, p. 238). As Breitmayer and colleagues (1993) stated, “each measure, source, or investigator contributes another piece to the puzzle” (p.
In the current study, triangulation was used for a confirmatory purpose, with the idea of viewing key theoretical constructs that emerged from the data from the three different sources. More specifically, the experts provided their perspectives on the accuracy and adequacy of emerging themes, further concretized these findings while also providing increased depth and understanding. The addition of the expert interviews also provided an enhanced confidence in the completeness of this study. This is because the researchers initially felt that saturation had been met from the teacher and youth interviews, as a redundancy in the topics became apparent in the coding schemes and emergent categories. However, as the analysis process deepened and evolved, the need for additional information became apparent in order to fully understand the depth of the emergent themes and to ensure certainty with the findings. Thus, the decision to recruit expert and advocate perspectives was made.

Breitmayer and colleagues (1993) highlighted the idea that using triangulation for the purpose of confirmation was to select data collection techniques that would provide strengths and weaknesses that are known and counter-balancing. It is believed that the addition of expert interviews provided exactly this, as the sophisticated understanding these individuals contributed to the issues surrounding homophobic bullying provided an additional varied perspective. The addition of the expert voices helped to deepen the researcher’s understanding of themes that were already emerging from previous interviews. In short, these interviews contributed to a deeper understanding of the complex issues that were introduced in the initial 14 interviews and provided further confirmation of the resultant themes and model, and enhanced the rigor of the study.
Rationale for Conducting Individual Interviews

The following section outlines a number of benefits to conducting individual interviews in the current study:

Individual Interviews Versus Written Questionnaires

Issues within the topic of homophobic bullying range from the various types of victimization (D’Augelli et al., 2002; Elze, 2003) to the political aspects of school policy regulation (Walton, 2004), with a number of other topics in between. Conducting one-on-one interviews not only allows the interviewer to establish a positive rapport with the participant, it also improves the likelihood that the participant will find it interesting to talk with the interviewer; thus potentially providing richer information (Cozby, 1997).

As well, in-person interviews allow the interviewer to ensure the participant understands the questions, whereas the provision of a questionnaire lacks this ability. Individual interviews also allow the researcher to ensure that all areas of interest have been adequately addressed, and follow-up questions can be put forth if needed. Individual interviews also allow the interviewer to ask the participant what areas related to the subject matter he or she believes are important but were perhaps not addressed in the interviewers predetermined questions. Lastly, open-ended questions are often easier and less time-consuming for the participant to address in person, rather than in writing (Cozby, 1997).

It also appears that gay men prefer to participate in interviews rather than complete questionnaires when sharing their own personal experiences (Zea, Reisen, & Diaz, 2003). Zea and colleagues (2003) found that gay research participants felt “constrained” by multiple-choice questions and they preferred to participate in interviews or debriefing sessions and added that
they believe interviews will likely allow the participant to “express thoughts and feelings elicited by the questions” and provide new insight for the researcher (p. 287).

Additional researchers have also agreed on the important contribution of qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), in that it allows a deep exploration of behavioural concepts and their varying contexts and interactions. Thus, it appears that the open-ended aspect of individual interviews is often preferred because of the richness of information communicated.

**Individual Interviews Versus Focus Groups**

Focus groups are group interviews that aim to illustrate participant perspectives and the interaction between group participants, in order to create data on a particular topic (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). “A unique feature of focus groups is that instead of research participants responding to a question in turn, participants are encouraged to communicate openly with each other, promoting discussion and commenting on each others’ experiences and perspectives” (Nestel et al., 2012, p. 2). This interaction can provide rich data that may not emerge, or be available, from individual interviews. Additional benefits to gathering information through focus groups include time efficiency and being more cost effective.

However, Nestel and colleagues (2012) also highlighted the difficulty that can arise from “the human resource intensive nature” (p. 2) of focus groups that includes the development of topic guides, scheduling, keeping record, transcribing, analyzing and reporting the results. Focus groups also have the potential for negative group dynamics to effect the information being presented. For example, if outspoken individuals strongly enforce their opinion, it may decrease the likelihood that others volunteer opposing ideas, resulting in the possible censorship of important information. Nonetheless, a skilled facilitator can likely avoid these pitfalls by working to enhance the balance of the group.
Less outspoken individuals may feel intimidated or embarrassed to give their opinions, and thus may not volunteer as much as they would in an individual interview. A challenge that Nestel and colleagues (2012) noted with focus groups was ensuring that all participants had the space and were comfortable enough to offer opinions. Again, a skilled facilitator can likely work to ensure the comfort and contribution of all participants, but this last point was especially important given the sensitive nature of the subject matter of the current study. Ward and Winstanley (2003) stressed the power of silence that has historically been cast over sexual minorities. They stated that this silence makes research within this area extremely difficult, with a real challenge being getting people talking.

A study by Lalwani, Shavitt, and Johnson (2006) found that people who answer in socially desirable ways tend to be preoccupied with self-presentation. Although socially desirable answers could certainly occur in individual interviews, it is likely more common for people to offer such responses in a group-context in an effort to avoid any stigma or exclusion. Needless to say, socially desirable responding could threaten the validity of the data collected, and thus negatively affect the outcome of such research. With this in mind, it seems warranted to use the qualitative individual interviews to lessen the potential for biased data and to elicit rich information around the experiences and attitudes towards homophobic bullying.

For the purpose of this study, individual interviews were conducted with the intention of gaining an understanding of the constructs related to LGBTQ bullying in high schools. It was because of the above-noted concerns that the researcher opted to conduct individual interviews. However, it needs to be clear that, in fact, the richness of the data collected in the present study could have been even further enhanced from utilizing both individual interviews and focus groups. Please see the Limitations section for further discussion on this topic.
Procedure

**Semi-Structured Individual Interviews**

Eighteen individuals participated in interviews conducted by the primary researcher. Fourteen interviews were in-person and four were via telephone. The telephone format was utilized for the four bullying expert and LGBTQ activist interviews, as the primary researcher had moved outside of Ontario at that time. The researcher prepared a manual prior to conducting the individual interviews (see Appendix A), which outlined the relevant topics, questions, and procedures for each interview.

The topics addressed in the teacher (n = 6) and youth interviews (n = 8) were what homophobic bullying currently looks like in the school system, how participants defined homophobic bullying, what variables help or hinder the occurrence of homophobic bullying, the impact on homophobic bullying student victims, and how confident school staff felt to recognize and intervene in these situations.

Approximately half (n = 8) of the initial round of interviews involved LGBTQ youth, in order to gain a greater understanding of the bullying issues that impacted them during their high school experience, and what they believed would have been helpful for change. LGBTQ youth was chosen as a participant group because of the importance of giving voice to their first-hand experiences of homophobic bullying in the school system. When exploring a topic that needs further description and understanding, accessing those individuals who can speak to their own lived experience, allows the research to unfold in such a way that enhances the authenticity of the information gleaned.

Multiple LGBTQ youth organizations in the Greater Toronto Area were made in an effort to recruit participants. Recruitment efforts targeted The 519 Youth Group, Individuals associated
with The Pink Triangle Program, TEACH (Teens Educating About Homophobia) and other various LGBTQ Gay Alliance groups. Administration of each of these community associations were initially contacted by the researcher and asked about the specific procedures for recruiting association members to participate in the study. Once the agency granted authorization, flyers were delivered to the association and posted in visible locations to attract participants.

Two youth participants were recruited from these efforts, but the majority was recruited through the use of Craigslist volunteer postings and advertisements placed on LGBTQ youth Facebook pages (n = 6). For Facebook, Craigslist and word-of-mouth recruitment methods, those responsible for the administration of various email groups were contacted for consent of recruiting participants through their site. On Facebook, messages advertising the brochures were posted, asking LGBTQ individuals to participate in the study and to forward the message to others who may likely be willing to participate in the study. Only individuals from these associations who were age 16 or above were accepted into the study. Students were also required to be English speaking.

**Specific Questions Posed to LGBTQ Youth**

The questions posed to the LGBTQ youth were devised after a literature search, reflection by the researcher on areas that seemed important for understanding homophobic bullying, and with supervisor consultations. It is important to note here that despite it often considered counter to the grounded theory method to do a literature review prior to data collection (Ramalho, Adams, Huggard, and Hoare, 2015), this step was a necessary part of gaining approval by the University of Toronto Ethics Board. However, from an epistemological perspective, the literature review has been identified points where classic grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory diverge (Hernandez & Andrews, 2012). Henandez and Andrews
(2012) noted that constructivist grounded theorists often start with a literature review in order to determine what has been done and what needs to be done, in order to clarify the study problem. As well, constructivist grounded theory highlights the unlikeliness of a researcher coming into a previous research project without any prior knowledge of the field, even without conducting an early literature review, and thus, constructive grounded theorists often focus less on avoiding a literature review and more on allowing any previous knowledge to “lie fallow” until later stages of analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p.166). The current researcher’s primary purpose for the literature review was to gain a general sense of direction for the initial interview questions and she then committed to ‘favouring the data’ over any previous knowledge or research (Ramalho et al., 2015). The concept of favouring the data was described by Charmaz, as doing ‘some forethought’ on the subject being studied, while remaining as open as possible and not narrowing your topic before starting (Gibbs, 2015). Once the initial interview questions were determined, the University of Toronto Ethics Board and the TDSB (for the teacher interviews) also contributed minor revisions to the questions being posed. Questions that guided the open-ended interviews with the LGBTQ youth were:

1. Do you feel like homophobic bullying was a serious issue at your high school?
2. How do you define homophobic bullying?
3. What examples can you give of homophobic bullying that you either experienced first-hand or witnessed?
4. Did you ever drop out of school or avoid school because of bullying?
5. Were there people you felt you could talk to about homophobic bullying? If so what made you aware that you could approach these individuals?
6. Was anything done by the school system to lessen or stop homophobic bullying?
7. How did homophobic bullying feel when it was occurring? What messages did you
receive from these experiences?

8. How do you think experiences of homophobic bullying affect people/yourselves long-term?

9. What impact did these experiences have on you then and now?

**Specific Questions Posed to Teachers**

The remainder of the initial interviews (n = 6) involved teachers from the TDSB. Teachers were recruited to participate through the TDSB and word-of-mouth. The TDSB was contacted with regards to their ethics and consent procedure to recruit participants for the study (see Appendix B, for Letter of information to the TDSB) and an application was submitted. When consent was granted, advertisements for the study were provided to the TDSB and distributed in meetings and/or posted in visible areas. However, the most successful teacher participant recruitment methods were through word-of-mouth and direct contact with Alternative School Programs. It should be noted that teachers and LGBTQ youth were not necessarily from the same schools.

The teacher participants were asked questions pertaining to their perception of homophobic bullying in their schools, what they believed the impact on students was, how confident and willing they were to intervene, and their understanding of the related school policies and guidelines.

Questions that guided the open-ended interviews with teachers were:

1. How do you define homophobic bullying?
2. Can you provide examples of what types of behaviours, words, or actions would be defined as homophobic bullying?
3. How often do you think gay and lesbian students are verbally/physically harassed
because of their sexual orientation?

4. Can you give examples of homophobic bullying that you may have witnessed or heard about that occurred at your school?

5. How would you react if you saw homophobic bullying occurring?

6. What has your school done to lessen and/or stop homophobic bullying?

7. How do you feel the school climate is for gay and lesbian youth?

8. How comfortable would you feel discussing such issues in the classroom?

9. If not, what are some things that may hinder you from doing so?

10. What do you think the long-term impact is on students who experience homophobic bullying?

11. How do adequately do you think the school system addresses/takes action against homophobic bullying?

12. What more do you feel the school could be doing for gay and lesbian students to protect them and their rights?

All teacher and LGBTQ youth participants were given a Letter of Information and Consent Form (see Appendix C) as well as a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D). The names of all participants were entered in two draws (one for the teachers and one for the LGBTQ youth) to win $100. Each participant completed a separate ballot if they elected to be part of the draw with their name and way they would prefer to be contacted if they were the winner, either via email or telephone. The draws were completed following data collection and prizes awarded.

Specific Questions Posed to LGBTQ Advocate and Bullying Experts

As noted previously, a further round of interviews was conducted near the end of data analysis. Four LGBTQ youth advocates and bullying expert interviews were completed in order to ascertain feedback from LGBTQ and bullying experts on the emerging themes from the initial
interviews, in order to solidify the rigor of the study and to further enhance the understanding of this complex topic. These homophobic bullying expert/activist participants were recruited through the use of purposive sampling methods. Individuals who were known within the academic and LGBTQ community to be active members within this research area were contacted via email and/or phone. A list was provided by the dissertation supervisor, an acknowledged expert in the field based on personal contacts and knowledge of experts in the field. The snowball method was also utilized, as many of those initially contacted had other people in mind that they felt would also be able to offer insight and wisdom to this study. Those suggested people were also contacted.

Questions posed to the Expert/Advocate sample were:

1. Can you start by telling me how you would define homophobic bullying?

2. Can you provide examples of behaviours, words, or actions that would qualify as homophobic or transphobic bullying? (If not addressed in previous answer).

3. Why do you think homophobic/transphobic bullying occurs? Do you have a theory about why LGBTQ individuals are so often the targets of bullying?

4. Do you see homophobic/transphobic bullying as a significant problem in Ontario high schools? What do you base your opinion on?
   a. If yes, then…what policies or procedures at the School, Board or the Ministry of Education and Training level need to be changed to more adequately address homophobic/transphobic bullying? Who should provide the leadership for that change to occur? Do you have other solutions to suggest?

5. How adequately do you think the issues of homophobic/transphobic bullying are addressed in high schools?
   a. If not adequately, then: Is there need for curriculum change and more inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity information and discussions in high schools? Do you have other solutions to suggest?
6. What do you feel needs to be done to create change around homophobic/transphobic bullying? (IE; where is the most crucial place for change to occur?)

7. What more do you feel the school could be doing for gay, lesbian and transgendered students to protect them and their rights?

The researcher provided participants with a brief summarized list of the themes and the model that emerged from the previous interviews with teachers and LGBTQ youth, and asked them to respond and provide any additional insight or opinions they may have. Follow-up questions were as follows:

8. Do you feel that these themes adequately represent the elements/issues involved in homophobic bullying in high schools today?

9. Is there anything that you would change or add to these themes that is not adequately represented regarding homophobic bullying.

10. Is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to add about this topic?

The researcher posed all initial interview questions with the intention of opening up those areas of interest and then further questions were developed based on the participant’s responses. At the end of each interview, the researcher also asked if there was anything that was not covered in the interview that participants felt was important to share on this topic. Through the process of reflection and analysis as the data was being collected, new areas of interest emerged while other areas were determined to be less relevant from the experiences of the participants. It is with this flexibility and openness that grounded theory allows the researcher to narrow her focus as she moves through the data collection process to, in turn, gather additional specific data. This meant that additional areas of interest emerged as the data collection proceeded and a few questions that
were originally asked were discovered to be unhelpful, and thus were omitted. These examples will be reviewed in the results section.

**Participants**

This section outlines the specific demographics for the teacher, LGBTQ youth, and expert/activist participants to provide a picture of who took part in this research. As previously stated, a total of 18 people participated in this study, with six being TDSB high school teachers, eight being LGBTQ youth, and four being LGBTQ experts or activists.

**Teachers**

Of the teachers (n = 6), three were male and three female. Ages ranged from 24 to 42 with a mean age of 35. Ethnicities of participants were Caucasian (n = 4) and Asian Canadian (n = 2). With regard to sexual orientation, two teachers self-identified as lesbian, two gay and two heterosexual. Four teachers were actively working as high school teachers at the time of the interviews and two were completing graduate work. Three of the teachers had experience teaching at the Triangle Program, an alternative school that is part of the TDSB that focuses on marginalized LGBTQ youth. Years of teaching experience ranged from one year to 12 years with an average of 5.5 years.

**LGBTQ Youth**

Of the LGBTQ youth (n = 8), three were male, four were female and one chose the “Other” option for gender. Ages ranged from 17 to 21 with an average age of 19.25 years. It is important to note that the researcher determined an age range from 16-21 years likely for this population. Ages younger than 16 require parental consent to participate, and it was believed that this requirement may pose problems for youth who are not out to their parents,
or those who are not comfortable discussing these issues with their parents. As well, comparable studies that included LGBTQ youth typically include age ranges from 14 or 16 to 21 or 22 (e.g., Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Jamil et al., 2009). All eight LGBTQ participants were Caucasian. Three self-identified as gay, two as lesbian, two as bisexual and one as “Other” (further described as "Pansexual"). When asked of their professional title or occupation, three did not answer, three were students, one was a Customer Service Representative, and one was unemployed at the time of interview.

**LGBTQ Advocates and Bullying Experts**

Demographics for the four LGBTQ advocate and bullying expert participants are as follows: Three identified as male and one as female. Three identified as Caucasian and one as Jewish. Ages ranged from 41 to 63, with a mean age of 53.5 years. Two identified as gay, one as queer, and one as heterosexual. The confidentiality forms asked the expert/activist participants if they would like to remain anonymous, or if they would consent to being identified in order to allow readers to understand whom the experts were and what their qualifications were. All four participants agreed to non-anonymity, thus, they are briefly introduced here:

**Faye Mishna**

Dr. Mishna is Dean and Professor at the Factor Inwentash of Social Work at the University of Toronto and is cross-appointed to the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. Her research focus is on bullying, cyber abuse/cyber bullying and cyber counselling, and school-based interventions with students with learning disabilities. She has a number of books and scholarly articles on bullying and bullying in Canada.
Kenneth Jeffers

Kenneth Jeffers is the Coordinator for the Gender-Based Violence Prevention Program at the TDSB. He also has experience working in the TDSB Equity Department, and as a child and youth worker.

Steven Solomon

Dr. Solomon is a full-time sessional professor at Ryerson University. Previously he worked as the school social worker for the TDSB Human Sexuality Program. He provided counselling for students who were bullied because of the sexual orientation, and he delivered anti-homophobia workshops for K-12 students. He also has previously worked at the Triangle Program and he was awarded the TDSB Excellence Award for his part in helping students establish GSAs in schools.

Tim McCaskell

At the time of the interview, Mr. McCaskell was retired. However, he has ample experience working within the TDSB, doing anti-racism and anti-homophobia work for over 20 years. He also is named as an Educational Activist with the University of Toronto and was affiliated with the Anti-Homophobia Equity Coalition. He is the author of the book *Race to Equity: Disrupting Educational Inequality* that reviews three decades of work within the TDSB to reshape the education system through the delivery of anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-homophobic workshops.

Transcription and Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and inputted into the data analysis software program, NVivo. The transcriptions were then reviewed against the original interviews to ensure accuracy. An important concept within grounded theory is analyzing the data throughout the data
collection process with the intention of keeping the researcher close to the emerging data (Charmaz, 2003). As Payne (2007) stated, “one of the unique features to grounded theory analysis is the dynamic interplay of data collection and analysis” (p. 68). As previously described, data collection and analysis for the current study did overlap, but were not completely simultaneous. The details of this will be explained further in the subsequent section.

The analysis process began during the researcher’s first review of original transcripts, in order to ensure accuracy, as initial ideas were noted as memos for further evaluation and reflection at a later time. Memos also served the purpose of the author taking note of her own ideas, prior knowledge and perceptions, in order to contribute to and understand the co-construction of meaning that is considered so important in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Line-by-line coding was then initiated, with the researcher reviewing each line of the transcripts and coding them into ‘small units of meaning’ (Horne, Seymour, & Payne, 2012). This coding was conducted systematically across all initial 14 interviews. Memos were also created during this initial coding, in order to document the question of “which theoretical categories might these statements indicate” (Charmaz, 2006, p.45)?

Following the line-by-line coding, the codes that had been created by the researcher were then further grouped together according to their cohesiveness. For example, despite a majority of the researcher’s questions revolving around the high school context, she recognized that many participants spoke frequently about issues or influences on homophobic bullying in school that stemmed from contexts outside of the school. For example, a few initial codes that the researcher named from the line-by-line coding were community influences, homophobia from within the gay community, and family influences. Eventually conceptualized a thread between these codes and made the decision to include them under the larger heading of ‘External Influences’. From here,
the researcher utilized this new idea to revisit previous data and to explore subsequent data (Charmaz, 2006), assessing for frequency and process factors related to External Factors. Because it was found that a majority of participants spoke to the tremendous impact of external factors on high school homophobic bullying, it was determined that this concept met the criteria of a category (Please see Appendix E for an example Paper Trail).

From this point, the researcher moved into what Charmaz (2006) terms the more “focused and selective phase” (p. 46). In more concrete terms, after line-by-line coding was conducted for all interviews, the current researcher moved from codes to categories by recognizing the various groupings of the most significant or frequent initial codes, and sorted and synthesized them through the construction of “tree nodes” in the NVivo software (See Table 1). This helped to organize such codes, to grow them into the larger associated categories. From this process, the researcher began to recognize initial categories and emergent concepts (Lyons & Coyle, 2007) and this data was then compared and contrasted across interviews (Charmaz, 2006). From this process of comparing and contrasting, certain categories were discarded if they were not fully supported, while some were supported and enhanced. In short, the categories listed subsequently in Table 1, are descriptive categories that primarily revolve around the grouping of initial coding. The following section describes how the researcher moved from these descriptive categories to higher level, analytical categories and themes.

Theoretical coding has been described as the process that specifies “possible relationships between categories you have developed in your focused coding” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). Once the researcher began to recognize themes through the integration of the focused codes, further refinement occurred as she connected related themes and categories and sub-categories, and revisited earlier data (sometimes even reviewing original interview transcriptions) for
confirmation purposes and in fitting with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) phase four of Reviewing Themes. (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). A codebook was created for these emergent categories, which was then shared with the project supervisor to check for “fit” and to refine the emergent themes and model.

To continue along with the above noted example, the category External Influences was explored more thoroughly and the researcher soon recognized the various ‘levels’ of influence being discussed by participants. As well, she also began to recognize the connections between other developing categories that spoke to change agents, such as ‘Recommendations for Change’ and ‘School Action’ and ‘Teacher Action’. The researcher believed that these categories and the connections between them supported the large theme “Influencing Homophobic Bullying” and was exemplified best by the model being presented in Chapter five. As will be subsequently discussed, this was also when the researcher became aware of the connection between the various ‘levels’ of change that were being discussed by the participants, and Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model. As previously noted, some categories were discarded. For example, the sub-category that was entitled LGBTQ Community Influence, was reviewed more thoroughly and was determined to be limited in terms of the frequency of participants that were discussing this, and/or had knowledge about the LGBTQ community. Moreover, despite this being an interesting component of homophobic bullying: the fact that it is so ubiquitous that it can even exists within such a community, the researcher felt this was too far from the context of the high school focus and due to the limited number of participants expressing their perceptions regarding this, the researcher could not feel confident in any continued analysis, so it was eventually discarded.
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<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sub-Categories</th>
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<td>Age Factors Related to Homophobic Bullying</td>
<td>“High School is Too Late”</td>
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<td>Teaching about Homophobic Bullying in Elementary School</td>
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<td>Complaints Directed at the School Board</td>
<td>General Awareness of Bullying Policies</td>
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<td>“The Administration also Bullies”</td>
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<td>The Role of Principals around Homophobic Bullying</td>
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<td>Defining Homophobic Bullying</td>
<td>Emphasis on Language over Action</td>
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<td>Understanding “That’s So Gay”</td>
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<td>Movement Against Those Who do Not Fit the Norm</td>
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<td>Witnessing or Experiencing Homophobic Bullying</td>
<td>Physical Bullying</td>
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<td>The Importance of Out Teachers</td>
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Participants were asked how they would like to be identified in the final write-up of the study, and all opted to be identified by initials (albeit the experts, who chose to forego anonymity). However, because there were a few teacher participants who had prior experience working at the relatively small Triangle Program, it was decided to identify the teachers numerically (T1 – T6) rather than with their initials, in order to ensure anonymity.

**Saturation**

Categorical saturation involves continually introducing new participants into a study until the data set is viewed as complete. Completion is determined by data replication or redundancy, when no new information is being added (Bowen, 2008). According to Bowen (2008), an adequate sample is determined by the depth and breadth of information attained. He noted how the grounded theory constant comparative method was “bound up with the process of saturation” (Bowen, 2008, p. 139). As analysis carries on, saturation will become apparent if no new codes, themes or theories are emerging. According to Rennie (2006), saturation can occur in as few as six or so sources.
The initial interviews with LGBTQ youth (n = 8) and teachers (n = 6) were conducted until the content of the material being collected appeared to reach saturation; that is, when the new data seemed to add very little to the understanding and content already discovered and the topics became redundant. However, as previously noted, data collection and analyses were not completely simultaneous in the current study. Thus, as analysis continued and the emergent themes became more apparent, it also became obvious that further clarity and confirmation was needed. As Charmaz (2006) has previously highlighted, “Realizing that your data have gaps-or holes-is part of the analytic process. It is inevitable when you adopt an emergent method of conducting research” (p. 48). It was decided that saturation had not actually been fully met to the researchers’ satisfaction and data collection with expert/activist participants was initiated. After four in-depth interviews with this sub-population, it became apparent that saturation had been met. These interviews helped to establish a sense of adequacy and appropriateness of the emergent themes and theory and offered further information for the categories that required further depth (Bowen, 2008).
CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS RELATED TO UNDERSTANDING HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

Introduction

The goal of this study was to describe how teachers, LGBTQ youth, and experts view homophobic bullying, how they experience it and how they believe change needs to occur. It is thought that providing this understanding, grounded in their lived experiences, will provide a further understanding of where similarities and differences emerge from these three groups and lend further understanding to this complex phenomenon. The findings section of this manuscript is divided into two chapters. The first chapter begins by outlining how participants define homophobic bullying. This information is presented first because of the importance to clearly understand the context of what is being researched, and to know how participants construct meaning and understanding about homophobic bullying. Following this, the subsequent section outlines the four primary themes that emerged from the original data set.

In the second chapter of findings, the theoretical model that emerged from the data is introduced and explained. This model outlines the key socio-cultural factors that were considered instrumental in creating change around homophobic bullying, according to informants. These change variables are presented as bi-directional, as participants described most of these variables as key-players that have the ability to both help and/or hinder efforts to eradicate homophobic bullying. This chapter also includes a section that reviews key findings from the expert interviews, primarily consisting of the concept of power and domination in reference to why homophobic bullying occurs. It is important to note that all findings presented in this manuscript were supported or approved by the experts; meaning experts were provided the initial findings from the original data collection (Teachers = 6; LGBTQ youth = 8) and were asked to comment
on whether these findings fit with their understanding and knowledge of LGBTQ and homophobic bullying issues. In addition, the interviews from the expert/advocate group were included in the focused coding aspect of data analysis, and provided further richness to the information gleaned. Because of this, quotes from these expert/advocates are included throughout the writing.

**Part 1: Defining Homophobic Bullying**

The current study elicited participants’ definition of homophobic bullying and the meaning that they construe from this social phenomenon. The primary reason why the researchers chose to ask participants about their definition of homophobic bullying was because the need to understand how participants’ construct homophobic bullying is crucial in moving forward to create change. If different parties have different definitions of the problem, movement towards change will likely be difficult and inefficient. Thus, before accurately proposing solutions, we must first fully understand the nature of the problem, how people construct it, and all contributing variables involved. Like most social issues, constructing a widely accepted definition of the problem is vital and considered the first step towards implementing productive and effective change.

This question also aimed to create clarity and understanding of the diverse quality of homophobic bullying as compared to general bullying. Is it the same as general bullying but it just happens to be directed at an LGBTQ individual or is there a qualitative distinction? It is believed that eliciting participant’s specific definitions provided insight into these questions.

The final reason why ascertaining definitions was important in this study is due to the emphasis in a constructivist grounded theory approach on attaining knowledge of how participants understand and construct meaning of the phenomenon being investigated.
Constructivism moves away from the idea that there is one objective truth, and instead “assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and viewed, and aims toward an interpretive understanding of subjects’ meanings” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250). In short, the researchers aimed to grasp what the informant views as ‘the event’ and the meaning they make from it (Charmaz, 2003).

**Homophobic Bullying Definition**

LGBTQ issues are complex and defined differently by different people. The current research will outline individual differences and similarities in their definitions of homophobic bullying, and will illustrate the various interactions and social dynamics participants associated with homophobic bullying. It was common for participants to include examples within their definitions to help understand how they conceptualized the realm of homophobic bullying. However, if participants did not naturally provide examples, the interviewer would later prompt them for examples in order to deepen the understanding of how they construe homophobic bullying.

The majority of participants began their definitions in a general way, often stating that homophobic bullying referred to discrimination, teasing or negative behaviours directed at individuals who were known to be, or perceived to be, LGBTQ. As stated by teacher T1 (heterosexual female, 24), “if I saw a student that was being rude or discriminating against another student on the basis of sexual orientation, that would be my definition of homophobic bullying”. Likewise, lesbian youth KM (female, 17) stated, "I would say that it is bullying towards queer people, or bullying that is focused on sexuality, particularly towards non-heterosexuals". In short, sexual orientation was seen as the primary catalyst for the bullying.
However, after these brief initial definitions were provided, participants often focused on two specific areas that deepened the meaning of their homophobic bullying definitions. Two main sub-categories emerged:

1. Emphasis on Verbal Bullying
2. Emphasis on Gender Role Expectations

**Emphasis on Verbal Bullying**

Bullying no longer involves just an image of direct physical assaults, schoolyard fights, or overt acts of dominance orchestrated by large outspoken bullies and directed at smaller, weaker and less supported victims. What we construe as bullying has greatly expanded to include a more discreet yet ubiquitous form of bullying: verbal bullying.

A strong theme that emerged from the current data was how homophobic bullying seems to occur more often, in subtle and covert ways, through language much more so than through physical altercations or aggression. Again, this is not to say that physical bullying directed at gay and lesbian youth does not occur; certainly this is not the case. However, in the current research, it seemed that when people spoke about homophobic bullying, verbal discrimination and name-calling were emphasized much more frequently than physical bullying. A few of these examples are as follows:

Homophobic bullying, I think can take various forms, it can be simple things like statements "that's so gay" to writing things on lockers, like put downs such as fag, dyke, gay, anything you can think along those lines. So any type of verbal threats or put downs, they can be physical threats and put downs too. (T3, gay male teacher, 42)
Anything physical, verbal or emotional, of like—yelling at someone you’re a fairy, you’re a fag, you’re a dyke—using some words that aren’t necessarily great words to use when you’re using them in a negative context. (KM, lesbian female youth, 17)

Verbal violence was strongly emphasized in how participants perceive and understand homophobic bullying. Terms such as “mocking”, “name-calling”, “harassment” and “teasing” were reiterated again and again. Of all the examples provided by participants, only one participant included an example around physical violence. And only three of the definitions provided by participants had a balanced approach that included both physical and verbal violence equally, and all others emphasized verbal violence in their definition.

In fact, over half of the participants did not even mention physical violence in their definition or examples provided. For example, female youth, LB (bisexual, 18) provided the following example of homophobic bullying: “When people make jokes about anal sex, and especially with men…name-calling…it’s surprising how common name calling is in high school.” Gay male youth, CC (21), also provided a similar example:

I think that anyone who’s going to go out of their way to purposely target someone’s sexuality, homosexuality and call them any name that is insulting or degrading, that is homophobic behaviour to me. Anyone who goes out of their way to - When you’re walking down the street and someone just goes: “Faggot.”

**Emphasis on Gender Role Expectations**

Gender role expectations were an important element in participant definitions of homophobic bullying and a majority of youth and teachers included this aspect in their discussions. Gender roles are social constructs that are communicated through the social process about behaviours and personality traits that are affiliated with being masculine and feminine
(Dietz, 1998). In the current study, participants spoke about gender roles in how students express their gender, either in a typical way or atypical. But, in fact, their emphasis was not on the gender expression of each student, but more on the gender expression expectations of other students and the impact it had on homophobic bullying. As teacher T6, (lesbian female, 40) stated, “At school if you are not conforming to the gender norm, you’re an outsider and you are going to have all sorts of trouble.”

Expert/activist Kenneth (gay male, 41) stated how people in schools often feel the need ‘to police’ others with regards to gender expectations. He stated, [Homophobic bullying] could be more of the gender policing which also comes across as homophobic bullying where you have a bunch of boys saying another boy is looking like a girl or behaving in some feminine way in a very gender policing way…which telegraphs that there is something less male or masculine.

Homophobic bullying was described as the tool that students often used to perpetuate or uphold the particular gender norms of that environment, through the use of teasing or even ridiculing those individuals who deviate from such gender expectations. Meaning, if boys were to behave in a manner that seemed effeminate or girls were to present as particularly masculine, their risk increases of becoming targets of homophobic bullying.

This part of participants’ definitions seemed to move beyond simply naming what they think homophobic bullying is, but also addressing the connection between societal standards of what is deemed acceptable gender expression and the use of homophobic bullying to ensure it. Gay male teacher, T3 (42), highlighted this point in reference to teen dating:

That is a bit of a generalization but I don’t think it is that far from the truth because what do you do from Grade 6 to Grade 12? You meet different people,
you hold hands, you kiss, all of that sort of social learning, they [LGBTQ youth] don’t get to do that because they don’t get to hold their partner’s hand in a school, to say “I love you,” to send a valentine. We don’t think about that when we think about homophobic bullying but it is huge.

Many examples that were provided by participants broadened the scope of homophobic bullying from sexual orientation alone to include any type of bullying that is against someone who does not fit with the social norms of that specific environment. For example, EP, gay male student stated that he believes homophobic bullying includes, “Putting someone down because of their masculinity, their gender, and failing to live up to the gender expectations...that kind of thing”. Heterosexual female teacher AF reiterated this point, stating:

For example if a student who was a male student had very effeminate mannerisms, and another male student was mocking that student based on that. The student with effeminate mannerisms doesn’t necessarily have to have come out to the other students or be open about their sexuality – maybe that’s something that they don’t know yet themselves – but for myself, I would say that’s an example.

Hetero-normativity was a phrase that was repeated throughout the interviews and used frequently during the initial question around defining homophobic bullying. It highlighted that there often exists a slew of behaviours, mannerisms, and physical attributes that are associated with being heterosexual that are often deemed to be appealing or acceptable within many communities. Often participants highlighted how any observed behaviours or actions that may lie outside of these hetero-normative customs are used as fodder for homophobic bullying. For example, RR (20) stated, “Anything that people could insult you for, being outside average, normal or I guess mainstream. I guess it could be pretty basic, that way you look, the way you dress, the way you act.” LB, bisexual female youth reiterated this point by saying, “When those
who do not fit into the hetero-normative stereotype casts…when people make fun of them, like exaggerating femininity or masculinity.”

Hetero-normativity was discussed by lesbian female youth SJ, who stated, “even in high school French, we had one exercise where we had to describe our perfect mate or whatever, and you know you had to choose ‘Il’ or ‘Elle’, like ‘He’ or ‘She’. And one person’s pronunciation wasn’t perfect and so it sounded like he was saying “Il” and the teacher made this big joke about it…there are so many ways.”

T6, lesbian female teacher, also spoke to the issue of hetero-normativity in schools:

But then there is also the more, I would say, sinister type which is a little bit tougher to pin down, which is the hetero-normative aspect in a school which is that everything is hetero, and if you are not hetero-sexual than you are out there and different. So in the formal way that things are arranged like man/woman, boy/girl, do this, like the prom for example is a good example of hetero-normative activity.

Heeding the specific environment, or context, is an important point to note, as many participants recognized that gender standards or norms were not ubiquitous. In contrast, the interviews revealed the importance of the varied environments (especially that of high school environments) in regard to the dominant social norms. The specific environments and variables that appear to relate to the gender and sexual expectations of that environment will be addressed in further sections.

In conclusion, definitions of homophobic bullying typically started in the same place, with a focus on bullying directed at LGBTQ individuals, or those who are perceived to be LGBTQ. But the expanded version of participant definitions showed an emphasis on two
subsequent categories: verbal bullying and gender role expectations. It is important to note that
the role of the environment, including the hetero-normative messaging, could also be included in
the definition of homophobic bullying, according to many participants. This quote from T4, a
lesbian teacher, highlights how a large majority of the findings outlined above can be
summarized into one apt statement:

I think [homophobic bullying] can be anything from a look, to cut-eye, to verbal
assault, to physical assault. I think there is really a spectrum from neglect by a
teacher, to harassment, name-calling, looks, all the way to serious physical abuse.
I’ve seen it all. Our students have experienced it all. I think it is really the
marginalization of the kids.

Four Primary Themes

The results of the qualitative analyses yielded four primary themes around describing
Homophobic bullying: (1) “Words as Weapons,” (2) “Understanding “That’s so Gay”: Harmful
Discrimination or Innocuous Slang,” (3) “Exclusion as a Weapon,” and (4) “It’s not Getting
Better.” Each of these themes is described below in the subsequent sections, along with the
inclusion of poignant examples and quotes from participant interviews. These quotes are
included because they are the body and soul of this research, and they show the original sources
of the emergent themes.

Theme One:

Words as Weapons

The primary, and most simplistic, descriptor of this theme was that verbal bullying was
an important topic of discussion when exploring issues related to homophobic bullying. As
previously mentioned, the researcher’s initial awareness of this theme came during the early data
analysis of homophobic bullying definitions, where verbal bullying was emphasized much more
so than physical bullying. However, the trend of verbal violence being emphasized continued past the initial discussions of how participants defined homophobic bullying, and was a strong focus of much of participant discussion.

Not only was verbal bullying the most commonly discussed form of bullying in participant definitions, it was also the most common type of homophobic bullying witnessed in schools. The sub-categories that help to delineate this theme are as follows:

- The De-Emphasis on Physical Bullying
- The Emphasis on Verbal Bullying
- Why Verbal Bullying is a Difficult Issue to Tackle

The De-Emphasis on Physical Bullying

Only a very small amount of participants had witnessed physical homophobic violence first-hand. In the current study, 12 out of the original 14 participants reported never having seen any physical violence related to sexual orientation discrimination. In addition, none of the teachers reported seeing physical violence related to homophobic bullying while they were at work.

For example, teacher T2 (heterosexual male teacher, 26) stated that he "never saw any extremely harmful situations in [his] classroom". T3 reiterated that he personally didn’t see anything during his practicums or when he was teaching at the private school. He later relayed that he had heard of overt physical homophobic violence towards LGBTQ students that had occurred outside of the alternative school he worked at, but that he had not seen it directly. He stated, “I had one student whose wrist was broken in a school, another student who was put in
the trash bins at the back of the school, another student who received death threats on her car, in her locker, various notes and such, things like that all the time.”

T4, a lesbian female teacher (41), also denied seeing much homophobic physical violence: "I did see a lot [of physical violence] but it wasn’t usually around homophobia. It was usually other issues, but not really specific". T1 (heterosexual female teacher, 24) also stated that she did not see any physical violence and only reported seeing a lot of homophobic bullying in the form of verbal bullying, stating, “There wasn’t a lot of overt bullying. I don’t think I ever really saw much overt bullying but more of the “Oh, he’s so gay” or “That’s so gay”. I also heard the term “fag” being used a lot.

While it may be safe to assume that teachers will have less experience witnessing homophobic bullying, given perpetrators are likely to avoid exhibiting such violence in the presence of teachers, it was interesting to find that most students also lacked examples of witnessing violence. They spoke of similar experiences, where they witnessed very little or no physical homophobic bullying. As an example, LB (bisexual female youth) stated, “I don’t think I witnessed anything like that. It was a little more insidious than that. Like if someone was being assaulted, they were probably generally a misfit, not just queer”.

If students did have experiences of violence to share, they most often could only recall one event that included physical violence related to sexual orientation, and none of the experiences were directed at the participants themselves, but instead were witnessed. As an example, CC (gay male youth) indicated, “Just the once in high school, though I was in Grade 12 when this happened. There was a new group of students in Grade 9 and this boy was getting in a fight with his classmates and it was just for being gay”. Another male student, RR also recalled one incident while he was in high school: “I remember, I think I might have been in Grade 9, and
someone got punched in the face or something and I think he was openly gay. Yeah. And I imagine, well not imagine…it was his sexuality that had something to do with the fight.”

Only one participant spoke to a first-hand experience of being physically bullying. In fact, this participant was a gay male teacher who described his own high school experience:

I know from my own experience as a high school student that once the verbal was done, every day people would push me into lockers. I got locked in a locker once, it seemed like an eternity…it was probably only 10 or 15 minutes, but it was long enough. People pushed me, hit me, pushed my belongings down, wrote stuff, throw my stuff out, hide my gym clothes, all stuff like that. (T3, gay male teacher)

None of the youth participants had experienced overt physical homophobic bullying directed at them in their high school years. The reasons why this may be will be discussed in subsequent sections. However, as we will see from the next section, participants had ample unfortunate stories to relay when asked about verbal homophobic bullying they had experienced or witnessed.

The Emphasis on Verbal Bullying

Verbal bullying was deemed the most common type of homophobic bullying witnessed in schools. Every participant reported witnessing verbal bullying towards LGBTQ youth on a regular basis. Hearing such derogatory phrases and belittlement towards LGBTQ youth was vast, and students and teachers alike had multiple examples to share. As Lesbian Teacher, T6 eloquently stated:

I would say it is very prevalent, on an hourly basis. There are statistics from the United States, I don’t have it in front of me right now, but on the number of times you are going to hear the word “faggot,” etc., “gay,” “that’s so gay,” “such a dyke,” in school. So the numbers are very high. So in sexual minority groups,
whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer…however they identify…they experience that kind of vulgarity at an exponential rate.

A small number of students reported experiencing first-hand direct verbal bullying due to their sexuality. For example, gay male student EP reported that the verbal name-calling he endured was related to his mannerisms and his self-expression:

I have a lot of experiences…I never thought I was feminine, I was just being myself as much as possible and I grew up with two older sisters and my mom, and my dad was never around so I guess I just copied their sort of movements, and their speech and…I don’t know…I always just did what I wanted to and I had fun. I would be in the plays and the lip-synching contest and all those type of things. I just did what I wanted and the first time I remember being called gay or anything like that was probably in Grade 2 and this new kid came to class, and…I hated him, and it was like it just stuck and stuck and stuck and every year of school, every day pretty much…they would call me a girl, queer, fag, gay, homo…and they would just do stupid things, like in front of the class, stupid things like “I’m straight, are you curved?”

Student LB (bisexual female, 17) also reported experiencing verbal bullying directed at her. She shared the story of the first time she was bullied due to her perceived sexual orientation:

I was somewhere between the ages of 9 and 10 and I was walking home from school and I was wearing this hat I had made and we had done crafts, I think it was Yule day or something and these older boys who were probably only in Grade 6 or so, were like “Oh, I didn’t know dykes wore hats,” or something like that.

All participants could readily provide examples of witnessed verbal homophobic bullying. As CC (gay male youth, 21) stated, "definitely in the cafeteria, name-calling in the halls…name-calling everywhere". EP (gay male youth, 21) also reiterated this statement:
I wasn’t around school very much but I was definitely aware that a few of the kids, that were the more obvious gay ones, were constantly harassed. Like I said my sister was walking down the hall for whatever reason, minding her own business, and people felt the need to scream obscenities at her for whatever reason. I guess just to make your day worse of something.

SJ (lesbian female youth, 21) also reported hearing verbal homophobic bullying “all the time” at her school despite never once seeing any physical homophobic violence. She also highlighted a discrepancy she felt existed between homophobic bullying directed at boys versus girls in school. She stated, "I think there was a lot of making fun, generally more directed at men. Yeah…just a lot of making fun of gay people in the media, or just people who are calling any and everything gay". Teacher T1 (heterosexual female, 24) reiterated this sentiment with the following statement:

It’s interesting, I think that those comments are usually only…only male students will usually say “You’re such a fag” to another male student. I don’t really hear it as often between a female student saying it to another female student or a female student saying it as much to a male student. It’s more often male students to other male students that I’ve noticed. Male students maybe feel the need to define themselves a little bit more, their masculine traits need to be very apparent, especially in high school.

An additional example of the gender dynamics related to homophobic bullying came from T6, a lesbian teacher (40) who spoke of a particularly horrific story with a tragic ending that occurred at the school she had previously taught at:

So what happened was there was a young promising drama student who was in Grade 12 and he was a gay young man, but I’m pretty sure he was closeted about that, he didn’t go around telling people. He was being hounded, I understand by a
pack of girls…he experienced a lot of homophobia from them, which is really unusual. Often times, girls get along quite well with gay males so it is unusual…my students told me that basically he ended up taking his own life because of the amount of homophobic bullying.

Why Verbal Bullying is a Difficult Issue to Tackle

This section looks at participant perceptions around verbal bullying, why verbal bullying is so pronounced and why it is such a difficult area in which to make change. It appeared that the large majority of participants felt that verbal homophobic bullying was rampant and difficult to stop. Despite the consensus on verbal bullying being difficult to stop or lessen, participants differed on why it was difficult to stop. Male heterosexual teacher T2 (26) explained his take on why verbal bullying was such a difficult issue for teachers to address. He stated,

It is not like someone who gets hit or punched, they get a broken leg, broken arm, you see it, they are in a cast, so then students will say okay that was really bad…we hurt them really bad. But you don’t see that explicit outcome when it comes too verbal bullying.

Student CC (gay male, 21) also spoke to covert aspect of verbal bullying and the difficulty that teachers have in monitoring it. He stated, “I feel like teachers can’t be everywhere at every moment and right before school, and after school, there are way too many students to have teachers there at any given time.” Bullying expert, Faye (heterosexual female, 63) agreed, “it can’t just be up to the teachers because it takes a lot of resources to address it because it doesn’t mean just one workshop, it means really stopping and having a school climate in a way that’s not humiliating but that really makes room for tolerance.”

Teacher, T3 (gay male, 42), believed that teachers themselves sometimes fear falling victim to verbal bullying: “The other thing I hear all the time is ‘If I stand up and say this, well
then they will think I am gay or lesbian and then I won’t be able to teach because then they will harass me’.” This point speaks to the pervasiveness of bullying and as a reminder that the fear of being bullied is not just for students. T1 (heterosexual female) similarly recalled, “Actually, I have heard stories when I was in teachers college…student teachers that were gay feeling bullied by the students.” She also spoke to the issues of teachers’ fear of job loss or negative professional repercussions. She stated, “maybe a parent might have an issue with me bringing up these topics in class”.

Teacher T4 (lesbian female, 41) also spoke about teacher fears, but she highlighted how some teachers are not well equipped to handle verbal homophobic bullying. She stated, “comments are made and a teacher looks nervous or scared because they didn’t know how to handle it, and so they do nothing. That just encourages the behaviour…when the authority figure in the room is not doing anything about it.” She added, “I don’t think it is because they don’t believe in diversity, but I think the bigger issue is that they are afraid to. I don’t think they have the skill set and the tools to be able to deal with, and not dealing with it makes it worse.”

Many participants also spoke about the time constraints and curriculum demands that teachers have to cope with. Many stated that managing the verbal bullying that occurs so frequently would take a lot of time, and they often feel pressured to continue with the lesson plan:

So when you come across that kind of language in a classroom, first of all, there are a lot of things you have to look into, like for example, is the bell going to go right now? Maybe it is not even worth it to get into this right now. If there is an exam and we have to start this exam in 1 minute, well no, I am not going to get into this right now. (T6 lesbian female teacher, 40)

The most common reason, however, for participants to feel that verbal bullying was a challenging area in which to create change was because it often was deemed not important.
Bullying expert, Faye (heterosexual female, 63), spoke to this idea, stating, “I think…often we differentiate between serious and non-serious.” She added,

I think we also need to really recognize that a lot of the incidents that are supposedly minor, actually are not, they can still have a huge devastating impact but they also, again, give the message…if we don’t deal with the minor ones…it gives the message that it is not really important enough.

Faye’s point addresses the issue of how we construe major and minor issues. Female teacher, T1 (24), also reiterated this idea by stating that, even though she believed she would address any verbal bullying that occurred in her presence, she understood sometimes why some teachers may elect to not address it:

If everything else in the classroom is going well, why bother bringing this up, why bother starting a situation with a student that could potentially escalate into something? Why bother ruining a good relationship that you have with a student? I think that probably stops them. Or for them maybe also they feel it’s a small thing, just let it slide.

However, a concern exists around the impact of school staff’s opinions around whether or not addressing homophobic language was important, and gay male teacher T5 (38) aptly addressed the disparity that often occurs between racist discrimination and homophobic discrimination. He stated, “it is like saying if the student said a racist comment…it would be dealt with. It would be dealt with by the administration, a guidance or social worker, there would be parents and counselling. But when someone says, “that’s so gay” that doesn’t happen.”

T3 (gay male teacher, 42) spoke to the complexity in addressing verbal bullying, given there can be a multiplicity of offenses in one statement:
And that’s what I find with put downs most of the time is that not only is it a put down to gay men or gay/lesbian/bisexual/trans-gendered folks, but it is often a secondary put down to woman. Because we are putting down guys for not being masculine, but what are those words we are attaching like “pussy”, “bitch”, whatever, those are put downs to women. So I always find it really interesting that sometimes we don’t equate that, and some people don’t address the double-edged sword of homophobic bullying and making women second class citizens all of the time.

In summary, a large majority of participants emphasized the frequency and harm of verbal homophobic bullying in their interviews, much more than physical bullying. Both teachers and students noted minimal experiences with witnessing physical violence and ample experience with verbal bullying. It was agreed upon by participants that verbal bullying seemed to be a difficult issue for teachers to address. As previously noted, only one participant had the unfortunate experience of being physically bullied because of his sexuality when in school, and this participant was actually a teacher at the time of the interviews. He acknowledged the irony in the fact that he had such a difficult experience in high school and yet he chose to become a teacher and work within the Ontario school system. He shared, “I’m surprised I’m sitting here as a teacher too. The last place I ever thought I’d end up was back in a school! So I understand why a lot of queer people would not be attracted to our profession” (T3, gay male teacher, 42).

**Theme Two:**

**Understanding ‘That’s so Gay’: Harmful Discrimination or Innocuous Slang?**

This theme outlines the incongruence within participants about how to understand, conceptualize and make change around the phrase “that’s so gay”. Opinions about the phrase were plentiful, but that is where the similarities stop. There was no apparent difference between
teacher opinions versus LGBTQ youth opinions; disagreement existed within each of these sub-populations. However, it should be noted that there was a consensus within experts, who all felt that “that’s so gay” should fall firmly within the realm of homophobic bullying.

The sub-categories that emerged within this theme were:

- Bullying Versus Discrimination
- Lost its Meaning
- Intent versus Impact

**Bullying Versus Discrimination**

The lack of agreement between participants on the phrase “that’s so gay” was apparent right from the beginning of the interviews, where participants diverged about whether or not the phrase should be considered within the definition of homophobic bullying. For example, some people automatically included the phrase right in their initial definition of homophobic bullying, like T3 (gay male teacher, 42), who said, “Homophobic bullying, I think can take various forms, it can be simple things like statements “that’s so gay,” to writing things on lockers, like put downs such as fag, dyke, gay, anything you can think of along those lines.” Gay male teacher, T5 (38), also reiterated the idea that he felt this widely used term should fit within the definition of homophobic bullying:

> I think any acts of exclusion, any acts of verbal, emotional or physical violence based on how someone identifies. I think also use of language in terms of what is accepted, especially in a classroom. Like using terms like “that’s so gay,” or anything that deems or makes a student feel like there is something wrong with him because of what is being accepted by the role models around him.
If participants did not initiate a discussion about the phrase themselves, the researcher asked them directly what their thoughts were. Participant RR (gay male youth, 20) indicated, after some reflection, that he would also consider “that’s so gay” to be couched within the homophobic bullying definition. He stated, “It is really upsetting, and I find it more upsetting when people I know still use that phrase”. EP (gay male youth, 21) also echoed this sentiment: 

Absolutely [it should be included in the definition], because they are putting a connotation to the word gay like it is a bad thing. And that is one of the most common things I’ve heard, especially with kids these days, they say, “that’s so gay” all the time and I always have to correct anyone when I hear it.

On the contrary, many participants stated that they did not believe the phrase “that’s so gay” fit within the umbrella term of homophobic bullying. One primary reason was related to the actual definition of bullying. Some felt that while the phrase was certainly discriminatory, they struggled with considering it bullying. Like SJ (lesbian female youth, 21), who stated, “Well, I don’t know if I would use the term bullying but definitely homophobic”. T2 (heterosexual male teacher, 26) was another participant who wasn’t sure that it should be considered bullying, adding that the frequency of the phrase needed to be considered: “So, I don’t know if I would qualify that as bullying per se, but I do think it is definitely bullying when…I guess by the pure definition of bullying is when it occurs over time.”

Lost Its Meaning

A large number of respondents who did not feel that the term “that’s so gay” fit within the context of homophobic bullying, indicated so because they believed the meaning of the phrase had evolved and changed from straightforward discrimination to a different meaning altogether. In fact, the title of this sub-theme is an in vivo quote from T2 (heterosexual male
teacher, 26) who stated, “I mean I know it is really bad to say this, to have this pre-conceived notion, but to say that the word has sort of lost its meaning because it’s been said so much, but I think that definitely happens.”

Participants, who also highlighted this point, believed that the term ‘gay’ when used in the phrase “that’s so gay”, actually had limited, if any, connection to sexuality. In simplistic terms, many said the phrase now simply means ‘bad’ or ‘negative’. As teacher T1 (heterosexual female teacher, 24) explained:

They really just mean “that’s so bad” or “that sucks”…and they say it all the time, it happens all the time in the classroom. And I really do try to stop it, but for some of the students it’s become so common for them, they actually…when they’re talking to another student…they actually just say “that’s so gay” or “yah, I did really bad on this test, that question was so gay”. That’s the context that it’s used in…they mean “It sucks” or “It’s bad”.

As CC (gay male youth, 21) reiterated,

I don’t know that it’s bullying because I feel that a lot of people that say it, say it because they’ve been saying it for a long time. When I call my friends out on it now, and I never used to, but they’re going “you know I don’t mean it like that, you know I love you, I love gay people”.

Teacher T4 (lesbian female, 41) highlighted how impactful the disconnect is behind the meaning of the phrase, as she often hears teenagers who are gay themselves use the phrase. She stated, “They are gay, but they say it as a put down and don’t realize because there is a disconnect, it such a big part of the lexicon”.

However, many teachers did not agree with the exclusion of this phrase from the definition of homophobic bullying simply because of the so-called change in meaning. They felt
that people cannot just decide to use a descriptive word for someone’s identity in a negative manner and brush it off to be less problematic simply because they believe the meaning had changed. As gay male teacher, T2 (42) stated, “no, it doesn’t [change anything] because if we went around and said, “That’s so nigger” everyone would freak, right?”

RR (gay male youth, 20) also was one participant who felt the term should be included in the definition, and this was due of the connotation now attached to it that gay is synonymous with “bad”. He stated, “And I…it’s almost a little disgusting when I hear that because it is associating with “that’s stupid” or “that’s silly” and I’ve heard people say it, and obviously I’ve lost respect for them.” Teacher T4 (lesbian female, 41) also believed it should be included in the definition of homophobic bullying and she spoke to the importance for everyone to be thoughtful about the words they choose: “Language is powerful. I don’t think you can underestimate that. The word is still there, it still has the same meaning.”

**Intent Versus Impact**

A final, and related, area where participants differed on their opinions of the term ‘that’s so gay’ was the focus on either the speaker’s intent versus the impact. Many participants believed if the person did not intend to cause harm (meaning they were not purposefully being discriminatory or offensive to the specific LGBTQ individual(s)) then it did not fit within the context of homophobic bullying. For example, KM (lesbian female youth, 17) stated, “They really don’t think about how much that can hurt someone, or how much it’s just wrong to say. And when they do say it, it’s a reaction of ‘Oh my gosh, that guy is so gay.’ Or ‘Oh my gosh, my computer is being so gay,’ like stupid or wrong”. Some teachers reiterated this idea as well, as in T1 (heterosexual female, 24), who stated, “I don’t think it fits as much under the category of’
homophobic bullying because I don’t think the students that say those words themselves understand that they’re hurtful and I don’t think that they mean to use it in a hurtful way”.

This issue was also touched on in the interviews of the expert/activists. However, as noted above, all of them believed that the phrase did, in fact, fit within the homophobic bullying definition, and they believed that instead of focusing on intent, the emphasis ought to be on the impact. The shared idea here was that even though some individuals do not mean to cause harm by the language they choose, it still has a very detrimental effect.

Bullying expert, Faye, indicated that she felt this issue, and any issue that revolved around homophobic bullying needed to be addressed as early as possible to create the necessary changes: “It always needs to be earlier, because you do it before it is a problem. So that’s why when kids in kindergarten are saying ‘that’s so gay’ that’s a perfect opportunity without making it in to a problem, is teaching them, or helping them not say that right?”

Expert/activist Kenneth highlighted how the phrase ‘that’s so gay’ not only included a pervasive homophobic element, but also is derogatory towards people with intellectual disabilities. As he stated,

Because really you are targeting someone's…either to poke at them intellectually if they've done something that is not really smart, or not very cool is the other way that it kind of gets used too, which can speak to self-esteem or whatever. But it certainly takes someone sexual identity and uses it in a negative exclusive route. So, it's still homophobic in the way that it's being used…even though it's not being used to focus on someone's sexuality…but it's basically saying, “A gay identity is stupid and therefore the thing that you just did is stupid”.

In summary, ample confusion appeared to exist within participants about the phrase ‘that’s so gay’. Even within the different categories discussed above, there was varied
perspectives about whether this phrase should, or should not, be included under the umbrella
term of homophobic bullying. Some participants would cite one reason why they felt it shouldn’t
be included and often for the exact same reason, others were stating it should. This finding is
important because the lack of agreement is both concerning and telling. As noted at the
beginning of this chapter, if individuals have differing perspectives on the definition, or what
should be included within homophobic bullying, then progress towards change will likely be
slowed and convoluted. The researcher believes that for the climate for LGBTQ youth in schools
to improve and evolve, a shared understanding of how to operationalize homophobic bullying,
including being clear of the harm associated with pervasive phrases like ‘that’s so gay’ is
imperative; A point that will be explored further in the Discussion section.

Theme Three:
Exclusion as a Weapon

Throughout the data analysis process, it became apparent with how frequently exclusion
was used as a tool for homophobic bullying. Much like verbal homophobic bullying, exclusion
appeared to be used frequently and was considered by many to be a serious social threat. The risk
of isolation or alienation in high school proved to be a very powerful motivator to adhere to
school norms and appeared to be quite influential in whether LGBTQ youth chose to come out.
As exemplified by MS, a pansexual inter-gendered youth (17), “I just felt like I shouldn’t say
anything [about sexual orientation or gender identity] because I might lose my friends.”

It became apparent that there were three important categories that existed within this
theme:

• Explicit Exclusion

• Implicit Exclusion
• Efforts to Avoid Social Isolation

Explicit Exclusion

A large majority of participants highlighted the frequent use of exclusion in homophobic behaviour and language, and participants provided plenty of examples of exclusion based on one’s sexual orientation. Almost all of the youth participants indicated a fear that if they came out in high school, they would risk losing friends or become vulnerable to isolation in some way. As MS, a pansexual inter-gendered individual (17), recalled, “I remember once that I was part of these normal kind of jock girl types, and they were talking about how they went to this party and they found out this girl was bisexual and they were like ‘Oh that’s gross, I don’t want to be friends with her anymore’. They also recalled friends promoting the idea that if you deviated from the norm in any way that it was better, or perhaps safer, if you keep that information concealed. They shared, “I was having trouble making friends and I told my friend [I was inter-gendered], and she was like ‘yeah, maybe you shouldn’t tell people that you are inter-gendered…maybe you just shouldn’t talk about it’.

CC (gay male youth, 21) also spoke about feeling as though he would be excluded if other students knew he was gay. He explained:

A lot of boys will be like…I can see kids totally and maybe it’s because I sort of remember it…not wanting you to be on their team because they that think you might be gay and so they’re like “why the hell do you want to play? You’re going to be picked last”…it just makes a person completely not want to be a part of that.

Teacher T4 (lesbian female, 41) spoke to the frequency of LGBTQ youth at her alternative school having problems in other schools. She said, “a lot of our students are used to being on their own because they are scared. They’ve been rejected by groups at school, peers…a
lot of them have been rejected at home by family. A lot of rejection, a lot of marginalization, and this is a crucial time in their development.” LGBTQ youth LB (bisexual female youth, 18) spoke about how the norms around who is considered socially acceptable and who is not, start at a very early age. She said, “Yeah it just starts so young, and it is often just exclusion and not being a part of it. It is not always that blatant.” Because of this she suggested that intervention efforts be introduced in elementary school: An idea we will see in later sections that is shared by many.

**Implicit Exclusion**

Many participants also spoke about implicit forms of exclusion that sexual minority individuals also were often exposed to. Meaning, messages were communicated about the rate of acceptance of those who deviated from the sexual or gender norms of that environment. Some examples focused on messages within the environment that communicated that sexual diversity was not supported. For example, EP (gay male youth, 21) spoke about advertising efforts that Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA’s) would make in his school that would be quickly thwarted. He stated, "They would put posters up around the school and people would rip them down immediately, or put “Fag” in the middle of the poster advertising the gay/straight alliance, so I guess that is tolerated. It was common." Allowing individuals who are heterosexual to have certain rights that LGBTQ individuals lack was also included in many participants’ discussions of homophobic bullying. As MK (bisexual female youth, 19) stated, "it [homophobic bullying] can get up to harassment and abuse, but I think that the milder things...like things that a heterosexual couple can do, but it is like, ‘you guys can’t’.” When asked to provide an example, she elaborated, “My friend wanted to bring her girlfriend to graduation, and the head teacher there was like, no, I won’t sell you tickets. She refused to, and was telling other people in the school…that is not cool.”
T3 (gay male teacher, 42) addressed the same issue, of LGBTQ youth not having the same rights of expression as heterosexual youth:

I think that is so detrimental, that so many queer people are really sort of fucked up, and it takes us our twenties and thirties to sort of figure that out. That is a bit of a generalization but I don’t think it is that far from the truth because what do you do from Grade 6 to Grade 12? You meet different people, you hold hands, you kiss, all of that sort of social learning, they don’t get to do that because they don’t get to hold their partner’s hand in a school, to say “I love you,” to send a valentine. We don’t think about that when we think about homophobic bullying but it is huge.

Having a void of LGBTQ curriculum or mention of same-sex couples was also repeatedly emphasized. Again the term hetero-normative arose, addressing how the assumption is that all are heterosexual. An example by SJ (lesbian female, 21) was:

Even high school French, we had one exercise where we had to describe our perfect mate or whatever, and you know you had to choose Il or Elle, like He or She, and one person’s pronunciation wasn’t perfect and so it sounded like he was saying “I’ll” and the teacher made this big joke about it. There are so many ways.

A majority of participants spoke to the lack of LGBTQ representation in schools. For example, expert/activist Tim (gay male, 63) stated, “how is it integrated across the curriculum? How is it in English class? How is it in French class? How is it in History class? How is it in Geography? How is it everywhere so it’s not just if you miss school the day they deal with homophobia in Phys. Ed, right, you missed it right?” Tim also spoke to the importance of inclusivity in the resources available to students: “Can kids just go to the library and get books about alternative kinds families and books with gay characters, or is this on a special shelf and you have to get the librarians permission to take it out?”
LGBTQ invisibility within the curriculum was also touched on by bullying expert Faye, who stated, “It’s the thing of everybody needs to see themselves, so if in the curriculum, in history, in examples, if marginalized groups are in there in a positive way, that again is a very important message.”

T3 (gay male teacher, 42) also spoke to the need to include same-sex diversity into daily lessons:

I think of all of the opportunities we have, as secondary teachers, to include tidbits throughout the year that we could be talking about. Even for elementary teachers, there is very age appropriate ways to talk about things, Suzie and her two moms go shopping; they have $25 to spend on groceries. You’ve just edited it in to the curriculum, probably nobody will question and if somebody does say “Suzie has two mommies?” Yes, there are different types of families, some are raised by grandparents…there are so many ways you can do this kind of work without getting into trouble.

It was surprising to see how many participants highlighted the exclusion of LGBTQ sexuality in sexual education courses. Time and time again, the way this topic was presented in schools was deemed as hetero-normative and excluding of sexual diversity. As EP (gay male youth, 21), stated:

I was thinking about this the other day…is that sexual education in schools is horrible, horrible, horrible! They are so afraid to talk about sex, especially alternate, well not alternate…but other sexual orientations that they never even…until they start teaching kids that it is not a choice, not a lifestyle choice, then it is hard for straight people to understand that it is not just a myth. I think sexual education is the biggest thing that needs to be taught in schools.
LB (bisexual female youth, 18) also shared the same sentiment when she stated; “I remember in health class in Grade 9, in sexuality, I don’t remember there being any sort of mention of non-heterosexual sexuality.” She added, “Well, I think in health classes they should be talking about gay and lesbian relationships, and I think when there is discussions about sex, that should be a part of it. I think teachers need to use an inclusive language for sure.” This was also address by expert/activist Tim (gay male, 63):

One of the big problems in the school system today, and even in Ontario, they are supposed to deal with this stuff by sexual orientation…it’s considered part of sexual education. And Sex. Ed, of course, is the preview of physical education. It can only legally happen in Phys. Ed.

Efforts to Avoid Social Isolation

The exceptional fear that students felt associated with the risk of being socially isolated or excluded highlights the importance for all students to feel a sense of belonging. Many students spoke directly about how influential the need to belong is in high school. For example, MS (pansexual inter-gendered youth, 17) stated, “you feel so pressured to be this person that everybody expects you to be and you don’t want to play sports but everyone else is playing sports.” They continued by saying “It’s like…you know…you are kid, you are in high school, you don’t really know who you are, you are trying to discover who you are, but some things are just not okay to try. Yeah, if you are different, than you are a target”.

RR (gay male youth, 20) also spoke to the importance of not standing out for fear of not being accepted. He said, “I think in high school, sex is a big thing, right? So I felt like if I didn’t have a girlfriend, which I didn’t have an interest in, I stuck out.” EP (gay male student, 21) also spoke about the excessive efforts he took to be accepted:
I think I changed the way I acted, like now some people tell me that when they meet me they wouldn’t be able to tell I was gay right away, but when I was younger I was so feminine. I guess I repressed all of that and paid attention to how to move my hands, and how to not be singled out, I guess I learned how to act more masculine to not be singled out as gay. So that’s when I changed I think was probably Grade 7.

In summary, exclusion appeared to be a covert tool used frequently within the school system to communicate homophobic ideas and to perpetuate both homophobic bullying and gender-norm policing. LGBTQ youth especially considered this threat to be of utmost importance, as the need for belonging in high school was considered pivotal.

This not only speaks to the importance of school staff addressing these issues individually but also looking at the systemic discrimination that appears to be occurring. For example, T3 (gay male teacher, 42) stated, “The fact that I’ve gone into schools and seen things like “Fag” written on someone’s locker and you go in a week later and it still hasn’t been removed…so it is like the administration also bullies.” He highlights the point that LGBTQ issues often are not deemed as important and discrimination is not addressed effectively, whether covert or overt. The following chapter will look further into the suggestions that participants made on how to create change on this issue and others.

**Theme Four:**

**It’s Not Getting Better**

This theme emerged following discussions about what the school climate is like for LGBTQ youth today and the consensus was disheartening, to say the least. Participants believed that improvements in recent years, if any, were minimal and that LGBTQ students continued to experience negative and hostile environments. T3 (gay male teacher, 42) articulated this well:
It’s really disheartening. People often say to me, things are so much better now, queer kids don’t have any problems, and I’m like, ‘hello, when was the last time you were in a school’? Just because you can turn on your TV, see Will and Grace, The L-Word, or Queer as Folk, or Brother’s and Sister’s has a gay couple…sorry for our kids, it’s not much better. And the stories I hear here are the same stories I faced twenty-five years ago when I was in high school. Very little has changed.

This section on “it’s Not Getting Better” includes the following sub-themes:

- The Climate is Grim
- The Safety of the Closet
- Outliving Homophobia
- Psychosocial Impact
- Coping Mechanisms

**The Climate is Grim**

Teachers, LGBTQ youth and expert/activists were in agreement that the general school environment remained quite negative for LGBTQ youth. They spoke about the negative impact of hearing verbal violence and off-hand remarks, such as “that’s so gay,” and how this greatly impacted the feeling of acceptance and openness towards LGBTQ individuals. As teacher T6 (lesbian female, 40) stated: “Oh, it is horrific. It is just as bad as it ever was. Worse because of the visibility…with increased visibility comes increased vulnerability.” Student EP (gay male, 21) also spoke about the negative feelings he had for high school, “I think aside from knowing that I couldn’t talk to teachers, or come out, you’re bullied and that’s it…high school’s miserable for four years. That was pretty much . . . you do everything you can to not come out.”
CC (gay male youth, 21) indicated a feeling of resolve to the high school climate:

“Unfortunately in high school, a lot of people have a lot of learning to do. So I knew at that age that everyone was as open-minded as they should be…and you can’t change people. Nobody was going to hear me out in high school.” Even, SJ (lesbian female youth, 21), who noted a relatively positive high school experience, stated, “Umm, well looking back and seeing the amount of people that came out after high school, it is interesting to see that maybe it wasn’t the most supportive environment to people.” In fact, she stated that out of her entire school, she could not recall one student being out.

Teacher T6 (lesbian female, 40) also noted how many schools are trying to provide support for LGBTQ youth but the overwhelming negative climate of many schools might be making these attempts less effective:

Having gay/straight alliances is great, but what I hear from students is those are really unsafe spaces because everybody knows and you are being targeted and all of these big schools and a lot of the gay/straight alliances are made of all straight kids, because the queer kids don’t feel safe. I don’t know how you change the whole climate of a school but that sort of needs to change before these kids are going to be able to go to the gay/straight alliances.

It is also interesting to note that even teachers sometimes fear being bullied by students for their own sexual identity. As an example, teacher T1 (heterosexual female, 24) stated, “Actually, I have heard stories when I was in teachers college…student teachers that were gay feeling bullied by the students. I guess that’s another issue that we haven’t touched on yet. Teachers themselves have felt threatened by the students.”

Teacher T3 (gay male, 42) shared a similar story; “I have a friend who was out in every aspect of her life but was terrified to be out at school, she was with her teachers and principals
but not with the students at all, because the school itself was so homophobic. She was terrified of what the students might do to her.” He added that this fear also occurs for teachers who aren’t gay themselves but who would like to address the issue of homophobic bullying: “The other thing I hear all the time is ‘If I stand up and say this, well then they will think I am gay or lesbian and then I won’t be able to teach because then they will harass me’.” T5 (gay male teacher, 38) also believed this fear held teachers back from creating change, “Well, a lot of the teachers are afraid that they are going to be labeled gay. They feel like that label is going to come with repercussions from their students and parents and their ability to be an effective teacher.”

Lesbian female teacher T4 (41) spoke about the importance of teachers being out to the degree they are most comfortable, depending on the environment they are working in:

There are varying degrees of outness, many people I talk to about being out in schools say it is only safe for them to be out with their colleagues, and other people say it is only safe for me to be out with select students. It is all a personal matter to where you perceive your safeness, and also the climate of the school, the culture of the school.

**Finding Safety in the Closet**

As previously noted, none of the LGBTQ youth participants experienced direct physical homophobic bullying themselves, and very few reported direct verbal bullying. One of the likely reasons appeared to be their choice to remain closeted during high school. As RR (gay male youth, 20) stated, “In high school, I didn’t personally [experience homophobic bullying], but I wasn’t out yet.” Of the few students who did choose to come out during high school, all had switched to alternative arts schools and felt this environment promoted the security to come out. MK (bisexual female youth, 19) was an example of a student who did not feel comfortable coming out in high school. She said, "I don’t think it was open and transparent in my high school,
so I feel like people were closeted because they didn’t feel comfortable being out. I certainly felt that way because it wasn’t welcome or accepting.” She later transferred to an alternative school and chose to come out in that environment.

Gay male youth CC also chose to not come out in high school and he felt his choice was a common one for LGBTQ youth: “I think that the world is in for a shock. Because if everyone that was gay or transgendered or anything other than hetero came out, people would realize “oh my gosh…okay all these people are in the closet…they’re scared to come out…there’s so much more’.”

In a similar fashion, EP (gay male youth, 21) also chose not to come out in school after witnessing his sister come out to negative backlash. He stated, “she [sister] was very vocal about it and she got harassed all the time and I didn’t want to go through that so I just waited until after I got out of there.” Therefore, he reported that he seldom attended school and chose to not be engaged in school as much as possible. He believed that not coming out was very connected to his avoidance of school: “I think because I knew I wasn’t going to come out, I just wasn’t being myself. So I felt I was being fake…or I felt like what was the point of getting to know all of these people if they are just going to hate me eventually once I come out anyways?”

Sadly, almost every participant spoke to the benefits of LGBTQ youth remaining in the closet in high school. Teacher T2 (heterosexual male teacher, 26) stated, “I think if the person is comfortable with staying in the closet so to speak, they won’t have a hard time in high school.” Teacher T4 (lesbian, female, 41) reiterated this point, stating, “I think there are a lot of queer kids who are in the mainstream schools right now and probably doing okay, either they are not out…I suspect the majority of them are not out…and they are doing okay with their small friendship circle, and they prefer it that way.”
Outliving Homophobia

I think the effects of homophobic bullying are very profound and it is very damaging to the student in the school system right until the end of Grade 12. As soon as they get out of that hellish environment, and I’m not kidding, it is hellish, then they have a lot more freedom. (T6, lesbian female teacher, 40)

Both teachers and students spoke to the idea that improvements occur for LGBTQ youth after high school. As teacher T2 indicated, “I think if they can get through high school and get to University there’s a…almost a niche for everyone, that’s where they are more comfortable coming out.” His statement rang true for the majority of participants, who felt that the high school environment remained a risky place for students to come out. Teacher T6 (lesbian female, 40) also stated that LGBTQ students just needed to ‘survive’ high school. She stated her advice is to “just outlive homophobia…if you can outlive your school years, you will be okay.”

Most students also reiterated the point that things improve once they left high school. An example is RR (gay male youth, 20), who stated, “I felt like high school was a very uncomfortable place…and it is funny how I know gay people who were the most popular kids in school, but who weren’t out yet, but once you leave high school it is like it becomes more accepting.” And lesbian youth SJ also shared a similar sentiment: “Umm, well looking back and seeing the amount of people that came out after high school, it is interesting to see that maybe it wasn’t the most supportive environment to people.”

In summary, the examples and passage presented above draw a picture of a bleak environment for LGBTQ students. They illustrate a common school climate where open attitudes and acceptance of sexual diversities is not often the norm. The majority felt that schools continued to be a negative space for LGBTQ youth, were their sexual identity was virtually
excluded, albeit for the times it was used as fodder for harassment and bullying, and where remaining closeted was thought to be the best, and likely safest, course of action.

Actually this one time I remember, I think I was in Grade 5 and this little kid comes to the door. He knocks on the door and he says, “I need to talk to you.” He says it to the teacher and she says “Well, whatever you need to say you can say it out in front of the class,” and he was just apprehensive, but he says “D___ in your class, called me a faggot. The whole class starts laughing and the teacher starts laughing too. She just burst out laughing and the kid was so embarrassed and the teacher was laughing at the same time. So it was kind of understandable, the one time that kid felt the courage to speak up about it, he gets laughed at by an entire group of people. (EP, Gay Male Youth, 21)

The Psychosocial Impact

Social Isolation and Avoidance

Participants were asked about the impact on students who experience homophobic bullying. EP (gay male student) indicated that he did not come out in high school but that he was still teased in elementary school for being feminine. He spoke to the impact of this: “I just pretty much shut down, stopped talking and I withdrew socially. I completely shut off, I’d never put up my hand in class, I never talked, that’s when lot of it stopped because I just stopped putting myself out there.” It appears that the impact for EP resulted in social and academic withdrawal. He described his high school experience as being unpleasant and avoiding school whenever possible.

Because many of the LGBTQ youth interviewed concealed their sexual orientation when not in a safe environment, many did not have personal experiences of ongoing direct homophobic bullying. But the impact of not being authentic, or true to their identity, also had an
impact. As LB (bisexual female youth, 18) stated, “I think in Grade 7 and 8 I didn’t enjoy school that much and so I avoided but it wasn’t just because of overt bullying, I just generally felt uncomfortable at school…because I knew I just didn’t quite fit in.” RR (gay male youth, 20) reiterated this point; “I don’t think it was entirely because of homophobic bullying, but I didn’t feel accepted so I didn’t really enjoy my high school. I took summer classes, everything possible, to not have typical school.”

Students also spoke to what they believed were the long-term impacts of experiencing homophobic bullying. LB (bisexual female youth, 18) spoke to the impacts on relationships, stating,

I think there is an intrinsic affect of feeling guilt. I think it is hard to have a normal sexual life when there is always the feeling of shame. I think it makes getting into a healthy relationship tough because how do you say, “I have problems with my partner” when you have trouble saying, “I have a partner”?

MS (inter-gender, pansexual youth, 17) also spoke to this issue, “They may feel emotional about getting into a relationship with someone else who is homosexual because they aren’t sure about themselves.

Shame, Self-Harm, and Low Self-Esteem

KM (Lesbian female, 17) also noted a negative impact from experiencing verbal homophobic bullying when she was in school:

I was quite insecure at that point, and I was very easily thrown into a bout of depression, so having that [verbal bullying] kind of made it worse. I will admit, that I used to cut, and I used to do all that kind of stuff and that made that worse. So I would take it out on myself thinking that, ‘This is wrong, this is who I am, but it’s wrong and I can’t do it and it’s wrong so I should just try to like men.”
It appears that KM’s experiences of bullying led her to turn her anger inward, blame herself, leading to self-harm. A triangle teacher also addressed this issue. Stating, “We see a lot of self-harm. A lot of that stems from a lack of confidence and just not feeling worthy, so from that there is eating disorders, cutting, attempted suicides…”

SJ (lesbian female, 21) highlighted the negative impact on one’s mental health. “It can be really traumatic.” She added, “I think just like, isolation or depression, just…poor self-esteem sort of stuff.” EP (gay male, 21) shared a similar response:

Like I said it can repress who you are, make you feel shame for a long term, make you feel embarrassed, make you feel like the person you are is not worthy, make you feel like you have to change yourself because you are being told all the time that you are gay like it is an insult. You feel like you are doing something wrong and so I think that kind of shame lasts a long time in some people.

Understanding the negative impact of homophobic bullying is vital, especially in relation to the previous section that highlighted the difficulty with making change around verbal homophobic bullying and the perspectives that attributed this to a belief that these issues were ‘minor’. Drawing a connection between the behavior and the impact is seen as important, if perspectives around the importance of addressing this issue are to change.

Enduring “Damage”

As previously noted, a few of the teachers interviewed for the current study had experience working at the Triangle Program. The following are a few excerpts from those teachers, who had first-hand experience seeing students who could no longer attend their other
school(s) because of significant degrees of homophobic bullying. These statements speak to the enduring damage thought to be associated with experiences of homophobic bullying:

We try and be really upfront with the fact that all of the staff here is gay and lesbian, but sometimes it will take kids six months to even really connect with us, because the place that was supposed to protect them, school, was that scary place. That negative impact on their persona and psyche is huge and it can sometimes take a long time.

The student who struggles the most in Triangle, and he is 18 now, and the only student who has ever told me this, but homophobia started for him in Kindergarten. This kid has no self-esteem, this is almost his third year here and it is so hard to convince him that he is capable of anything.

These kids are damaged. They are so damaged and I think that is the best word I could use.

**Positive Impact**

Some students spoke to the positive impact that enduring a difficult experience can sometimes have. For examples, KM (lesbian female, 17) stated, “But the other part of the time you become stronger from it, you realize this isn’t what I want from a relationship, this isn’t what I want from life.” She continued, “Sometimes people who are abused or bullied go into social work so that they can protect people from that or sometimes they become the abuser and further things.” MK (bisexual female, 19) also spoke to this: “Another consequence it can have is I think some people will become more withdrawn, and some people will become really big, really big activists. There are the two side of it.”

**Coping Mechanisms**
An interesting finding from this study was how LGBTQ youth chose to cope with the high degree of homophobic bullying and perceived negative environment. It is important to note that when assessing for gender differences in this study, very little were found. Having said this, gender differences did appear to arise within how LGBTQ youth coped with their school environment, in relation to their sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, all of the male youth chose to remain at the school but not disclose their sexual orientation. Alternatively, three out of the four females opted to change schools to alternative based schools, as did the individual who identified as “other” for gender identification. The one female, who did not change schools, opted to not come out during high school. In line with this, the female participants had more to share, than the males, in the sub-category entitled ‘What Helps Youth who are out in High Schools,’ where as the males of the study had more to share around the ‘benefits of not being out’. The implications for these findings will be discussed further in the Discussion section, but it appears that the solutions from the participants in this study revolved around creating their own sense of coping by either remaining closeted and in their current context or being more open about their sexuality but changing contexts in order to feel comfortable doing so.

Summary

In summary, it appears that, from the perspectives of the participants, the high school environment remains difficult, challenging, and potentially harmful for LGBTQ youth. Fear appears to weight heavily on students’ decisions to come out, or, for some, to even engage in school at all. Fear also appears to impact teachers, in their willingness to address such issues and their own fear of being harassed or bullied. With rampant verbal homophobic bullying and homophobic epithet use that appears to go uncontested, it is not surprise that the environments
described by most participants appear, at the very least, uncomfortable for LGBTQ youth.

Despite participants ability to name change agents that they believe could likely lessen this phenomenon (as we will see in the subsequent chapter), for those who have experienced high schools recently, it appears the best solution for now is to stay in the closet, move to an alternative schools, or simply ‘outlive the homophobia’.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS RELATED TO CHANGE IN HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined what homophobic bullying is, according to participants. It also aimed to paint a picture of what this phenomenon currently looks like within the Toronto high school climate. The current chapter aims to add to this information by providing a further understanding of how participants felt change could best be enacted within homophobic bullying. This chapter presents the four additional themes that emerged around the process of creating change within schools. Additionally, the contributions of the bullying expert and LGBTQ advocate participant provided an additional finding around the why of homophobic bullying. This chapter concludes with a synopsis of this finding: why homophobic bullying occurs so frequently in high schools today.

Four Final Themes

The qualitative results that emerged when exploring the How of homophobic bullying yielded four additional themes: (1) “Understanding Actions: Explicit and Implicit Messaging,” (2) “Understanding School Culture,” (3) “Suggestions for Change,” and (4) Creating Change: “Top-Down or Bottom-Up.” Each of these themes are outlined below and exemplified through the inclusion of participant quotes.
Theme One:
Understanding Action:
Explicit and Implicit Messaging

Actions taken by teachers, school staff, principles or school boards in an effort to reduce homophobic bullying were discussed thoroughly during the interviews for the current study. Throughout the participant discussions, it became apparent that there were ample examples of actions taken that were extremely helpful and there were also plenty of examples provided of action (or inaction, more specifically) that proved to be problematic in the plight to reduce homophobic bullying. It became clear that it was not only imperative to focus on what schools, teachers or other influences were doing to combat homophobic bullying, but also what they were not doing. Actions and inaction around homophobic bullying were discussed, and was often related to the messages that these actions (or inactions) communicated to students. During the coding process, action and inaction codes fell within the descriptive category of Teacher Action. However, as the analytical process developed further, the researcher became aware of the higher-level analytical category of implicit and explicit action or communication. Not only did this analytical category include teacher and school action but it also relates back to the earlier-presented theme of exclusion through explicit and implicit means. Thus, this theme is of higher-level abstraction, as it integrated lower levels categories. As well, through theoretical coding, this category was substantiated in the expert/advocate interviews, as they often spoke directly to the importance of addressing both of these forms of communicating ideas, norms and expectations. The majority of participants spoke about both the explicit and implicit messages that were communicated through action or inaction, which often further impacted students, other teachers and even the broader school culture and norms around homophobic bullying.
For the purpose of this dissertation, ‘explicit action’ refers to any direct communication that is fully and clearly expressed, with nothing implied (Dixon, Faries, & Gabrys, 1988). An example of an explicit message around homophobia, or homophobic bullying, is teachers interrupting a verbal assault on an LGBTQ student and explaining why this behaviour unacceptable and will not be tolerated. The message that this behaviour is not tolerated, is explicit due to its direct communication. On the contrary, ‘implicit action’ refers to any type of communication that is implied or understood without being directly expressed (Dixon et al., 1988). An example may be of a teacher observing a verbal assault on an LGBTQ youth and doing nothing. There is no explicit message communicated but the implicit message is that this behaviour is allowed.

The following section provides an overview of the examples participants provided of both explicit and implicit messages communicated around homophobic bullying in schools, with the first section covering actions that were deemed helpful towards lessening homophobic bullying, followed by those that were deemed unhelpful. Bullying expert, Faye aptly explained the importance of recognizing both implicit and explicit messages in reference to homophobic language use below.

An explicit message is ‘I’m going to stop this conversation right now and I’m going to have a little conversation about it.’ The implicit message is, let’s say you are not even part of that conversation…let’s say you are a kid and you hear that…the implicit message is the teacher saying that’s not okay. And so, if a teacher says nothing…so nothing has happened explicitly…but the implicit message that the kid, a vulnerable kid or any kid, can take is, ‘oh, it’s okay to talk like that.’

The following sub-themes are what make-up the body of this theme:
• Explicit Positive Teacher or School Action
• Implicit Positive Teacher or School Action
• Implicit Negative Messaging
• Explaining Teacher Inaction
• Sexual Education Issues

Explicit Positive Teacher or School Action

The majority of teachers provided examples of when they acted on homophobic bullying they witnessed in school, and they all felt equipped to know how to handle such circumstances. Only one teacher participant did not talk about any overt action against homophobic bullying that she took, but this was likely due to her vulnerability of working at a Catholic school and her fear of being ‘outed’ if she were to take such action. The following are a few examples from teachers on how they would, or did, explicitly handle homophobic bullying:

One thing I would definitely say is, ‘Stop. What do you mean by that?’ and actually just confronting the student one on one. (T1, Heterosexual Female Teacher)

What I always try to do with students is talk to them like, ‘You said ‘that’s so gay,’ what do you mean by that?’ I question it and make it a teachable moment. (T3, Gay Male Teacher)

So, I think what I would do…was to confront the student about the comments. Confronting them in a non-threatening way, so I mean if, in the class room I’m at the front of the board and I hear students calling each other ‘fags’, or ‘you’re so gay’, or ‘that’s so gay’, then I would talk to the class as a class, and have a class discussion. I mean regardless of whether or not my lesson plan was going to be finished for that day, I think for me, it is more important to have this type of
discussion and show the students that I care about what they do. (T2, Heterosexual Male Teacher)

Yeah, if it is somebody saying ‘fag’ or ‘dyke’ or something, I respond to it immediately. (T4, Lesbian Female Teacher)

Female teacher T4 also spoke about ways her school and her would utilize outside resources and associations in order to further educate students and send the explicit message that homophobia and homophobic bullying would not be tolerated. She stated, “When I started at [school name] we had TEACH (Teens Educating And Confronting Homophobia) come in, they would come in every year and educate the students, and I would always do workshops and homophobia was a part of it…classism, racism. It was always a part of my curriculum.”

Students also recalled times when either a teacher or the school would explicitly address homophobic bullying. For example, MK (bisexual female youth, 19) stated, “One time someone wrote ‘Fag’ on the chalkboard and we had a two hour meeting about how that is inappropriate. So [alternative school name] was definitely a good place. Basically they were like, ‘we know this is acceptable at other places but it is not acceptable here and we want to catch it before it goes to far’.”

RR (gay male youth, 20) also recalled one time when there was a homophobic bullying incident in his high school and the matter was taken very seriously. He stated, “At my high school there was some bullying and there was one instance where someone was called a fag and there was a whole kerfuffle, and the whole school had to go to presentations in the gym or something like that.” He noted that he found it comforting to know that the school was putting an effort into communicating intolerance to this type of behaviour.
KM (lesbian female youth, 17) indicated that her alternative school did a lot to address LGBTQ issues at her school. She said, “We have the QSA, which is the Queer Straight Alliance. We have different social clubs and whatnot”. She added that her school also does a lot to be active in social consciousness-raising. She said, “So we have a lot of things…we do the Day of Silence every year, we do a lot of fundraising, so we can donate to – we donated our money this year to SOY [Supporting Our Youth]. And we go to the Unity conference and Converge every year.”

**Implicit Positive Teacher or School Action**

Teachers and students also provided examples of times positive messages were implicitly communicated about homophobic bullying and sexual orientation issues. Teachers often spoke about being aware of the messages they communicate and how they set an example for respecting individual differences.

When I was at the other school there was quite a bit of homophobic bullying but they knew that it was not okay to say in my room. My room had posters everywhere. It was very clear that this was going to be a safe space for kids and an inclusive space. (T4, Lesbian Female Teacher)

I think of all of the opportunities we have, as secondary teachers to include tidbits throughout the year that we could be talking about. Even for elementary teachers, there is very age appropriate ways to talk about things, Suzie and her two moms go shopping; they have $25 to spend on groceries. You’ve just edited it into the curriculum, probably nobody will question and if somebody does say ‘Suzie has two mommies?’ Yes, there are different types of families, some are raised by grandparents…there are so many ways you can do this kind of work without getting into trouble. (T3, Gay Male Teacher)
With regard to positive implicit messages that were recognized by students, the majority spoke about using such messages to determine which teachers were approachable around sexual orientation issues and who were not. For example, CC (gay male youth, 21) was not out in high school, but he did acknowledge there were a few teachers that he could have talked to about homophobic bullying or sexual orientation issues, if needed. He indicated a few guidance counsellors he enjoyed talking to. He said, “I would go to them, because you could talk to them, and they made me feel like…they made you feel like adults”. He also spoke specifically about one teacher who really made an effort to engage with the students, “Yeah, she was open…she was like ‘you guys need to open your minds, there’s so much you need to learn, and there’s so many more people out there outside of high school’. She got me through a lot. Thank god I had her a lot.” Despite these positive experiences with individual teachers, CC also noted a lack of school action around LGBTQ issues. He stated, “It was never addressed and there was no sort of…‘everyone meet up, let’s talk about this’…or nothing on the PA’s. I went to a Catholic school.”

KM (lesbian female youth, 17) believed that the staff at her alternative arts-based high school was open. She stated, “If I had experienced any homophobic bullying of any form I would either have talked to a teacher at some point or gone straight to my Principal. Because they’ve created enough of a context, that all the students, no matter how many students there are…we at least have some teachers that you know that you can confide in, and that you can talk to about anything.”

LB (bisexual female youth, 18), who also went to an alternative arts-based school, stated that the teachers were very approachable, “Yes, the teachers were receptive to that type of thing. I think in general we had a pretty good staff. We had some staff that you definitely could not talk
to about that type of thing.” She also explained why she felt these teachers were approachable. She said, “Either they were willing to correct kids who said ‘that’s so gay’ or who made inappropriate comments, or they were more stern about it…they didn’t let those sorts of things slide.”

SJ (lesbian female youth, 21), also believed that the teachers at her large rural high school were approachable on this topic, but she struggled to say for certain what led to that impression, “Umm, I don’t know. I guess…like…probably at the guidance counselor, there were posters and stuff. I don’t know, people just sort of seemed pretty open minded, but I guess it is hard to say exactly why.” She also added that her school did not make any efforts to address this topic on a larger scale, despite her positive beliefs about individual staff. She stated, “I wouldn’t say anything overt really. There was no gay/straight alliance or anything like that, no overt mentioning of anything related to [homophobic bullying].” When she was asked if her school offered anything in terms of assemblies or sexual diversity issues taught in class, she simply said “no”.

In short, this section aimed to provide an overview of the positive examples and messages, both explicit and implicit, teachers and schools are communicating around homophobic bullying. The following section will outline the specific subthemes that emerged related to the theme Understanding Action: Implicit and Explicit Messages, as these unfortunately arose from the more prominent discussion around ‘problem areas’ and/or areas for change.

**Implicit Negative Messaging**

Participants were also asked about teacher action around homophobic bullying that was seen as unhelpful. The good news here is that the participants had very little to share in terms of
explicit action by teachers that were considered homophobic bullying, that could fall under the category of explicit negative messaging (hence there is no explicit negative messaging category presented here). However, participants had ample experiences to share that focused on implicit negative messages conveyed by teachers or school staff. An important finding from these discussions was that the majority of comments about unhelpful teacher action were actually not about action at all; they were about ‘inaction’ or a lack of taking action to homophobic bullying. The focus was on what appeared to be a re-occurring issue of inaction and what message was being implicitly communicated when teachers did not attend to or correct homophobic bullying. In essence, the focus was on the harm associated with inaction.

Teachers, LGBTQ youth and experts alike all discussed inaction as a serious and impactful issue. The following excerpts highlight the responses and examples participants gave around this topic:

A lot of times in class if someone said something stupid about being gay to someone, teachers will hear it and they won’t say anything and if they’re those teachers that don’t say anything, you know…not everyone…because obviously there are the good few, but the majority of teachers didn’t really care. (CC, Gay Male Youth)

There were teachers who let comments like ‘that’s so gay’ pass in class, teachers that feel disempowered or like…constantly correcting kids and trying to get them to be PC, is not important.” (LB, Bisexual Female Youth)

At times I do think that some of the older teachers who have been there for a long time…from what I’ve observed they might not engage in that type of education, or use those teachable moments. And I don’t know if that’s because they’ve been there, they’ve seen it, you know, ‘what’s the point’ kind of mentality, or the more
The shared idea held by participants was that this lack of action communicates a message to students about homophobic bullying. As T4 (lesbian female teacher, 41) emphasized, teachers often do nothing because of a lack of knowledge. She said, “Comments are made and a teacher looks nervous or scared because they didn’t know how to handle it, and so they do nothing. That just encourages the behaviour, when the authority figure in the room is not doing anything about it.” She speaks to an important point about the implicit messages that are communicated through inaction.

Bullying expert Faye explained her concerns around inaction by school staff. She said, “I think that we live in a world where it’s…we’ll say ‘oh it’s bad and kids shouldn’t bully’ or whatever, but if we don’t address it at the moment in a comprehensive way, the message we are giving is that it is acceptable”. Teacher T3 (gay male, 42) reiterated this idea when he spoke about homophobic graffiti. He stated, “If teachers aren’t addressing it, if administration is not cleaning bathrooms and lockers that have these negative comments on it, then we are sending a clear message that it is tolerated and okay.

Student LB (bisexual female, 18) also felt that change was needed in this area. She provided her perspective, as a student:

It is tough because I think I teachers do have to crack down on name-calling because it shows that they do care, even though everyone loves the teachers who are a little bit looser and aren’t as tough because they are the cool teachers. But I think it is really important for the cool teachers to crack down on that stuff and not let it pass.
Explaining Teacher Inaction

Students look to teachers to set the tone of the school and to outline what is expected. As CC (gay male youth, 21) stated, “It’s something that needs to start there, because those are the adults that you’re looking up to once you’re in school and they’re the ones that discipline you and make you comfortable so that if you go to them, you know you’ll be ok”. Participants shared their ideas around why teachers are not addressing the issue of homophobic bullying more, and the common ideas revolved around a lack of time, a lack of knowledge and fear.

In terms of a lack of time, it appears that this type of teaching is difficult to fit in and possibly seen as ‘extra’ in addition to an already heavy load teachers are carrying. As T4 (lesbian teacher, 41) stated, “There are probably a small percentage who are really homophobic, but I think most people just don’t have the where with all, the resources, the time. When you don’t have time you have to just deal with your curriculum, you have to cover this much by this time, and all this other stuff doesn’t fit in.”

Lack of knowledge was also believed to be a reason why teachers don’t act. As T4 stated, “I don’t think the intention is to make it worse; they just don’t have the vocabulary to talk about it. I’ve heard that time and time again from teachers in the system. I worked for the board centrally for a couple of years and I did workshops with teachers on how to deal with at risk students, and I would hear over and over again “Tell us what to say, tell us what to do.”

Fear was another reason why teachers may not act on homophobic bullying. As T3 (gay male teacher, 42) explained, “I think administrators are afraid to introduce what they deem controversial issues in the classroom”. T4 reiterated this point by stating, “I don’t think it is because they don’t believe in diversity, but I think the bigger issue is that they are afraid to. I
don’t think they have the skill set and the tools to be able to deal with, and in not dealing with it, it makes it worse.”

Expert Steven (gay male, 47) highlighted that this type of teaching needs to not be viewed as an “add-on” but instead is intricately tied to the core teachings, “part of [changing homophobic bullying] is around stepping back and providing the resources so that all teachers can move forward…and also selling teachers on the idea that it is not just an add on but homophobia gets in the way of your ability to teach so if you don’t do something about it, it gets in the way of students ability to learn.” He added, “But, I think really the stuff around, again mine is for middle schools, but hallways, school yards, cafeterias, right? Inviting teachers to think about, ‘Well, what’s your role in those areas’? Cause I think teachers hesitate to think that their authority doesn’t extend beyond the classroom.”

A prominent conclusion that emerged from the data around the issue of teachers not acting on homophobic bullying was that it appears the decision to act is more subjective than objective. Meaning, it is up to the teachers’ discretion whether they felt addressing homophobic bullying was ‘worth it’ in that moment, and, of course, the above-noted issues factor into this subjective opinion. For example, T1 (heterosexual female teacher, 24) provided an example of an incident she witnessed directly by teacher, when she was completing a practicum. She recalled a student being bullied for being effeminate and being called derogatory homophobic terms and the teacher, whom she was observing, did nothing. She stated, “I think he probably just let the comment slide because he felt, you know, it’s not a big deal…’I’ll just let the comment slide’…so he just didn’t deal with it.” T1’s comments highlight how opinions about what is and what is not important appear to get in the way of systematic progression for change happening in
the schools. As many participants stated, comments, actions, graffiti are often deemed ‘not a big deal’ and thus no action is taken.

It is this subjective judgment that is taking a toll on implementing effective change, according to expert Faye, who highlighted how teachers often “differentiate between serious and non-serious”. She added:

So, if something blows up in the media then it’s in the headlines and everybody’s worried about it. But then it goes back underground. But I think we also need to really recognize that a lot of the incidents that are supposedly minor, actually are not, they can still have a huge devastating impact…but they also, again, give the message, if we don’t deal with the minor ones, it gives the message that it is not really important enough. And then, of course, we wait until it blows up…so I think that is problematic. So the supposedly minor incidents need really not to be taken that way…they can be very serious.

Expert Steven, also highlighted this point, and emphasized how what is deemed homophobic is often subjectively categorized as serious or not serious:

When we call things homophobic, often people go right to the very tragic, extreme examples that the media reports. But then I say to kids, using “gay” as a put down, that’s homophobic. But they think homophobic means you hate gay people, and it’s like, ‘well, no, but when you say it that way, is it a compliment?’ So that gets kids to kind of think about the power of words.

In short, failing to act on witnessed homophobic bullying or failing to address LGBTQ discrimination was deemed pivotal in many ways, including sending the message the homophobic bullying was okay, that LGBTQ discrimination was acceptable, and that it was not an important issues at the school. Thus, it was believed these messages contributed to negative school culture and low acceptance/tolerance levels at schools.
**Sexual Education Issues**

A specific topic that arose again and again in the current study was that of sexual education courses in Ontario high schools, and the narrow focus and content often covered in this course. Despite there being no direct questions about this topic asked by the interviewer, this issue consistently emerged during the discussions of homophobic bullying occurring in high schools. It appeared that the importance of this topic was how the lack of inclusivity in this course connects to the implicit messages being received about the school’s acceptance to sexual diversities.

I was thinking about this the other day, is that sexual education in schools is horrible, horrible, horrible! They are so afraid to talk about sex, especially alternate…well not alternate…but other sexual orientations that they never even…until they start teaching kids that it is not a choice, not a lifestyle choice, then it is hard for straight people to understand that it is not just a myth. I think sexual education is the biggest thing that needs to be taught in schools. (EP, Gay Male Youth)

LB (bisexual female youth, 18) also addressed the issue, and she noted that sexual diversities needed to be included in Sexual Education classes. She said, “I remember in health class in grade 9, in sexuality, I don’t remember there being any sort of mention of non-heterosexual sexuality”. SJ (lesbian female youth, 21), also spoke to this issue: “Like even Sex Ed was very heterosexual-focused”.

LGBTQ Expert, Tim (gay male, 63), highlighted why he felt sexual education was often limited in scope in high schools. He stated, “One of the big problems in the school system today, and even in Ontario, they are supposed to deal with this stuff by…sexual orientation is considered part of sexual education. And sex ed., of course, is the preview of physical education.
It can only *legally* happen in phys. Ed.” His point was that sexual education often isn’t taught by those with specialized knowledge in the specific topic, who would likely be more comfortable, or more knowledgeable discussing LGBTQ sexual education.

Given this considerable and seemingly common omission in most sexual education curriculum, it is understandable that participants provided suggestions for change that were more inclusive. For example, EP stated “I think that the sex ed…they should have a special topic for gays, lesbians and transsexuals, gender identity, that kind of thing”. LB also felt that change was needed in this area. She explained, “Well, I think in health classes they should be talking about gay and lesbian relationships, and I think when there is discussions about sex, that should be a part of it. I think teachers need to use an inclusive language for sure”.

It appears that a large portion of participants felt that a link existed between homophobic bullying and the ideas being taught in certain courses, particularly that of sexual education. It seems as though these teachings send an implicit message about the school culture, and the importance (or lack there of) around LGBTQ issues. If these issues are not addressed at all, this certainly sends a message about the priorities of teachers and/or the school board.

This section addresses a primary concern around a lack of action or discussion around sexual diversity and related concerns. Thus this leads to the question is failing to act also considered in the realm of bullying? Just as allies are needed in order to help LGBTQ youth feel more included and to lessen homophobic bullying, the opposite is also true, in that bystanders, who do nothing in the face of homophobic bullying, could potentially and inadvertently cause harm. The harm being that they promote the ideology that homophobic bullying is tolerated or not considered a serious issue.
Theme Two:
Understanding School Culture

Through the interview process, it became clear that in order to understand the differences in homophobic bullying within the school system, you had to understand the different types of schools and their school cultures. Participants frequently discussed demographic variations between schools, and how they believed this related to varying levels or frequencies of homophobic bullying. These differences in school cultures included small versus large high schools, inner city versus rural, schools with ethnic majorities that they believed impacted homophobic bullying, school religious affiliation (e.g., Catholic schools), and general high schools versus alternative arts schools. The following sub-themes are described below:

- Alternative Arts-Based Schools
- Religion
- School Demographics

Alternative Arts-Based Schools

Youth MS (pansexual inter-gender, 17) experienced both a large urban high school and then transferred to a smaller alternative arts-based school. They stated, “At [large urban school], it was a big school, with 2000 kids, and it was kind of a very normal high school, everyone sort of fit into a stereotype.” MS expressed the idea that large schools seem to be limited in terms of the ‘community’ feel that smaller arts-based schools often possess. They said, “I felt like [large urban school] was sort of a machine of a school. This year kids even had to wear lanyards every day to school that had your picture, name and student ID, that is sort of machine-y to me, whereas [arts-based school] is more like a community.”
LGBTQ youth MS also transferred during their secondary school years from a large urban school to a smaller arts-based school. They stated, “[arts based school] was more focused on community and my old school was focused on university preparation. They didn’t have as many courses at the school, and it was more like ‘we want to prepare you for the work load at university, blah, blah, blah’. So that was a big difference in what their kind of aim was”. They added, “To have community, and someone to talk to, and not being all these people…I just think smaller schools are more effective.”

An important aspect to note is that students who attended arts-based alternative schools indicated significantly less experiences with homophobic bullying then those who attended public schools. They described a culture within these types of schools that explicitly and implicitly made tolerance and acceptance of individual diversities the norm. For example, Bisexual student MK explained why she felt that alternative arts schools were generally accepting places for LGBTQ youth:

It is a particular demographic school, it was like, [school name] was an alternative school, so lots of the kids were coming from arts schools. Plus the teachers there were different: they were open-minded, and they teach the curriculum in a different way. I don’t know, we didn’t really shy away from any taboo topics. Plus there was a lot of, like, queer students there, so it was pretty accepting.

KM (lesbian female youth, 17) also spoke about what she perceived to be the benefits of attending an alternative arts-based school:

There’s smaller classes, it’s a smaller school. The teachers tend to work with you more one on one if you want it. Whenever you need it, they give you the opportunity. It’s just a better atmosphere. You’re going to a school that people want to be in, and not just because they have to be in. A lot of the people identity
themselves as bi...as bisexual. A lot of the men identify themselves as gay. We have a few kids who are transsexual, or gender benders – and they like both, and do both so most of the school does identify as homosexual and we have so many teachers who are open about their sexuality and are out, and they are gay, and we have that environment to be in to be open”.

**Religion**

Participants often discussed how religion was believed to influence the culture of the school as well. Teacher T6 (lesbian female, 40) focused on her knowledge of guidelines in the catholic schools in Ontario, which she believed often lead to a particular type of culture:

Well, nobody actually talks that overtly about homosexuality in Catholic schools, except for the things the Bishop writes. But what they do if you are a teacher in a Catholic school is they make you sign a contract saying you will uphold the Catholic doctrine 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. So you don’t know what the Catholic doctrine is, and what that means is basically, it is okay to be gay, just don’t act on it. If you are gay, you can’t let people know that you are gay and that you have a partner, because that is the part that they cannot deal with, if you are acting on your sexuality by expressing your sexuality with another person. –T6, Lesbian Teacher.

Gay male student, CC spoke about his experiences attending a Catholic school. He stated, “I went to a Catholic school, so...there was also one student who was told to transfer because he was openly gay…and they were like ‘transfer or be expelled’.” He noted that he struggled significantly due to being gay within a Catholic school:

Yes, It was really tough. I think with a lot of Catholic schools…it’s really tough. I think that the bullying definitely still exists in public schools but people are not so...you know...quick to judge. Like in Catholic school, there’s their own set of
rules and you’re either in or you’re not, and they can make fun of you and have Jesus to back them up, you know.

However, student RR (gay male, 20) also attended a Catholic school and he had a very different experience. He stated, “I went to my local Catholic high school, and I appreciate going to a real school. Well, the definition of a real school is just your local school, and I didn’t go to an arts school or a special…there are lots of alternative schools. I appreciated going to just the local one to get what the average experience is”. He added that his school was not heavily religious: “I’m surprised though, being in a Catholic school, the religion component wasn’t overly strict, and so perhaps, that could have been an area of huge negativity, but it wasn’t…because, I guess, religion isn’t popular these days.”

Lesbian female student SJ also had a unique experience regarding religion. Although she didn’t attend a Catholic school herself, she was strongly affiliated with her church and she highlights the point that consensus or stereotypes cannot be applied regarding religious affiliation and that religious values around diverse sexual orientation are not all the same. She explained:

It really depends because I’m part of the United Church, and in those circles especially, well…and even in Toronto too…but there are so many queer identified ministers, but it is really more the norm than anything. I grew up with a lesbian minister and it was always really positive. I think religious circles can be a really positive example of a non-nuclear family and breaking those ties because your family is larger and different.

School Demographics

Participants spoke about how schools seemed to take on a particular identity and were often known for certain things given a particular make-up of students or location. As an example of this, EP (gay male youth, 21) described the ‘identity,’ or the culture, of his school. He stated,
“I grew up in the west end and the school that I went to was known for its fights, so it was a little bit more intense. I could only think of maybe three other gay students in the entire school that weren’t out, but I knew, and other people had a pretty good idea”. He felt that location might have factored into the culture of the school he attended. He explained:

If you went to school in downtown Toronto you probably met gay people in your life, or different cultures, and you are more accepting, I guess. But if you live in the suburbs, like we did, and these kids were just spoiled by their parents and ungrateful…they had their little cliques, their little groups…and if you weren’t in it then they would just….maybe it has something to do with just being so secluded.

School demographics were also discussed in terms of ethnic majority at a school. For example, Teacher T1 (heterosexual female, 24) stated:

And that really has to do with, I think, the environment of the school, the culture of the school. Because I noticed in my first school where there’s a huge population of Arab students that that attitude amongst the students themselves was tolerated much more. The homophobia there was a lot more prevalent, and I really do think it was a cultural thing. It really, really was a cultural thing.

Gay male teacher T3 also spoke about his experiences with different schools when he was doing homophobia workshops in schools. He also spoke to the issue of ethnicity or cultural beliefs influencing a school’s willingness to discuss or address certain topics:

It was a school of a lot of immigrant students and I think there was more fear to discuss those kinds of issues and I think the school board itself had reluctance to talk about homophobia with immigrant populations because they are not sure how parents are going to react and if they are going to get more challenges from parents than say, second or third generation Canadian families.
T5 (gay male teacher, 38) aptly summarized many of the particulars that contribute to a school's individual identity. He stated, “Each school takes on its own culture and community, so it depends what community the school is in itself. It depends whether it is an accepting community, and unaccepting community, whether it is new immigrants, whether it is black or white, all of those things are a factor.

It appears that out of all the school differences that participants believed factored a more positive school culture, arts-based alternative schools appear to be the most successful in promoting an environment of acceptance. This cannot be generalized to all alternative arts-based schools, as further studies are needed to understand this dynamic better. But, it should be noted that, according to the participants of the current study, alternative arts-based schools appear to be doing well at promoting an environment of acceptance and inclusivity.

In summary, this section outlines the importance of understanding the underlying school culture, when thinking about how to create change with homophobic bullying. Norms are often reflected in the school culture and students are very quick to pick-up the messages of what the accepted school culture is, and how to act appropriate within that context. These messages, whether explicit and implicit get communicated to all students and are important when thinking about homophobic bullying.

**Theme Three:**

**Suggestions for Change – Stopping the Silence**

The feedback from participants paints a picture of schools often implementing a seemingly haphazard approach to addressing important topics for LGBTQ youth, perhaps depending on need, time, teacher education, resources or objective opinion. It is clear that a more systematic approach to change is needed, so that such institutional disparities are alleviated. This
section focuses on participant suggestions for change, which coincide with the two above-noted themes that emphasized the importance of Understanding Teacher Action and Understanding School Culture. Again the emphasis from participants around creating change revolved around increasing the explicit teachings and discussions about embracing sexual diversity and counteracting homophobic bullying. The higher-level analytic category, which eventually became a theme, of Stopping the Silence was recognized through the awareness of the researcher that a large majority of participants’ suggestions for change revolved around ways to increase the dialogue around sexual diversity, likely with the purpose of contributing to the explicit communication of norms that promote acceptance, tolerance and the celebration of diversity. The primary sub-themes that emerged around suggestions for change were:

- Talk About It!
  - Increasing Visibility
  - Curriculum
  - GSAs
- Ensuring Consistency.
  - School Workshops
  - Teacher Training

**Talk About It!**

It would have been nice to even discuss [homophobic bullying], and have an event or some sort of gathering in the cafeteria where it was touched upon or “don’t bully”, but it was never talked about. (CC, Gay male student)

As the quote from CC indicates, it is important for students to hear issues being addressed, especially those that impact them personally. Previous sections of this manuscript highlighted how both explicit and implicit action and messages are important, when thinking about
homophobic bullying. Participants addressed how not acting on homophobic bullying solidified the message that this kind of behaviour is acceptable. Thus, the antidote to this seems clear: Talk about it!

The majority of LGBTQ youth in the current study emphasized how important it was for homophobic bullying to be discussed and acknowledged in schools. For example, LGBTQ student SJ spoke to the importance of teachers addressing the issue of homophobic bullying and sexual diversity through various methods. When asked what would help with homophobic bullying in schools, she stated, “Probably just being more expressive. Seeing it, having it written in policies, seeing how it can integrate into all aspects of curriculum”. When the interviewer asked her to provide an example, she said, “Well just sort of mentioning it…mentioning it in terms of Canadian History, you know, like, authors to read from or, like, things they’ve read.”

KM (lesbian female youth 17) also shared this idea, but she explained it with the perspective of ‘undoing’ what many have been learned from prior experiences. She stated, “[schools] also probably need some form of session of…‘This is what you’ve learned, but that’s wrong and this is what should happen’.” EP (gay male youth, 21) reiterated this idea, stating, “Bring it up…and the teachers should, especially the ‘that’s so gay’ comment. I’ve heard so many younger kids say that and if teachers just said, ‘that kind of talk won’t be tolerated’, and explained to them how discriminatory that is.”

But it certainly wasn’t just LGBTQ youth speaking about the need for increased discussions. Teachers and experts alike all highlighted how crucial it was for this topic to be addressed openly and directly. Gay male teacher, T3, also shared this idea: “Let it start at kindergarten. If we want our kids to be bilingual we should start our kids in French in kindergarten, same thing if we want our kids to not hate, we should start teaching in
kindergarten.” LGBTQ bullying expert, Steven highlighted how teachers need to address the issue overtly and in areas other than just their classroom:

It’s not just your classroom, but we have to claim the school. We do an activity called the Name it, Claim it, Stop it. So, you hear something you call it what it is. It’s homophobic, it’s sexist, or racist. Claim it. So the idea that you would say to someone I don’t want…you know…that’s not a good use of the word. I don’t want to hear it. The student figures, Okay I won’t say it around Ms. So and So. But if you say, ‘in this school we don’t use that language.’ Now you’re trying to broaden the sense that this is a place where that kind of language used that way is not acceptable. And then you want to stop it by, having you know some progressive natural consequences.

The importance of talking about it has so many rationales, including lessening homophobic bullying comments and actions, increasing awareness, and teaching students implicitly and explicitly that this type of discrimination is not tolerated. But, as CC (gay male youth, 21) also highlighted, another important point to consider is how talking about it likely increases the sense of safety felt by LGBTQ students. He stated, “It’s something that needs to start [with teachers], because those are the adults that you’re looking up to once you’re in school and they’re the ones that discipline you and make you comfortable so that if you go to them, you know you’ll be ok….and get answers”.

Previous findings highlighted how the majority of high schools still are considered to have a negative climate for LGBTQ youth, and this section highlights participants’ emphasis on these issues being openly and thoroughly addressed in the hopes of creating change. Teacher T4 (lesbian female, 41) also shared this view, when she stated, “We hear that all time from our students, that they just weren’t supported. A little comment can go along way in feeling
supported. Just shutting down that conversation or acknowledging it, pulling someone out of the room, anything would help”.

**Increasing Visibility**

A prominent topic of conversation around what promotes a positive school culture that is open and accepting of sexual diversity issues was the visibility that is seen. It appears that the culture isn’t just influenced by the demographics or student make-up of the particular school, but also what is actually taught as the school culture through visual expressions around the school. Examples include posters, pink triangles, pride flags, pamphlets etc. Again, this all speaks to this implicit messages communicated by school staff.

T4 (lesbian female teacher, 41) provided a relevant example of using visibility to communicate her expectations in class. She stated, “My room had posters everywhere. It was very clear that this was going to be a safe space for kids and an inclusive space. I would always go over the rules with new students, the school board rules, charter of rights and freedoms. By doing that all the time it really sets a tone.” She also spoke about an exercise she would do with students to create a visible reminder for the class rules:

I would always do this exercise and it sounds rudimentary, but high school students take to it. We’d take a huge piece of mural paper and trace all of our hands around the outside to make a border, then I would say ‘What do we want to see inside of our safe space, how do we want to feel in our space? What do we keep out’ I’d leave a margin around the hands so we would write the things we did not want outside, we’d get really specific, and then it would go up on the wall and I would always refer to it. I think that is a really powerful visual and it is a community builder.
Many participants offered suggestions for change around homophobic bullying that had to do with increasing visibility. For example, T3 (gay male teacher, 42) shared the following, “I think mainstream schools could do a better job just by subtle little things, putting up a sticker in classrooms that say ‘homophobic bullying will not be tolerated’, the rainbow stickers, anything that shows that it’s concerned with everybody in school”. MS added to this idea when she stated, “I think assemblies and the day of silence is really helpful, and just like making sure people know it is okay to celebrate their sexuality.”

Increased visibility about resources was an important point that related to ensuring students knew where to go for help or support. Student EP explained this in the following segment:

Because every teacher is different so it is hard to know who you can approach. Maybe if there was an office with office hours when you could go in and talk to someone and it was for the entire school so they would know who to go in to talk to, and I don’t know, like maybe give more resources too, like pamphlets and websites and people could do their own learning instead of feeling exposed or pushed out.

LGBTQ youth KM also noted the importance of having more increased signage or visibility for resources. She stated, “They should have more anonymous counsellors…they should have more help lines available, other than just Kids Help Line, and they should all know that they have these social resources available to them.”

Curriculum

Improving visibility was also discussed frequently from the context of curriculum content. Although, it is interesting to note that although the majority of teachers and experts spoke about ensuring there is an inclusive curriculum, very few students spoke to this issue.
Teacher T5 stated, “I think more [changes are needed] in the curriculum. Not just LBGT, but I think more in the curriculum…should show that everyone is included”. Bullying expert Faye also spoke of the importance of including diversity in curriculum. She stated, “…And again, it’s the thing of everybody needs to see themselves. So if in the curriculum, in history, in examples, if marginalized groups are in there in a positive way…that again is a very important message”. Expert Steven also spoke to the importance of curriculum being both expansive and inclusive:

The idea, I mean my definition of curriculum is that from the moment a kid walks into a school, until when he or she leaves, what are they hearing? What are they seeing? What are they feeling within the school? Who’s in the school? Do teachers look like them? Do they see their family talked about in positive ways? Are they challenged to think critically about bias and prejudice and stereotypes? Curriculum is not just what we read in the book but also how we engage with students. So you know, I think pieces, I think a comprehensive view of equity that includes a strong component around sexual orientation and gender identity alongside race and class and ability and gender, I think creates a very powerful foundation that can withstand any sort of backlash that often comes with any sort of equity work.

Expert Tim also spoke to the fact that curriculum can be considered a broader notion than just what is read in class. He said, “I mean curriculum is much broader than what’s in the book. Like what kids learn in school has to do with the broadest notion of school and community environment. He also added, “…and we are talking about curriculum, how is it [sexual diversity] integrated across the curriculum? How is it in English class? How is it in French class? How is it in History class? How is it in Geography? How is it everywhere so it’s not just if you miss school the day they deal with homophobia in Phys. Ed., right, you missed it, right?”
Steven (gay male expert, 47) also emphasized the important influence of the TDSB around curriculum. He stated, “Within the TDSB, we’ve got a really hard working equity department, at the nucleus of schools, and they are doing lots of curriculum writing, so that’s another piece, giving teachers the lesson plans to infuse what they teach with some semblance of diversity. That’s important.”

**GSAs**

Suggestions for increasing visibility for sexual minorities were also discussed in terms of having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) on campus. As student EP stated, “I think that every school should have a chance to have an alliance, a gay/straight alliance.” LGBTQ youth LB also reiterated this point, by stating, “I just feel that queer youth forming a community together is important and not just discussion groups and support groups, or arts stuff. Even just like if there were queer dances.”

Even T6 (lesbian female teacher, 40), who worked at a Catholic school for many years, felt like these were beneficial in any school. She stated, “Well…the actual schools, what they need to be doing is allowing gay/straight alliances to exist. There are some that do exist in Catholic schools albeit under less provocative names like the diversity club or things of that nature”.

However, it seems that GSAs are definitely not standard practice, as many students and teacher could not recall GSAs at their school. For example, teacher T3 (gay male 42) spoke to his teacher training practicum experiences: “I don’t remember either school having a gay/straight alliance or something that would help combat homophobia. And I’ve heard many schools won’t put up our posters, we send out Pride posters every year. Schools won’t put them up.”
Despite the majority of participants believing that GSAs are helpful to increasing the visibility in schools, a few noted the negative consequences possible with such associations as well. As the following quote from teacher T4 highlights, GSAs don’t always guarantee a positive space for LGBTQ youth. She stated, “having gay/straight alliances is great, but what I hear from students is those are really unsafe spaces because everybody knows and you are being targeted…and all of these big schools…a lot of the gay/straight alliances are made of all straight kids, because the queer kids don’t feel safe.” RR (gay male youth, 21) also recalled the diversity group at his school not being a safe place. He stated, “there was a society, or a group called Students Concerned about Oppressed People or something, and they definitely would have some gay thing in there, because I guess gay people are oppressed people, but that society was definitely not popular. A lot of people would bash that society because it was run by not as popular kids.”

It seems that GSAs are important for a number of reasons, including increasing the visibility of acceptance in the school and enhancing the school culture for LGBTQ youth. Lesbian teacher T6 spoke to the important issue of why LGBTQ youth also need allies and why she sees allies as a crucial part of creating change within the high school climate:

For people who aren’t experiencing the slur, they should be the ones to take care of it. The ones who already experienced it are suffering from the pain, and they should be the one to counter it? They need to heal themselves. But the other person who didn’t experience the pain of the slur, they should be the one to step forward and make change.

Enacting the supports of allies was a topic also brought up by bullying expert Faye:

I think there is still lots of room and one of the issues too is that we also talk about bystanders, and if we want kids to stand up and be allies, then they can only do
that in a safe...well some kids can do it in any climate because they are just particular, but most people can’t...most kids need to be in a safe environment or know that they have a support system in place. So in order for kids to do that, the whole environment has to be safe.

Teacher T2 (heterosexual male, 26) also spoke about the importance of recruiting students in the form of allies. He recalled a positive impact that came from students correcting students, and students working as allies to curtail homophobic behaviour or language. He said, “I would say that there were definitely several students, or a few students, three to four students who would definitely take a role, saying you know, like ‘don’t say that’. But definitely not a big enough population of those students where you would see the school culture change”.

In summary, it appears that the majority of students felt that GSAs offer a positive addition to creating a culture of inclusion and acceptance. It appears that the visibility aspect of GSAs was considered an important message about the schools stance of sexual diversities. T6 aptly summarizes the benefits, and the importance, of GSAs in schools:

So the schools...well you are talking about what can they be doing...well they need to have better leadership. Well, how can you have better leadership? How can you ensure this leadership? I mean, the principal is the one who sets the tone for the school, so if the principal realizes the potential and the human rights angle with having a gay/straight alliance than he or she should support that and educate his or her staff about the need. Because it has been proven that having a gay/straight alliance in a school has helped those who don’t identify as heterosexual feel safer in a school.

**Ensuring Consistency**

A goal for future change, as outlined by participants, was increasing the consistency for which homophobic bullying issues are addressed. If consistency between and within schools
were achieved, it would likely take away the difficult task of teachers deciding when and how to tackle this subject and from LGBTQ students having to know which school was safe and which school was not. Consistency was discussed in terms of school program implementation, as well as teacher training.

**School Workshop Consistency**

The following quote by Steven, LGBTQ bullying expert, highlights how some schools implement workshops only when ‘needed’. Meaning, when there has been some sort of a homophobic bullying issue, which likely contributes to the inconsistencies being taught about sexual diversity and acceptance:

> Even the idea that any sort of equity based work is always a process rather than a destination, so the need to keep doing it, building it in pro-actively. So, you know, with a lot of the schools…again I’m slipping into middle school…I would get called in, in response to something that happened, like a teacher got fed up, or maybe they need an outside guest speaker who’s from the board to talk about it. But other schools would build it in at the beginning of every school year. I used to do a series of workshops for a number of schools and it was the schools way of setting a tone. So it was more proactive, and there was one school I was going in regularly for almost ten years and when I was finishing up to leave the board and stuff, students who I had met initially in kindergarten, I knew them all the way up to Grade 8.

Many participants held the idea that it is important to ensure workshops and teachings are consistent. The following excerpt by expert Steven illustrates the difficulty when issues are addressed inconsistently: “So, this idea that people think, ‘okay, we are done now, we had pride week, blah, blah, blah’, it’s like okay, that approach, which is the way in which some schools approach black history month. It’s like, ‘okay, we are done now’ and then go back to some
typical day. I think that speaks to it”. He added his thoughts on conducting homophobia training in schools, and some of the difficulties he has seen. He stated, “I mean we are teaching this stuff to our new teachers in our faculties of education. It’s not yet become imbedded as core teaching principles within public education everywhere. It’s kind of as an add on and I think what I have seen as an educator in the last twenty years is, this is a different model and we are working on a system that is really quite outdated”.

Expert Tim also felt this was a problem and he succinctly stated the way he felt equity issues need to be address. He said, “The whole system has to work in concert to make a difference”. He added, “And then…the other real complication you see in multi ethnic cities, such as Toronto, is that you have to deal with all of the equity issues in the same way at the same time.”

**Teacher Training Consistency**

Inconsistency was also noted as an issue in terms of preparing Pre-Service Students to teach about sexual diversities and to address issues of homophobic bullying. The majority of teacher and expert participants highlighted the importance of teachers having proper training and knowledge about LGBTQ issues and bullying. For example, T6 (lesbian female teacher, 40) stated, “So it would be great if they just gave more information to the teachers who are in-service, you know one of the most common forms of bullying in schools is on sexual orientation or gender identity, they should do something about that.”

Many participants focused on how important it was for teachers to have specific tools or language that would help them to feel more comfortable addressing homophobic bullying situations. Like female heterosexual teacher T1 stated, “I think maybe giving teachers lines that
they can use in the classroom, I’ve found that that really helps. Many teachers spoke about the
need to provide information and phrases in Teacher College. Even student MK, who was the
only student to speak about teacher training, stated, “I don’t know some sort of anti-oppressive
education in their teacher education would be a good thing to have.”

Expert Steven also indicated a necessary change for teacher training. He stated, “I also
think they need to hold teacher colleges accountable for how it is preparing our next generation
of teachers. So…how teacher candidates are being taught about this, so that when they come into
the classroom they are not necessarily starting from scratch.”

Expert Kenneth spoke about the changes he felt are necessary with regard to teacher
training:

I'd start by ensuring that all faculties of education have mandatory components to
teach equity courses that include aspects not just of social justice, equity but also
the understanding of harassment, discrimination and bullying and what that looks
like in an education context and in terms of legislation and responsibility. I mean
I can't believe that that is not a mandatory course, but it is not.

Gay male teacher T3 spoke to the issue of inconsistency around training teachers that are
already working within the school system. He stated:

One thing that ticks me off…I don’t know if you are going to talk to Stephen? He
gets out and does anti-homophobia workshops across the TDSB, wherever he is
invited…but often he goes back to the same schools all the time. Why? Why
aren’t you training the staff so they can do the workshops themselves? Other
things I’ve heard as well, is sometimes when those workshops are being done, the
teachers go and do something else which sends a message that it is not very
important. Teachers really need to participate in it.
In summary, if teachers are properly and consistently educated on homophobic bullying issues, then they will likely do a more consistent job of addressing it and impacting the school culture. Obviously, the goal of better informing teachers is to help them then communicate this information to students, implicitly and explicitly. It appears that the take-home message from this section is the importance of continuing education and increasing the discussions around these important issues. That is, for everyone, both teachers and students alike, to continue to gain knowledge of new areas and misunderstood areas, as well as communicating that this issue is important and will no longer be ignored, downplayed, or deemed unimportant.

**Theme 4:**

**Creating Change: Top Down or Bottom Up?**

One of the most prominent discussions that emerged around how to initiate the most productive change with homophobic bullying in schools was around the theme of either top-down or bottom-up approach. Meaning, did participants feel that change was most effective when it was initiated from a grassroots individual level first, or starting at a broader governmental level and filtering influence on the way down? This theme connects us to the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model (to be explained fully in the subsequent chapter), as some participants felt that change should start at the individual or microsystem level, whereas others felt that changed needed to be initiated at the macrosystem level. Interestingly, all experts (and some teachers) were consistent in the belief that change needed to occur simultaneously from both ends of the model for the change to be most impactful. The following section will outline important aspects from all three arguments:

- The Bottom-Up Approach
- The Top-Down Approach
• The Simultaneous Approach

The Bottom-Up Approach

A bottom-up approach, for the purposes of this manuscript, is considered to be any approach that focused first on those within the microsystem (e.g. the individual student, principles, peers, GSAs, families and teachers) to create change around homophobic bullying. For those who did focus on a bottom-up approach to change, they emphasized the importance to changing the culture of schools with GSAs and improved teacher training, as was previously discussed.

It should be noted that only a small minority of participants spoke solely of a bottom-up approach. The majority either focused on a top-down approach to change, or a simultaneous bidirectional approach. Thus, this section focuses on the strongest category that emerged: the influence of family. It should also be noted that this discussion includes the perspectives of those who focused on a bidirectional approach as well, and their arguments for including a bottom-up approach.

Family

I think the biggest issue was the ignorance in the school and a lot of it too is chosen ignorance. A lot of people…if they were to be told better, they wouldn’t care and that has a lot to do with their family life at home and how their parents…and a lot of their parents too were from close-minded families, very old-fashioned, so they’re going to raise their kids that way. (CC, Gay Male Youth)

It became clear during the interviews that despite school influences, family values and parental belief systems were incredibly impactful for students. To follow along with the quote from student CC above, it appeared that changes around homophobia in the school is considered...
difficult if students are hearing an opposite message at home. As LGBTQ youth KM stated, “I think they also need…a lot of it, I think, also has to do with parents. If your parents say something, you’re going to end up saying it.” LGBTQ youth MS also believed this to be true: “At home if you learn that homosexuality is wrong, you are obviously going to make fun of people who are homosexual.”

Family was also seen as influential in terms of supporting any changes that happen in the broader system of the microsystem or upwards. For example, Expert Kenneth (gay male, 41) highlighted how changes ‘from above’ cannot be made (or is much more difficult to make) unless they receive support from those at the individual level. He explains:

And then there is also the quite honest reality…and this is across the country…of administrators who want to do the right thing and are terrified of parents who induce resistance. And they have to deal with that…and if they feel they are not being supported by the structure above them, they will collapse pretty quickly. And you almost can't blame them, because they will take all the heat from a bunch of angry parents and depending on the social demographic of the community those parents might get lawyered up or they might start talking to local politicians or whatever it is, they might start talking to the newspaper. You know we've had all sorts of variations of that over the years and even to the point where the board gets scared off doing the right thing and doing what they are supposed to do.

Teacher T3 also reiterated this idea that individuals forming special-interest individual groups can be very powerful and influential at impacting the larger socio-political structure. He stated:

I don’t know if you are aware of how much money the Christian Right put into the “What is a Family? Campaign,” when Canada was talking about starting to
legalize same sex marriages here, and they did the same thing recently in California when Proposition 8 got overturned. The kind of money they will pump into Canada because they didn’t want it here…full page newspaper ads…this lovely white, blond, heterosexual couple with a baby, going ‘this is a family’. You think of the money and power behind people who don’t want to move forward.

The above quotes highlight how families, and individual community groups often developed by families, may negatively influence the other systems attempts at creating change. However, as expert Tim also highlights, grassroots movements are also incredibly important in creating positive influential changes:

If you want to change the system you need to organize communities to demand change. Because they will pass policies until they are blue in the face…it doesn’t make any difference. Unless, on a local basis, people are organized to hold them accountable and upset them, and fight, and make waves and make life so difficult if they don’t do it, that they end up doing it.

In short, only a minority of participants felt like change needed to occur solely from a bottom-up approach. Reasons for why this may be will be discussed further in the Discussion section. Of these participants, and those who believed a simultaneous approach is needed, spoke mostly to the influence of family. They also noted the importance of individuals working to influence the culture of schools and beyond through improved awareness, teacher training and visible support for LGBTQ youth through associations such as GSAs. However, it seems that the teachers, parents, peers and students can only do so much.

It just can’t come from grass roots; it has got to kind of come from above. (T3, Gay Male Teacher)
The Top-Down Approach

A much larger majority of participants spoke to the importance of enacting a Top-Down approach to creating change around homophobic bullying. It became apparent, though the analysis process, that within discussions of the top-down approach, perspectives differed on what was defined as the ‘top’; Some referred to the School Administration as the top while others spoke about the federal government as the top. Thus, the broader theme of the Top-Down Approach is supported by the following two sub-themes:

1. “It Starts with the Government” - Government Influences
2. “Translating Policy Into Practice” - Administration Influences

Government Influence: “It starts with the government”

The in vivo code (a code that, in grounded theory, is a direct quotation from a participant) that exemplifies this sub-theme originates from a quote by gay male student EP, who implied that the government stood as the ultimate authority figure around perspectives on such issues. He stated:

I think it starts with the government though. Until they start recognizing gay rights… I think it was in like 36 states, they have no anti-hate laws, which include sexual orientation or something. So, it seems like it starts with acceptance from the government and authority and kids need to learn from authority figures that being gay is okay.

As was stated earlier in this manuscript, many participants spoke to the limits that teachers have on time and energy, which impacts their ability to address homophobic bullying issues. LGBTQ expert Tim connected this to government decisions and priorities. He stated:
Oh yeah, you know it all kind of fits into the liberal restructuring of education where teachers are being asked to do more for less money and their human resources...I mean when I worked in the equity department for the Toronto Board for the first fifteen years or so, more than that, almost twenty, we had more people and more resources in our equity department than the amalgamated Toronto Board, which is five times bigger, has today.

He went on to explain how government decisions inevitably have a direct impact on equity work done in the classroom:

So then the provincial government writes up this new curriculum saying ‘the schools have to have policy, and the schools have to do this and the schools have to do that’ and there is no money in it. So it just adds to people saying ‘what the hell? We can’t do this.’ And so they don’t do it and they often take it out on the kids. There’s all these battles right, we don’t have a program for Jimmy, so for homophobic remarks, write him up, suspend him, get rid of him.

Teacher T6 also spoke to the inconsistencies that often occur between laws and school implementation. However, she spoke to her experiences working in Catholic schools and how she believed that government laws and policies were not upheld due to personal or religious beliefs. She stated:

The Catholic institution has to recognize the potency of the laws of the land, which they haven’t been doing historically. In Canada, what needs to start happening here, is the Catholic schools have to start recognizing, ‘no, you are not your own little island, and you receive public funding, so if you are going to receive public funding you should be adherent to public laws’. You can’t just have this semi-permeable sometimes we appreciate the laws and sometimes we don’t.
Within the Top-Down Theme, there was less emphasis on government influence than on administrative issues, as we will see in the following section. It is likely that most believed that Canadian laws and policies are inclusive of LGBTQ individual rights and freedoms, or at the very least are moving in that direction. However, it appears that enacting these laws and policies is often another story.

**Administration and Board Issues: “Translating policy into practice”**

This section will outline the perspectives shared around the school administration and the TDSB, and their roles in creating change with homophobic bullying issues. Some participants focused on the school administration, such as Principles, while others focused on the TDSB. Despite this difference, the most prominently held idea was that there is a lag between equity legislation and policies and school staff’s ability to uphold them.

The idea that equity policies were often not leading to behavioural changes in teachers was shared by many, including gay male teacher T3, who stated, “I always think about why we don’t as educators keep up with where our social policy is?” Gay male teacher, T5, also shared this idea when he stated, “We have rights and we have laws and policies and the board, but the schools usually lag in this” He proceeded to explain who he thinks hold this responsibility. He said, “So it really come down to education and our administration showing the community that everyone is equal and everyone has a right to education.”

Often the focus of who was to ensure that schools were upholding legislation and policy landed on the Principal, which is evident in the following two poignant quotes:

So the schools, well you are talking about what can they be doing…well they need to have better leadership. Well how can you have better leadership, how can you ensure this leadership, I mean the principal is the one who sets the tone for
the school, so if the principal realizes the potential, and the human rights angle, with having a gay/straight alliance than he or she should support that and educate his or her staff about the need. Because it has been proven that having a gay/straight alliance in a school has helped those who don’t identify as heterosexual feel safer in a school. (T6, Lesbian Female Teacher)

The fact that we have an equity policy, I think that should be talked about in school’s…it is a useless policy if it is sitting on a Principle’s shelf, when teachers don’t even know we have an equity policy. I think that every teacher on the board should get a copy of the policy and every time it is updated they should get an updated copy of the policy. (T3, Gay Male Teacher)

Of the many participants who spoke to the disparity between what equity policies say and what teachers and school staff are doing, many provided their reasons for why they believe this problem exists. For example, lesbian Teacher, T4 (lesbian female, 41), spoke about her belief that the administration is afraid. She stated:

A big part of this is the administration. I think it is really important that admin takes this on, and I think admin more than teachers want to avoid it. It should be something that is mandatory top down, teachers need to be inclusive, and not just talking the talk, but asking who’s bringing in TEACH, whose doing this…real courageous leadership needs to happen in our schools. Unfortunately the admin is afraid of the losing their jobs because they are answering to the superintendents. I wish the school system wasn’t such a business, not such a corporate structure. Everybody’s afraid of losing their jobs, but I could go on and on.

T3 (gay male teacher, 42) also spoke to administrations fear. He said, “I think administrators are afraid to introduce what they deem controversial issues in the classroom.” He added that lack of knowledge or understanding is also part of the issue. He shared “All the calls we will get about kids coming out and they think they should come to the [Alternative School]
program, and I’m like why? Just because they are coming out, you think they have a problem. It really shocks me.” He added, “Until it is system wide, and I’m talking Ontario as well as Toronto District School Board, there is not going to be the change that we need to see happen.”

In short, the top-down approach was thought to include many leaders from various social systems, the administration, the TDSB, and the government, in order to work together to wholly impact change. I believe the following quote, from LGBTQ bullying expert, Kenneth, aptly articulates a summary of what this section is all about:

Well, we have great policies, and even pretty great legislation in Ontario. Recent amendments…big Education Act…have really I think, made Ontario's Education Act pretty outstanding in North America, embedding human rights grounds in the education act is a total shift in consciousness as an educator for most folks. And now principles are also responsible for investigating all incidences reported to them in the schools regardless of what it is, to see if it is related to bias, prejudice or hate and if it is they step it up so it is an automatic suspension, possible expulsion. So there is far more emphasis being placed on student's human rights than ever before. And real recognition that bullying comes in all various forms. However, that said, there is a real lack of accountability and compliance with many of those pieces. So although we have great education legislation and we have got really good policies the giant systems are not very good at holding themselves accountable for following through on these things. (Kenneth, LGBTQ Bullying Expert)

**The Simultaneous Approach**

When speaking about how to best enact change around homophobic bullying, most participants felt that an approach that worked from the bottom-up, and engaged individuals and communities, and from the top-down was the most effective way to create change. As stated by bullying expert, Steven, “I mean I think it kind of has to go top down and bottom up right?”
LGBTQ expert Tim stated that efforts from either end individually (not working in unison) often are not very impactful and the two ends have to work together. He states:

Yeah, we’ve already talked about that…the two things have to work together. Lots of people describe it as community organizing demonstrations and documents. Nobody takes any account of your fine well-crafted documents because there is no political pressure to do so. But political pressure that just is an occasional demonstration to shout your anger in the streets, it doesn’t actually produce any kind of blueprint for how the institution changes needs to be done. And that can only be done from the inside where it will blow over and nobody pays any attention, so the two things have to go together.

LGBTQ bullying expert Steven (gay male, 47) spoke in greater detail to the above-noted issue about how it is challenging to enact what is stated in the equity policies. He stated:

So it made me think about the fact that policies yes…we need the policies but they’re not the…they’re the beginning step. But actually communicating to students exactly what their rights and responsibilities are. Let them know that there actually are these things. I think we, perhaps some school boards assume, or often times it comes out, ‘oh of course we have this policy’, and kids are like ‘Really? Since when?’

He continued on and provided an example of how to communicate simply to students about equity policies. He stated, “You say ‘no you can’t smoke on school property. Oh and by the way we actually have a policy that promotes you know, a safe and inclusive learning environment for LGBT students’. Right? Like I think the mechanisms are there, so they need to perhaps be made better use of.”

In summary, it appears that participants felt that change could be enacted in many different places that would likely result in positive change. Thus, there is ample room for change
still. However, the most effective route for implementing change, understandably, appears to be from creating a cohesive system that will enact change simultaneously from the bottom-up and the top-down. The following quote from Kenneth is an excellent example of how the system could work in concert.

And then the other piece that I would use, because we have this antiquated system that focuses everything on academic success, I would hijack that because if we could create a piece of curriculum that went from K-12 that focused on just the basic understanding of healthy human relationships, self-esteem and self-identity and we built that in on every grade level as a core course. Then all of a sudden, every teacher who went through teacher's college would have some level of training on that because it is a core subject course. And all of a sudden the Ministry would have to be collecting stats and publishing stats on that because it's a core course. And all of a sudden all of our teachers would be able to access academic professional development funds to learn more about how to properly teach that core course. So you use the problems that exist in the system to your advantage by saying this is something that is so important to have to ensure every student is educated on it...they don't get just a workshop that might happen or might not happen depending on an incident that has happened at the school.

(Kenneth, LGBTQ Bulling Expert)

**The Why of Homophobic Bullying**

As previously noted, the addition of the bullying expert and LGBTQ youth advocate interviews (n = 4) illuminated the understanding around why they believe homophobic bullying is so often a problem in high schools. During the initial teacher (n = 6) and LGBTQ youth (n = 8) interviews, the researcher did not ask the participants why they believed homophobic bullying was a common issue in schools, but the researcher recognized that, over the course of these interviews, some participants offered their ideas about this topic. The category Theories of
Bullying emerged but the researcher recognized the findings here were ‘thin’. Thus, this idea was considered a ‘provisional category’, and was specifically addressed in the expert/advocate interviews.

The findings indicated that all expert participants considered the issue of power, more specifically social power, central to why homophobic bullying occurs. For example, when bullying expert Faye was asked why she thinks homophobic bullying occurs in schools, she responded, “So bullying… if you really just think about it… it’s about power differential right? Somebody who is marginalized, a group that’s marginalized is by definition more vulnerable”. She went on to explain the following:

I think there is some research that shows if you are the most popular person, like at the top of the rung, you bully last, but if you are up there but not as high, you bully more, so partly one theory would say that it is sort of a vying for status. But I think the issue of having power and where people fit, I mean I can’t say I understand that completely, but I do think it is something that fits across all ages.

Expert Kenneth also agreed, stating, “Well, essentially the root of all bullying is that power piece” and he elaborated further in the following statement when he discussed how sexual and gender minority individual are often, essentially, allocated to a position of lesser power:

So when you are talking about any equity issue, but particularly around sexuality and gender, because I think there is such an imbedded hetero-normative, cis normative, privilege power dynamic at play, there are lots of communities who do not want to see that power switch ever and will really work hard, put money behind it, put political power behind it and market with really outlandish campaigns against initiatives that school boards are trying to do.

Expert Tim also spoke to the impact of power differentials in society when he stated, “Well because LGBT individuals are depreciated in society in general, seen as less than or the other, so therefore marked as different, and when you live in a system that then gives you a green light to
do anything you want with people who are different, we are then marked, we are convenient punching bags”.

As the previous quote from Tim already alludes to, the experts all also discussed homophobic bullying in the context of marginalization of those who do not fit the norm, in specific reference to LGBTQ youth who most-often grow up in environments where heteronormativity runs rampant. Expert Kenneth aptly delineated this idea, when he shared the following statement:

We are all taught in the earliest grades, and in society in general, to reinforce everywhere we look really, in terms of what the rules are, and how you are supposed to behave, and how you are supposed to dress, and who you are supposed to date, and if you don't do those things then somehow you are different and worthy of being pointed at and all of a sudden have a lot less power in society then a whole bunch of other folks.

Stephen also spoke to how not-abiding by the expected social norm also relates to a loss of social status or increased marginalization. He explained, “So, I think both to specifically target someone who could be out, but it’s also again the underlying gender roles, when you break those roles or you violate those roles, then that invites in these ideas about well that means someone is gay and if they are gay they are wrong so therefore I am entitled to say something or do something that, quote, puts them in their place”.

The interesting piece here is that despite all expert/advocate participants agreeing that power differentials are at the root of homophobic bullying, and that LGBTQ individuals still continue to be marginalized and striped of their power, greater variability occurred when the topic was assessed in the specific context of high schools. More specifically, if the need for power, and the need to marginalize others who do not fit the social norms is a large part of explaining homophobic bullying, why is this issue so common in high in schools? Faye answered this question by stating that she believed the need is actually higher in elementary
school, and that as students get older the way to gain power lends more toward dating aggression and cyber-bullying. However, she theorized that because teachers often do not address these issues in elementary school it tends to go uncontested. She stated, “Then by the time they are older and they know what it means, that becomes more intentional. But even when they are young they don’t know what sex is, they don’t know what homophobic, but they know it [being referred to as gay] is bad”. Thus, taking us back to the emphasis of addressing these issues prior to high school.

In summary, the social degradation or marginalization of LGBTQ individuals appears to serve a purpose of allocating power for those who more aptly fit the social norms, or are in need of attaining power, according to expert/advocate participants. However, questions still remain around why homophobic bullying is often such a prevalent issue in schools, both elementary and high school alike, and further research around the development of school norms and the relationship to power will likely be of great benefit. Having said this, there are certainly large variations between schools, in regard to the success of creating social norms based more on equity and diversity, as was evident previously in the discussion around types of schools.
CHAPTER 5
SYNTHESIS CHAPTER

Introduction

It is also important to be clear of the who of homophobic bullying. Meaning, who are the key players that have the power to influence homophobic bullying? Throughout the grounded theory analysis, it became clear that these potential influences ranged from direct individual influences, all the way up to larger socio-political influences. It was soon discovered that these potential change agents were best represented in a model that depicts them from micro to macro levels of influence. More specifically, this discovery came about as the primary researcher had completed initial coding around the question of how participants felt change should occur. Following this, the researcher moved into more focused coding, as noted in the Methods section. As previously noted, the researcher was sketching out a concept map in order to help visualize and reflect upon the various points of discussion that were shared by participants. It was during this process that the researcher began to recognize the micro to macro variances in the codes, the similarities with Bronfenbrenner’s model, and the idea of utilizing the model to frame these results. This idea was processed with the primary researcher’s supervisor, and determined to be an adequate fit. The initial part of this chapter revolves around presenting and explaining this micro to macro model of homophobic bullying influences, with a preliminary section outlining the pre-existing theoretical model that emerged as a helpful guide, during data analysis: Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (1977; 1989; 1999).
The Connection:
Homophobic Bullying and the Bioecological Systems Theory

Participants spoke at great lengths about the factors they felt contributed to increasing or decreasing homophobic bullying in schools. When analyzing these factors, the researcher recognized that all participants discussed various contextual levels of influence on homophobic bullying, from micro level factors (e.g., individual or teacher influences) and macro level factors (e.g., school neighbourhood or provincial and federal government influences) that were believed to impact the severity and frequency of homophobic bullying. As these influences were explored, it became clear that they mirrored the micro to macro levels outlined in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1977; 1989; 1999). Therefore, Bronfenbrenner’s model was used as a guide for organizing the material presented and for understanding the relationship between the differing systems.

It should be noted that this theoretical model is not presented in an earlier section, simply because presenting it here is an accurate reflection of the grounded theory process. More specifically, the researcher determined that presenting the theory earlier in this manuscript risked giving the impression that the theory was in the researcher’s mind prior to data analysis, which was not the case. As noted above, when the researcher was diagramming concepts related to the recommendations for change within homophobic bullying, she recognized that there were issues that were very unique to the high school environment, and fit within the ‘microsphere’ concept, and broader issues that were more ‘macro’ in nature. Initially this was evident simply in the structure and organization of concentric circles focusing on the micro and macro levels being discussed. However, numerous other similarities became apparent, such as the bi-directional influence as well as the concept of proximal processes. It was at this point that she felt confident
in the idea that the data presented in the current study, was mirroring important aspects of Bronfenbrenner’s model and contacted her supervisor to discuss the applicability within this paper. It was at this point that the researcher also conducted a review of Bronfenbrenner’s model to ensure the fit. Information gleaned from specific readings led the researcher back to the data, to ensure adequacy and fit with what participants were saying. Once the model was drawn up, the researcher then returned to previously conducted literature to assess whether Bronfenbrenner’s model had been applied to concepts related to homophobic bullying.

One might think it is strange to gain insight from a theory that was originally based on children’s development to explain a phenomenon like homophobic bullying. When, in fact, the development of, and the influences on, the individuals who contribute to the phenomenon of homophobic bullying, is a key element worth examining. Do these factors influence individuals to develop in such a way that homophobic bullying is becoming more frequent? Or are changes being made that will influence the individual to move proactively towards reducing homophobic bullying? Because Bronfenbrenner’s model (1977; 1989) was chosen as a tool to aid in the presentation and discussion of the influences of homophobic bullying, a brief overview is presented here.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory

In his 1977 article entitled, "Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development", Urie Bronfenbrenner proposed a broader approach to human development research, than what existed at the time, which focused not only on the developing person but also on the environment in which the person exists. The environment, he proposed, included not only the immediate setting, but also the larger social context, ‘both formal and informal’. Since his original publication in 1977 on this model, Bronfenbrenner continued to revise and rename the model
based on additional information, exploration and reflection (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). The model has held many titles, including the Socio-Ecological Model and the Ecological Systems Theory. In 1989, Bronfenbrenner apparently renamed his theory the Bioecological Systems Theory, after engaging in “self-criticism for discounting the role the person plays in his or her own development and for focusing too much on context” (Tudge et al., 2009). This change includes the importance of the individual’s biology as an equally important variable on development, thus the addition of “bio” in the title (Harkonen, 2007). The Bioecological Systems Theory outlined four types of 'nested systems' that interplay to influence development of an individual or a phenomenon (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Harkonen, 2007; Tudge et al., 2009). The four primary systems of the theory are: the microsystem (such as the classroom), the mesosystem (such as the interaction of two microsystems), the exosystem (such as the parental workplace), and the macrosystem (the "larger socio-cultural context"). In the later years, he added a fifth system called the chronosystem, which is the progression or growth of the four systems over time (Harkonen, 2007). The following section outlines each of the systems, in further detail.

The Microsystem

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described a microsystem as "the complex of relations between the developing person and the environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g., home, school, workplace, etc.)" (p. 514). The settings were described as places with certain features that allowed the individual to engage in activities and often take on particular roles (e.g., son, parent, or employee) for particular periods of time. Paquette and Ryan (2001) highlighted that the relations between the individual and the environment in the microsystem happen in two directions: from the individual to the environment, and from the environment to the individual. Meaning, the environment impacts and influences the person but the person, being an active
agent himself or herself, can also impact the environment. This was referred to as bi-directional influence (Harkonen, 2007).

**The Mesosystem**

A mesosystem "comprises the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). More specifically, it is the interaction among those aspects of the microsystem outside of the individual. Examples of this for youth may include interactions between family, school and peer groups. Bronfenbrenner (1977) highlighted that this may also include church, camp or the workplace for some. Succinctly stated, “a mesosystem is a system of microsystems" (p. 515). Harkonen (2007) spoke of the importance of the connections within the mesosystem to identify if certain factors of socialization have merging or opposing directions. In other words, “do the different parts of the microsystem support each other or does the developing person perceive them as clashing pressures” (p. 11).

**The Exosystem**

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described the exosystem as

an extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there. (p. 515)

Examples of these social structures include the major institutions of society, such as ones neighbourhood, government agencies and communication and transportation facilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).
The Macrosystem

The macrosystem "refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social education, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exo-systems are the concrete manifestations" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Bronfenbrenner saw the macrosystem as “carriers of information and ideology” that provide and communicate meaning and goals to the community’s agencies and networks. As Bronfenbrenner (1977) highlighted, "what place or priority children and those responsible for their care have in such macrosystems is of special importance in determining how a child and his or her caretakers are treated and interact with each other in different types of settings" (p. 515). As Harkonen (2007) states, “the macrosystem can be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context” (p. 12).

The Chronosystem

The chronosystem was an additional system in the model that came about in later years. It was described as “the evolution, development or stream of development of the external systems in time” (Harkonen, 2007, p. 13). This addition of time, as an important element to consider within the model, could either cover a short period or a long period. Figure 1 is an example model of Bronfenbrenner’s theory.
Figure 2. Model of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory.

Source: Based on Bronfenbrenner (1989) from https://ici.umn.edu/products../prb/211/default.html
In short, this section provided a brief overview of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (1977; 1989) in order to provide the reader with a base of knowledge for the subsequent sections of this chapter. These sections revolve around a model that emerged from data analysis in the current study. Not only does Bronfenbrenner’s model serve as a suitable model to aid in the organization of all the influential elements participants spoke of, but it also provides a foundation for understanding the complexities of the dynamics between them. Homophobic bullying is a multifactorial issue that deserves a multifactorial solution, and the model presented in the following pages aims to delineate all the factors influencing this phenomenon.

**The Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model:**

**Micro to Macro Influences**

The subsequent section will explain the model that emerged from the current study that illustrates the micro to macro level of influences of homophobic bullying: The Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model (as introduced by the current author). It is thought that this model fits exceptionally well within the goals of the constructivist grounded theory model, as it presents “a picture that draws from, reassembles, and renders subjects’ lives” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 270). All aspects included in this model were aspects that were discussed by participants as relevant to their experiences of homophobic bullying.

The explanation of this model starts at the center and works to the model’s outermost shell. Thus, the subsequent section outlines the inner part, the student, and the related issues that were thought to impact homophobic bullying first. Subsequent sections will briefly review the factors that comprise the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, before introducing the additional themes that emerged around creating change within homophobic
bullying. These four themes on the *how* of making change within homophobic bullying also touch on the various systems within the model being proposed (see Figure 2).
Figure 3. The Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model.
Individual Influences

At the heart of the model, is the student. This ‘student’ can embody the bullied, the bully, or even the bystander - all of whom homophobic bullying can impact and who also can impact homophobic bullying. As Bronfenbrenner (1989) believed, the individual has qualities (and biology) that are influenced by the environment as well as being able to influence the external environment. Aspects of the individual student that participants discussed as relevant variables to homophobic bullying were: age, gender, and whether or not LGBTQ students were ‘out’. Each of these variables is discussed in the following section.

Age of Students

The age of students was repeatedly addressed as an influential aspect on homophobic bullying. Most frequently, this was in the capacity of how creating change was thought to be more difficult with older students, and that in order for change to be most impactful, it should be implemented at the elementary school level.

The specific sentiment shared by many was that high school was “too late” to address issues around homophobic bullying. Participants felt that these ideas and behaviours were learned at very early ages and thus, should be addressed early. As T1 stated, “A lot of their attitudes seem to be pretty fixed by the time they get to high school.” LGBTQ youth LB reiterated this point when she said, “I think homophobic bullying starts way younger than grade five in a lot of ways” and she added, “but in high school it is too late…it is important to try and educate high school students, but they are pretty independent by that point”. LGBTQ youth MK also used similar language when discussing this issue. She said “I think also by the time people have gotten to high school it is too late. I mean you can teach them stuff, but it is really engrained in their ways.”
Because of this, many participants felt that homophobic bullying issues needed to be addressed earlier than high school, in order to create effective change. For example, teacher JW spoke about the influence on homophobic bullying on the younger grades when he stated, “Same thing for elementary, I’ve often heard students say whatever on the playground or in the classroom, and not even know what the word [gay] means, but they know that it is bad so they are going to use it and throw it at somebody.” T4 also stated, “I do think the formative years are elementary school, I think we have to do a lot of more of this in elementary”.

**Gender of Students**

Previously, I discussed the impact and importance of gender norms in relation to homophobic bullying. This section speaks more specifically to the various ways participants felt gender influences homophobic bullying for individual students.

Throughout the coding process, it became more and more apparent that the gender of students appeared to play a role in participants’ ideas of what influences bullying. The overarching idea that emerged here was that boys were more often thought to influence and be impacted by homophobic bullying than girls. This is certainly not to say that there weren’t discussions about girls participating in, or falling victim to, homophobic bullying, but the majority of participants highlighted particularly heavy influences related to boys. Having said this, there were no specific questions in the current interview asking about gossiping as a form of bullying, which may have changed this emphasis on homophobic bullying as it relates to boys.

Many believed that boys were more often the targets of homophobic bullying. As MK (bisexual female youth, 19) articulated, “I’m thinking about the Triangle Program where the guys far outnumber the girls, and I think that is a good indication.” Student, SJ (lesbian female youth, 21), also believed males were the target more often. She stated, “I think there was a lot of
making fun, generally more directed at men. Ya, just a lot of making fun of gay people in the media…or just people who are calling any and everything gay.” When the interviewer clarified about whether this meant that she believed men get targeted more, she stated, “I think so. I read somewhere…and this sort of resonated…but society tends to idolize masculine traits over feminine traits, that a man being feminine is more deviant in a sense.”

Following along with the idea that ‘effeminate’ mannerisms or certain characteristics in men increased the likelihood that they will be targeted, MK (Bisexual female youth, 19) stated, “I think that goes back to way earlier on because it is way more okay for a girl to be a tomboy than a boy to be a sissy.” LB (bisexual female youth, 18), also said, “it is not good to stereotype gay or lesbian people, but if you are more feminine when you are younger, other males are more apt to call you out on it and call you ‘queer’ if you are feminine.”

Some participants felt as though males are more likely to bully in homophobic ways and would more often target other boys. For example, Gay youth EP stated, “It’s almost as if…you know…male students maybe feel the need to define themselves a little bit more, their masculine traits need to be very apparent, especially in high school”. However, as noted above, less emphasis on gossiping in the interviews may have contributed to this outcome, and it appears that relational bullying often is minimized. For example, when asked about her bullying experiences, LB stated, “I don’t remember being bullied about it, but I remember being talked about”. When it was highlighted to her that this could be a form of bullying, she recalled the multiple times she learned people were talking about her sexuality.

Expert Kenneth also spoke about how boys often take on the responsibility of policing others, in terms of their gender expression:
And even in those earlier grades, the boys all of sudden feel this sense of entitlement and power just for the fact of being boys and that is not something that anybody is actively teaching them, again it is picked up from the society they are living in and that feeds in to that negative behaviour that we see in later grade levels when boys feel they need to gender police, or there is that opportunity to point out someone who is glaringly different.

Out Versus Closeted Students

This category was discussed in the previous sub-theme of Finding Safety in the Closet in the previous chapter. Therefore, an in-depth review of this information will not be reiterated here, in terms of all of the so-called benefits of staying in the closet. However, the relevance of ‘outness’ to influences of homophobic bullying is related to the idea shared in many of the interviews that the visibility of ‘out’ students (or lack thereof) likely influences homophobic bullying. In simplistic terms, it was believed if more people were out, this could positively impact homophobic bullying. As CC (gay make youth, 21) stated, “I think that the world is in for a shock because if everyone that was gay or transgendered or anything other than hetero came out, people would realize “oh my gosh okay all these people are in the closet, they’re scared to come out…there’s so much more.” He added “And that’s why I would hope for more people to come out, because then there are more people to deal with it.”

Despite understanding why LGBTQ youth may not feel safe to come out at school, participants felt that the lack of visibility could further contribute to hetero-normative attitudes, which appeared to be very inter-woven with homophobic bullying. KM (lesbian female youth, 17) stated, “they need enough people that are out, and they need enough people who are strong enough with being out.” She continued by highlighting the fact that in schools where homophobic bullying is rampant, it is often assumed that very few are gay: “One of my friends
goes to a high school where there’s only two people who are out, but they’re only out as bisexual…even though I think the statistic is that 1 in every 10 people are homosexual or identify as homosexual. So you know there’s more than two people who are gay.”

Expert Steven (gay male, 47) also spoke to this point, by stating:

At some schools there are out teachers and that makes the world of difference. Cause then suddenly it’s like ‘ya, Mr. So and So or Mrs. So and So’, it’s just…there’s less homophobia in schools, and if teachers can be out then kids can be out, and if it’s a school where teachers can’t be out then I don’t expect to see a lot of students being out.

In conclusion, age, gender, and ‘outness’ were thought to be important individual factors around increasing or decreasing homophobic bullying. These factors are connected to the individual who stands directly in the middle of the microsystem. The following section briefly explains the additional influences and change agents around homophobic bullying by starting with an overview of the inner circle of the diagram, the Microsystem. These factors are reviewed only briefly here because they will also be addressed in further detail in the following four themes.

**The Microsystem**

The microsystem, as outlined by participants, includes teachers, additional school staff, such as principles and school counsellors, peers, GSAs, and families. Almost all participants talked about both positive and negative influences of each of these factors on homophobic bullying, thus, as previously noted, the model includes variables that have the power to both increase and decrease homophobic bullying. Like Bronfenbrenner’s model (1977; 1989), the model also includes proximal processes, in that the different variables included in the
microsystem also influence each other. The mesosystem then, focuses on how each of these variables within the microsystem impact each other and to which degree, will depend on the specific person and the specific environment.

The Exosystem

Broader areas that were discussed by participants that influenced homophobic bullying, that fit within the exosystem were the neighbourhood of that individual, the local government and the particular school board, which in turn involved the individual school equity policies and guidelines. Participants had much to say about these issues as well, but as noted above, they are best discussed in the context of the following four themes. In these sections, I will outline where the specific variables of the Exosystem come into play.

The Macrosystem

Ideology is the ideas we have about LGB folks and institutions…can be laws or policies. I think we often still get stuck at the individual level without thinking…I mean we could tell kids it is completely against the law to use “gay” as a put down and we could maybe make everybody stop saying it…but then what about the ideas that inform it or the institutional practices that condone it? LGBTQ Bullying Expert Steven

Many participants spoke about the broader ‘ideology’ that they believe influenced the degree of homophobic bullying. Ideology relates to the values and norms of the particular environment, which is reflected in the macrosystem, according to Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1989). The macrosystem for the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model includes the media (tool for communicating values and norms), the gender expectations communicated, the cultural
influences and associated social norms and the majority beliefs of the broader community. Again, these will be noted within the discussion below of the four final themes.

Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996)

As previously stated, these proximal processes are an important inclusion in the theoretical model. Bullying is viewed a systemic problem that occurs repeatedly over time and this exposure to the individual over time, heavily influences those individuals who experience it.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

This final chapter aimed to provide the reader with a comprehensive synopsis of the current research study, while also outlining its position and unique contributions within the realm of existing empirical works in this area. First, the purpose of the study is revisited, along with a brief review of the study’s findings. Following this is a section that outlined how each of the emergent themes and the model fit within the context of previously conducted research. Recommendations are then made that focus not only on the school system, but also include policy recommendations for government and school boards, and suggestions for future research. Finally, the researcher outlined the study limitations, the issues that arose during the research, and the contributions of the current study.

Recapitulation of Purpose and Findings

This study utilized qualitative methods, modified grounded theory (Bulawa, 2014) and thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to examine the phenomenon of high school homophobic bullying. More specifically, the researcher explored the perspectives of urban LGBTQ youth (n = 8), urban high school teachers (n = 6), and LGBTQ youth advocates and bullying experts from Toronto, Ontario (n = 4) on the issues and influences related to homophobic bullying. Research has highlighted the difficult plight of LGBTQ youth in high school (Almeida et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). This study was conducted with the intention of contributing further to this area by giving voice to those who work and learn on the frontlines of high school homophobic bullying and to
gain a rich, in-depth understanding of their first-hand perspectives and glean insight from their knowledge, experience, and expertise.

This study utilized these differing participant groups for triangulation purposes (Breitmayer et al., 1993), in order to understand where their ideas and opinions differ and converge. As previously discussed, triangulation was used for confirmatory purposes, with the idea of viewing key theoretical constructs that emerged from the data from three different sources (Breitmayer et al., 1993). The experts also provided feedback on the accuracy and adequacy of emerging themes from the teacher and LGBTQ youth interviews, further echoing these findings, while also providing increased contextual and conceptual understanding of these themes. As Breitmayer has stated, “The goal of triangulation in any study is to increase confidence in the trustworthiness of the researcher’s data and its interpretation” (Breitmayer et al., 1993, p. 242), and the researcher’s goal was to establish exactly that. There is limited research, especially research conducted in Canada, which utilizes triangulation from multiple perspectives to examine homophobic bullying, and this research aimed to fill that gap, by triangulating teacher, LGBTQ youth, and expert perspectives.

The findings included four initial emergent themes around understanding the nature of homophobic bullying (the What of homophobic bullying): (1) Words as Weapons, (2) Understanding “That’s so Gay”: Harmful Bullying or Innocuous Slang? (3) Exclusion as a Weapon, and (4) It’s Not Getting Better. Following these four initial themes, four subsequent themes emerged from participant discussions on creating change with homophobic bullying (the How of homophobic bullying): (1) Understanding Action: Explicit andImplicit Messaging, (2) Understanding School Culture, (3) Suggestions for Change, and (4) Top-Down or Bottom-Up? Finally, the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model (Dowling, 2016) was developed to capture
the micro- to macro-levels of factors influencing this complex phenomenon, as shared by the participants, and to provide a cohesive structure to consider when making comprehensive change in this complex system.

This research highlights that LGBTQ students continue to experience negative school environments that are wrought with both implicit and explicit messages that support homophobia, heteronormativity, and traditional gender expectations. Verbal communication, including verbal assaults and uncontested homophobic epithets, appears to be the primary tool used to disseminate these values, and they appear to remain stable through the use of students and teacher fear: Fear of abuse, harassment, and social isolation. Minimization or denial of the importance of these issues also acts as deterrent for change. Having said all this, the good news is that the current LGBTQ youth found ways to cope with the lack of acceptance of diverse sexual orientation in so many high schools, and all participants had ample suggestion on how to create change. From these suggestions a model was introduced in order to outline and encourage multilevel, systemic areas for change.

**Relationship with Previous Research**

This section starts with an overview of the difficulties in defining homophobic bullying, and then reviewing the relationship to previous research of the initial four themes describing homophobic bullying. This is followed by a review of the *Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model* (Dowling, 2016) and its compatibility with existing research. Finally, the section ends with a discussion of the subsequent four themes related to the change processes of homophobic bullying in relation to existing literature.
**Defining Homophobic Bullying**

It became apparent during the analysis process that participants struggled to clearly define homophobic bullying. As previously stated, participants in the current study often provided initial definitions revolving around discrimination or teasing directed at LGBTQ students, and then focused either on verbal bullying and gender norms. Participants exhibited uncertainty around certain issues, such as whether the phrase ‘that’s so gay’ should be considered within the definition of homophobic bullying. It seems reasonable to assume that such inconsistencies in understanding what defines homophobic bullying likely contributes to more uncertainty and confusion for school staff and students who experience or witness homophobic bullying.

From a constructivist grounded theory approach, acquiring definitions from participants, aids in the understanding of how they construct meaning around the phenomenon being studied (Charmaz, 2006). However, in the context of the current study, this proved to be a difficult task as a majority of the participants struggled to translate their understanding of homophobic bullying into a comprehensive definition, and likely the variations of definitions relate to the varied perspectives and experiences of the participants. According to Wittgenstein, a twentieth century philosopher who focused much of his work on the limits of language (Rayner, 2014), “In most cases, meaning is use” (p. 2). Meaning, that in order to understand language, we have to understand the context, and the social discourse, in which it is said. As further explained by Rayner (2014), “why waste time arguing over issues that will never be resolved when the whole thing could be deflated with a simple question: ‘Are we even talking about the same thing’?”. In addition, Robinson (1963) argued that definitions are often indicative of multiple realities, when he asserted, “The search for definitions in Plato’s dialogues is represented as a search for a
certain kind of true statement, and when proposed definitions are rejected it is usually because they are held to be false statements. But today it is often maintained that a definition cannot be either true or false, because it is not a statement but rather a command, not a proposition but a proposal” (p.1).

These ideas are especially relevant to the current research, as participants attempted to provide their best ‘proposals’ for a definition of homophobic bullying, but they still struggled to clearly identify the concepts and boundaries of homophobic bullying. Perhaps this relates to the multiple realities, perspectives, and diverse experiences around homophobic bullying. Perhaps they all experience or perceive homophobic bullying in differing ways. Having said this, perhaps the pursuit of a clear and concise definition within a study that utilized participants with such diverse backgrounds and lived experiences was not necessarily realistic, and a more suitable focus is attempting to gain an understanding of what homophobic bullying means to them experientially and conceptually.

One additional thought around the inherent difficulty to define homophobic bullying, is the consistent blurring of discrimination and bullying related to sexual orientation and gender expression. According to a study by Daley and colleagues (2007), “the likelihood of LGBT youth being bullied was associated with the extent to which youth stepped out of prescribed gender norms” (p. 24). These researchers carried on to explore the differences between what they called sexist homophobia and homophobic sexism. They stated that, “sexist homophobia differs from homophobic sexism in that the person who bullies employs sexist slurs rather than homophobic slurs to demean queer youth and as a weapon against (perceived) queer sexualities. Having said all this, it is suggested that the term ‘heterosexist bullying’ be considered as a
cohesive term to capture a wider scope of oppressive bullying directed at youth with diverse sexual orientations and youth with diverse gender expressions.

**Words as Weapons**

Through the grounded theory analysis of participants’ homophobic bullying experiences (witnessed or experienced firsthand), the theme “Words as Weapons” emerged. This theme highlighted the strong emphasis participants placed on verbal homophobic bullying in schools, and was evident in many areas of participants’ discourse, including participants’ definitions of homophobic bullying, discussions of “that’s so gay”, and areas where participants felt change was needed most. All participant groups (teachers, LGBTQ youth, and experts) discussed verbal bullying and the use of homophobic epithets more often than physical bullying. These findings are consistent with previous research that highlights the immense frequency of verbal homophobic bullying in today's schools. For example, both the EGALE survey (Taylor & Peter, 2011) and the GLSEN study (Kosciw et al., 2014) found higher rates of homophobic verbal harassment due to sexual orientation and gender expression, than homophobic physical assault. Numerous studies have also examined the frequency and nature of verbal homophobic bullying and epithets (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Poteat & Rivers, 2010; Prati, 2012, Rivers, 2001; Solomon, 2015), and have found similar results. Homophobic teasing has been described as a long-term issue that is often systemic in nature and perpetrated by groups of students (Rivers, 2001).

The current research also highlights the connection between the rampant use of verbal homophobic epithets and verbal harassment and the adds to this discussion by emphasizing the sinister and important nature of the implicit messages received by students in schools that less care or concern is given to verbal bullying. In support of this impression, the research
demonstrates that homophobic language appears to be repeatedly ignored by school staff (Kosciw et al., 2014; McCabe, Dragowski, & Rubinson, 2013; Michaelson, 2008). Previous research has also highlighted the low level of concern around homophobic pejorative use, especially in comparison to racist or other taboo slang (Thurlow, 2001). If verbal bullying and homophobic language are considered acceptable and less concerning than other forms of discrimination, by both teachers and students alike, than this likely contributes to it being more common and overt. Responses from participants in the current study provide support for this idea, in that LGBTQ students rarely saw teachers addressing verbal homophobic bullying.

Understanding That’s so Gay: Harmful Bullying or Innocuous Slang?

The phrase, ‘that’s so gay’ was a frequent topic of conversation raised by LGBTQ students during the interviews. However, unlike the consensus among participants observed in the thematic analyses for the Words as Weapons theme, this theme did not generate a consensus of opinion among the different participant groups. Specifically, teachers and youth participants varied around whether this phrase fit within the construct of homophobic bullying and whether it is, in fact, a “weapon.” Some participants argued that individuals who used this phrase do not have the intent to cause harm. Some focused less on the intent and more on the impact, and concluded homophobic bullying was harmful to both LGBTQ youth and the school environment. The latter analyses followed the logic that the outcomes related to anti-LGBTQ rhetoric generate a more negative climate, which is detrimental to LGBTQ individuals’ mental health (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011; Ybarra, Mitchell, Kosciw, & Korchmaros, 2015). In line with the results from the current study, current research also is wrought with debate and disagreement on the topic of “that’s so gay”. Researchers continue to struggle to fully understand the nature and impact of homophobic epithets, with some studies
highlighting the negative impact of this slang use (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008), and others finding less impact on students (McCormack, 2014) with the idea that the widespread and indiscriminate use of this phrase has rendered it innocuous (Prati, 2012).

It is important to note that although the phrase “that’s so gay” does, in fact, meet some criteria for the term bullying, it does not meet all. Specifically, the derogatory phrase is often used in a repetitive manner and can certainly be viewed as a way to highlight an observed or perceived power imbalance, yet in order to be considered bullying the behavior needs to be purposely directed at an individual, or as Gladden and colleagues (2014) described a “targeted youth”. Instead, the term “that’s so gay” is often not directed at one specific person repeatedly. Nonetheless, it is apparent from the LGBTQ advocate and bullying expert interviews that the phrase “that’s so gay” is certainly related to homophobic bullying. Specifically, such uncontested discriminatory phrases likely contribute to an already hostile environment for LGBTQ youth. When schools allow implicit messages to be communicated in the form of slang that uses LGBTQ identities as a synonym for “bad,” it likely inherently contributes to a foundation for homophobic bullying. As the following section suggests, microaggressions such as “that’s so gay” have been shown to have devastating impacts on groups targeted (Nadal, 2014).

Microaggression (McCabe et al., 2013; Nadal, 2013; Nadal, Issa, Leon, Meterko, Wideman, & Wong, 2011) is a term referring to the covert and subtle forms of discrimination that were originally discussed in the context of racial prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Wing Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009). Recently, the term has been expanded to include aggression and harassment toward, and within, the LGBTQ community (Nadal, 2013). Microaggressions are defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile,
derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups” (Nadal, 2008, p. 23). Nadal and colleagues (2011) concluded that LGBT individuals experience a wide range of microaggressions regularly, and it is believed that the phrase ‘that’s so gay’ fits within the concept of microaggressions. In a recent article, Nadal (2014) stated, “The more that people experience microaggressions, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression, psychological distress, and even physical health issues”. More specifically to LGBTQ individuals, in his 2011 study he found that those who experienced homophobic microaggressions were more likely to report depression, anxiety and feelings of being traumatized (Nadal, Wong, Issa, Meterko, Leon & Wideman, 2011).

A differing perspective on the topic of “that’s so gay” comes from McCormack (2014), who believes that the use of this slang phrase may not be as sinister as some may think. He explained that, following a year of research, he found that “the default position for straight male youth is to be supportive of gay rights, inclusive of gay peers, and critical of homophobia” (p.1), all while still utilizing the phrase “that’s so gay”. He postulates that the younger generation has a sophisticated ability to separate the different meanings of the phrase (homophobic versus bad/lame) whereas older generations struggle to cognitively separate the two. Having said this, he ends with a reminder that he does not advocate for the use of the phrase but recognizes that a common understanding within a majority of youth is that does not connote homophobia. Nonetheless, he recognizes that others may still hear it as homophobic.

The current research adds to this discussion, by highlighting the lack of agreement within teachers and LGBTQ youth around the phrase “that’s so gay” and what to do about it. However, it should be noted that all of the LGBTQ bullying experts and advocates stressed the importance of disseminating knowledge around the potential harm of such oppressive phrases. It is
imperative to note, however, that not one person in the study used the term microaggression when contemplating the phrase “that’s so gay”. Thus, the researchers encourage enhanced teachings and discussions within the school system around microaggresssions and their implicit contributions to homophobic bullying.

**Exclusion as a Weapon**

Exclusion was discussed in the current study in multiple forms. The more overt forms were excluding those youth perceived to be LGBTQ from social events or friendship groups while the more covert forms included absence of sexual orientation and gender identity topics from the school curriculum and limited discussion of sexual diversity topics in schools. In addition, LGBTQ participants reported experiencing repeated cultural and political exclusion. These findings around exclusion of LGBTQ students in the current study are also consistent with previous research (D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Elze, 2003).

Heteronormative assumptions serve as the justification for the exclusion of LGBTQ individuals in a given environment, including the school system. As stated by Toomey, McGuire, & Russell (2012), “Heteronormativity is a societal hierarchical system that privileges and sanctions individuals based on presumed binaries of gender and sexuality” (p. 188). Oswald, Blume, & Marks (2005) also spoke to the importance of evolving from a heteronormative framework to a “queering” framework, allowing for the theoretical expansion of what is considered ‘normal’ in terms of gender or sexual identity. Such an evolution to ‘queering the educational system’ requires that all individuals be included and represented in the curriculum, policies, and practices of schools (Toomey et al., 2012). This research highlights the importance of negating heteronormative ideas and promoting a new ‘queer’ normal that values inclusivity.
It’s Not Getting Better

Participant responses in the current study indicated that further effort was needed from teachers and schools, in partnership, to improve the school climate for LGBTQ youth. The current research is in agreement with previous research that highlights a continued negative environment in schools for LGBTQ youth (Connolly et al., 2005; D’Augelli et al., 2002; Kosciw et al., 2014). The longitudinal nature of these studies illustrate a common theme of a school climate of hostility toward sexual and gender diversity, with little improvement over time. These findings paint a bleak picture for LGBTQ students, with the negative school climate impacting their decisions around coming out. More specifically, it appears that most students had to choose between concealing their sexual identity in order to feel safe or accepted at school, or come out in an unsafe environment. Some chose to switch schools in order to be out in a more positive environment. Previous research has indicated the negative implications of concealing one’s sexual orientation (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009; Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Panchankis, 2007; Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015), while also highlighting the pivotal importance of coming out in an environment that is safe and supportive (Beals et al., 2009). The findings from the current study were akin to this previous research, as participants spoke frequently about the benefits of coming out after high school (often in university) or only in supportive settings where disclosing was more likely to enhance connections with others, as opposed to risking further isolation.

The idea shared in the “It Gets Better” celebrity-endorsed television campaign certainly rings true, according to participants. In fact, the majority of the interviews were conducted prior to the start of this campaign, and most touted the idea that LGBTQ youth just need to “outlive” their high school years. However, it is important note that while the climate may improve for LGBTQ youth after high school, it certainly is not a reason to accept the fact that the high school
environment is so often dismal for sexual minority youth. In fact, the popularity of this campaign, corresponding to the unfortunate high number of teen suicides from same-sex youth population, gives even more support for the need to create continued change. The four years a student gives to gain a high school diploma is a lengthy time to endure such discomfort, invisibility and potential victimization. Given the belief is that universities are more successful at creating positive spaces for LGBTQ individuals, it seems clear that this is also feasible for high schools.

It is also important to understand the continued hostile school climate for LGBTQ youth in light of recent changes within the broader community. In fact, evidence exists that on a macro level, some things are improving. For example, at the time of writing this manuscript, the province of Ontario has an openly lesbian Premier, Kathleen Wynne (Leslie, 2015), the Ministry of Education has changed the health curriculum to present a more inclusive sexual education that includes LGBTQ sexual health issues (Ontario Ministry of Education 2015), and same-sex marriage has now been legal in Canada for over a decade (Cotler, 2015). As well, recent international polling data shows that Canada has had a 10% positive increase in attitudes towards homosexuality over time (Pew Research Center, 2013). Despite such changes in external influences, it appears the changes have yet to ‘trickle down’ to the individual or micro level, to the extent that change is recognizable within the schools. As stated by Michaelson (2008), “Despite increasingly positive shifts in western societal feelings about homosexuality, educators continue to fail to implement inclusive practices and social justice for children who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT)” (p. 76). Understanding why this may be, whether it is fear of job security, or lack of clear guidelines and expectations from principals and administrators, or simply being too overwhelmed to address this issue along with all other teacher duties, is vital to improving the high school experience for LGBTQ youth.
The Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model (Dowling, 2016)

Before reflecting on how the following four emergent themes relate to previous research, it is important to briefly review the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model (Dowling, 2016), as it provides a framework for the themes relating to the How of homophobic bullying that follow in the subsequent section. To summarize, the proposed model serves as a useful tool to organize the spheres where participants felt change can, and should, best be implemented. As stated previously, a multifaceted problem deserves a multifaceted solution, and this model helps to understand all the important facets that need to be addressed. The following section focuses briefly on the model’s relationship to previous research.

Despite the lack of studies looking specifically at homophobic bullying within an ecological theoretical perspective, ample research has examined the impact of bullying, or homophobic bullying, from each of the spheres individually outlined in the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model. For example, Perry, Hodges, and Egan (2001) examined individual factors that are associated with bullying (microsystem), Burns, Maycock, Cross, and Brown (2008) looked at the ‘power of peers’ in their study that provided greater clarity around why some students use bullying as a method of conforming (mesosystem), whereas some studies looked at the community influence on bullying (Stern & Smith, 1995).

A wide variety of studies have successfully utilized Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model to examine a variety of phenomena (e.g., Lau & Ng, 2014; Leonard, 2011), and a few studies have utilized this theory to examine general bullying (Espelage, 2014; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Johnson, 2011). However, thus far, only two other published articles could be located that has looked at homophobic bullying from a bioecological framework (Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Newman & Fantus, 2015). It is important to note that the researcher was not aware of these
articles prior to deciding to utilize Bronfenbrenner’s model or creating the influencing
Homophobic model presented here. Hong and Garbarino (2012) employed this social-ecological
framework to examine the factors that they considered risk and protective factors for
homophobic bullying, such as gender non-conformity and community environment. Their
bioecological model was similar to the one presented here, in that the influences they discussed
were included in the same spheres as the Influencing Homophobic Bullying model. The only
differences were that they had less constructs included in their model, compared to the one
presented here. For example, they did not included aspects such as principals and teachers in the
microsphere or cultural influences or social norms in the macrosphere. The second article was a
theoretical piece that touched on Bronfenbrenner’s model as a way of framing the multiple
influences on homophobic bullying, and their model was also very similar to the one presented
here. The difference between these articles and the one presented here is that the one presented
here stems directly from the data collected from participants, whereas the others are theoretical,
and not empirically based. That is, the current model provides further support for the utility of
Bronfenbrenner’s model for homophobic bullying influences, as it is grounded in the experiences
of those on the frontlines of homophobic bullying. Perhaps then the additions that the current
model includes add to the theoretical models that have been previously presented in the literature.
The additions of specifics, such as GSAs, implementation of school policies, appear to enrich the
previous models and add new information about what teachers, LGBTQ youth and experts
believe are important influences on the phenomenon of homophobic bullying.

An important additional consideration for the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model is
the inclusion of multiple microsystems within the original microsystem sphere. The reasoning
for this is that studies have examined the complex relationship between multiple developmental
contexts (the microspheres) and have indicated differential patterns of impact depending on the different factors of each unique microsystem (e.g., Moolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006; Richman, Bowens, & Woolley, 2004). In fact, the eco-international-development (EID) perspective proposed by Richman and colleagues (2004) suggests that, “there are hierarchical environmental contexts that impact developmental outcomes” (Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006, p. 93), and EID is often considered in connection with Bronfenbrenner’s model. For example, Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor (2006) examined the influence of family and community on positive school outcomes for students. They found that certain microsystem protective factors (ethnic identity, religious orientation, and school satisfaction) reduced the risk for aggression, while others (future orientation and parental support) had no impact on aggression but decreased the risk for internalizing symptoms. This research highlights the complexity of the interactions between the influences within a microsystem.

Certainly similar ideas can be construed for individuals experiencing, witnessing, or perpetrating homophobic bullying, in that not all elements included in the microsystem can or should be considered equal. Thus, it is recommended that further investigations or ideas revolving around this model, consider the idea of adding multiple microsystems within the inner sphere to account for the varying risk and protective factors offered by each of the influencing microsystems. Such influencing microsystems include, but are not limited to: School staff, peers, family, and community. Please see Figure 4 below as an example that would likely be of benefit to add when considering the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model presented in the current research.
Figure 4. Multiple Microsystems of The Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model.

Understanding Action: Explicit and Implicit Messaging

The findings that teachers fail to respond promptly or take homophobic bullying seriously are generally compatible with previous research findings. That is, LGBTQ youth often reported that teachers and school staff did very little to respond to homophobic bullying, and the teachers also acknowledged that other teachers tended to not act on homophobic bullying. LGBTQ youth also noted that the schools, on the whole, did very little education or awareness training (such as through assemblies or celebrating pride) regarding LGBTQ issues and homophobic bullying. These findings are certainly consistent with prior research illustrating limited school initiatives around homophobic bullying and LGBTQ issues (Kosciw et al., 2014; McCabe et al., 2013; Taylor & Peter, 2011). In contrast, in the current study the teachers’ response to homophobic...
bullying, as described by the teachers themselves, was exemplary. More specifically, the teachers said that they themselves did and would act on any homophobic bullying they saw, while also acknowledging that other teachers tend not to. It should be noted that the teachers who participated in the interview were likely more knowledgeable about homophobic and equity issues, given their diverse backgrounds, including teaching at the Triangle Program, working on equity programs or completing their own graduate research on a similar topic. Thus, they likely did have a particular interest and a greater likelihood of feeling competent to act on these issues. Regardless, research has highlighted that a disparity does often exist between teachers’ intentions to act and their actual behaviours (Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2015). Thus, more focus on ensuring teachers know how to intervene effectively will enhance the likelihood that teachers will follow through on these positive intentions.

**Understanding School Culture**

The issue of school culture and homophobic bullying is an interesting topic when reflecting on prior research. This is because of the conceptual overlap between school culture and school climate (Payne & Smith, 2013). As previously stated, there is a solid body of research that examines the school climate in relation to LGBTQ youth experiences (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011), and more recent research has attempted to tease apart the link between school climate and culture in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding around the impact of one on the other (Pascoe, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2013). However, it is clear that further research around differing cultures within school, and types of schools, is warranted, as there is a paucity of research around homophobic bullying and alternative arts and general public schools.
The lack of research in the area of school culture and homophobic bullying may be understood in terms of examining the dominant bullying discourse in schools. As an example, Payne and Smith (2013) highlighted that because the common bullying discourse focuses on “the problem” as the bullies with homophobic beliefs and interventions that focus on the victims (p. 1), the broader issues of heterosexual privilege and gender norms often go unquestioned. These researchers concluded that bullying needs to be viewed in a more social context and interventions ought to include the cultural roots of bullying (Payne & Smith, 2013). It seems clear that research that further separates climate and culture is warranted, in order to disseminate this understanding to those teachers and administrators who dictate the learning in schools around LGBTQ bullying. As well, understanding what leads to the between school differences around culture in relation to homophobic bullying is vital. Given the social element of homophobic bullying, schools leaders need to be acutely aware of these social dynamics and work to promote a culture that discourages aggression (Rivers & Cowrie, 2006).

Recommendations

Recommendations Within the School System

First and foremost, it is recommended that all schools develop a zero tolerance policy for homophobic bullying, along with a clear definition of homophobic bullying, in all its variations. It is believed that such a policy will limit the possibility of subjective teacher responses and the minimizing of homophobic epithet use. Such a policy is best implemented at the school board level, which is discussed further in the following section.

Because of the data presented here, it is also suggested that the zero tolerance policy for homophobic bullying includes a strong component on the rampant use of homophobic language, and sets a clear standard for respectful language in school by students and staff. Having explicit
teachings about verbal homophobic bullying will likely provide a counter to the excessive implicit messages being communicated within the school system that such derogatory terms and verbal aggression is acceptable. Specific teachings around homophobic bullying, the impact of homophobic language, and a broader understanding of sexual stigma and microaggressions are vital. Increased dialogues around phrases like ‘that’s so gay’ in the context of microaggressions, is a step in the right direction. Nadal (2013), stressed the importance of taking such terms, like microaggressions, out of the ivory tower of higher education and including them in more standard language and teachings, so that everyone understands the importance of not only lessening the overt homophobic behavior, but also attending to the covert ways stigma and heteronormativity thrive in schools.

Participants in the current study shared many examples of experiencing or witnessing homophobic bullying in the early grades, prior to entering high school. LGBTQ youth, and experts alike spoke to the need for these issues to be addressed prior to high school, preferably in elementary school. Previous research has also emphasized this need (Birkett et al., 2009). However, concern about inconsistencies in program application (Flygare, Gill, & Johansson, 2013), has led to many anti-bullying programs being reviewed with mixed success (Flygare et al., 2013; Mishna, Newman, Daley & Solomon, 2009). As stated by Michaelson (2008), “Despite increasingly positive shifts in Western societal feelings about homosexuality, educators continue to fail to implement inclusive practices and social justice for children who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT)”. Determining how to remove teacher and school staff subjectivity around addressing homophobic bullying, and increasing objectivity around the implementation of such inclusive practices, is clearly a necessity. It is suggested that schools promote the use of prepared teacher toolkits (GLSEN, 2003; Hall, 2016) that include lessons on
name-calling, bullying, family diversity, and gender roles, in order to increase teachers comfort with addressing these issues and decreasing the subjectivity in the way these issues are taught in the elementary or secondary classroom. As highlighted by the current participants, the topics of diverse sexualities and homophobic bullying need to be addressed openly and consistently.

Another important area for change is enhanced teacher education on homophobic bullying. Teachers are not only instructors to students but they often also serve as role models, as value educators, and as behavior modification experts (Opertti & Brady, 2011). Since teachers are on the front lines of student experience, they have an important role in creating change around homophobic bullying. If discrimination appears to be accepted within the school system, students are more likely to follow suit. Conversely, if staff members work to create a positive and accepting environment, a positive change is certainly more likely. Thus, suggestions for change include implementation of a mandatory teacher-training program on LGBTQ issues and bullying, which includes an emphasis on verbal bullying and implicit messages. Moreover, teachers need to understand the various factors that motivate students to use this type of language that not only include homophobic beliefs but also involve social dynamics of power and dominance (Poteat & Rivers, 2010). Such a program should give teachers explicit examples and practice with handling various circumstances. Not only should these mandatory teachings be included in all teacher training programs to ensure consistency, they should also be taught in schools to those already in teaching positions (both elementary and secondary schools). It is believed that such programs will lessen the trepidation that teachers may have of not knowing how to handle a situation, or the fear of possibly making it worse.

Mahady Wilton, Craig & Pepler (2000) spoke about how a skills-training approach should be included in any school anti-bullying program, for individuals who are bullied and for
those who witness the bullying. It is suggested here that a skills-training approach also be used to encourage all youth to identify as LGBTQ allies and for the schools to teach the skills that coincide with this, such as monitoring one’s language, highlighting discriminatory language or actions, and reporting homophobic bullying episodes. As previously noted, GSAs have proven to be an effective way to provide a safe space for LGBTQ youth and to create change at a broader level by communicating the message that the schools do not endorse heterosexist and heteronormative values (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; McFarland & Dupuis, 2001; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). GSAs are an excellent way to promote allies and schools should be putting efforts into supporting these associations and enhancing visibility around them. However, given student participation in GSAs is optional, teachings around these concepts needs to be implemented in a consistent way, to ensure all students are learning about concepts relating to heteronormativity, sexual stigma, gender roles, power and privilege, not just those who are willing to join the GSA. As well, some of the students in the current study did not feel that GSAs provided a supportive or welcoming environment, and it appears more can be done to ensure these programs are, in fact, doing what they set out to do.

The writings from Payne and Smith (2013), emphasized teachings around heteronormativity and gender policing as another crucial piece for change within the schools. Given the overlap between gender expectations and homophobic bullying, and the fact that students so often become victims of bullying that target their perceived sexuality based on their gender expression, it seems imperative that greater emphasis be placed on teaching respect for varied gender expressions and for students to be encouraged to reflect on their own gender expectations. Certainly new school policies that are leading to more and more all-gendered bathrooms (Goodyear, 2016) being placed in school is an excellent starting point for enhanced
discussions around reframing gender expectations and creating an academic environment that values gender fluidity. Certainly educating students around power and privilege is also vital in these discussions.

Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, and Van Acker (2006) postulated that general bullying, or social aggression, is often viewed as *cool*. Understanding the social culture dictating the ideas behind what is cool or uncool within peer ecologies is imperative (Rodkin et al., 2006). How do we create a new norm where gender and sexual fluidity could also be considered cool? Given it has been proposed that the greatest challenges for creating change within homophobic bullying is addressing hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity as problematic concepts (Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Mills, 2001), it is seems that this is an appropriate place to start. As an example, the alternative arts based schools that some LGBTQ youth mentioned were described as having a broader value system that viewed homophobic bullying as *uncool*. KM (LGBTQ youth) drove this point home when she stated, “It’s really unaccepted to be unaccepting at our school.” Thus, creating a fundamental value change that allows LGBTQ youth full integration within the general school systems, and promotes norms based on diversity rather than exclusion and power is an imperative a poignant area that needs addressing in research, policy and practice.

**Recommendations for Policy**

Prior research has been very clear on the importance of staff and students to be acutely aware of school policies around discrimination and bullying (Kosciw et al., 2014). Students appear to feel much more safe and supported if they are explicitly informed of the school policies (Taylor & Peters, 2011). As well, educators need confirmation that their jobs will not be in jeopardy if they address these issues, and in fact, that this is expected of them. Having policies in
place appears to be highly influential in allowing teachers to feel more supported and confident with initiating action (Schneider & Dimito, 2008).

In terms of governmental and policy recommendations, the *Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model* (Dowling, 2016) is a helpful tool to encourage a simultaneous approach to change (top-down and bottom-up). It is important to ensure that the leaders of our nation are acknowledging the severity of discrimination and victimization occurring against LGBTQ youth, and are explicitly naming the abuse and creating a plan for change. As an example, Rivers (2015) highlighted that Public Health England had created a mandate that committed to reducing homophobic violence in schools by 50% in 2020. Thus far, the Canadian government has yet to announce such an initiative, but such a policy initiative could have a very positive affect on the willingness of school boards across Canada to take homophobic bullying seriously. Such leadership will promote the message that such behavior is unacceptable on all levels while also providing different spheres, such as school administrations to feel more confident in prioritizing their own initiatives.

The example of changes to sexual education in Ontario schools (Ministry of Education, 2015) to include sexual orientation diversity is a fitting example of the change that can occur when all levels of influence work in concert. For example, those sitting within the microsphere, such as teachers and schools staff, are required to learn how to teach more inclusive education, and the students then are influenced by seeing that this issue is no longer being ignored. The explicit message is that LGBTQ youth deserve to be educated on sexuality and safe-sex practices, and to see themselves represented in the curriculum. The implicit message is that the school practices inclusive education and does not adhere to a heteronormative standard. Thus, such teachings have the ability to enhance the school culture round normalizing diversity and teaching
respect for all sexualities and gender identity. Having the school board continue with such teachings despite significant backlash from certain groups, also teaches that the importance of such inclusivity and diverse education is worth standing up for. LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students see this, and undoubtedly learn from this.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There is still much room for further research to be conducted in many areas around homophobic bullying, in order to solidify the understanding and pave the way towards change. However, specific suggestions stemming from the current research revolve around four primary areas. The first is the need for further research to develop a standard definition of homophobic bullying and identify which slang terminology is acceptable and unacceptable. Of course, it is certainly plausible that such a definition is lacking because of such issues highlighted in the current study: a lack of consensus on what is considered harmful or innocuous. An important aspect to address is that during the interviews, while some participants seemed clear on their definitions of homophobia, others appeared to struggle a bit more to come to their own conclusion about what should or shouldn’t be included. Perhaps this is another issue that is related to individual interviews. Research that utilizes focus groups may be more successful at merging ideas to help participants create a definition of homophobic bullying that is not limited in scope to individual beliefs or experiences.

As determined by Solomon (2015), a dearth of research around homophobic language in schools remains, and in order for change to occur, it is imperative this acceptable and unacceptable language be addressed. As previously noted, this area is proving important with the growing awareness of microaggressions (Nadel, 2013), the term ‘that’s so gay’, and around
understanding the impact of explicit and implicit messaging from teachers and school staff around homophobic or discriminatory language or actions.

The second suggestion for further research focuses on understanding how change around homophobic bullying can occur simultaneously from all levels of influence (as outlined in the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model). Utilizing a more systemic program for change increases the likelihood that anti-bullying programs implemented in school do not fall flat, and are supported by the broader social and political spheres. Programs for change need to be supported by policy and address the culture that influence heteronormative attitudes and gender norms. For example, recent TDSB guidelines for the accommodation of transgender staff and students utilizes various political spheres that stem from the Ontario Human Rights Code and provides clear guidelines for implementation at the individual school level (TDSB, 2014).

The third suggestion for research stems from the qualitative difference described by participants between general high schools and alternative arts-based school in Toronto. Further research is needed to gain a greater understanding of what successful alternative arts-based school are doing to enhance the climate for LGBTQ youth and to create an environment where acceptance appears to be the norm. Is it the students that self-select to attend, the teachers who opt to work there, or the policies that are enacted on a regular basis? Understanding the factors that dictate such a school culture is needed. Moreover, research that focuses on the teacher actions, explicit and implicit messaging and the social norms within an alternative school would certainly prove useful. It appears that alternative schools are a good example of how norms can be altered, with gender fluidity serving as a good example of being seen as a positive thing, rather than something that needs to be policed.
And lastly, it is clear that homophobic bullying does not just apply to LGBTQ youth, as non-LGBTQ identified youth are also often targets of homophobic bullying as well. However, little is known about the impact of homophobic bullying on non-LGBTQ youth, and further research is suggested in this area to understand how bullying that is specifically about one’s identity differs from that which is not specifically linked to one’s own identity. For example, do non-LGBTQ youth experience similar short and long-term psychosocial impact when experiencing homophobic bullying?

**Limitations of the Current Research**

This study used exploratory qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers, LGBTQ youth, and experts in the field of LGBTQ youth advocacy and bullying prevention view the current issues surrounding homophobic bullying. The following section outlines first the limitations of the study, followed by an overview of the strengths and areas of contribution of the study.

With regard to the limitations within the study, it is important to first note a deficit in terms of participant diversity. A large majority of participants were Caucasian. Queer and/or Trans People of Colour (QTPoC) are an important sub-population of the LGBTQ community and recent research has focused more on this population’s marginalization within the LGBTQ movement (Alimahomed, 2010). Unfortunately, the current research study cannot participate in, or contribute to, this study area, as QTPoC were not represented adequately in the participant pool. A possible explanation for this is that the difficulty for ethnically diverse LGBTQ youth to negotiate both sexual orientation and ethnic identities lends to differing developmental experiences, as compared to Caucasian LGBTQ youth (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Moreover, Rosaria et al, (2004) found that black and latino youth were involved in fewer gay-related social
activities and were disclosed their sexual orientation less than their white peers. Nonetheless, simple convenience sampling likely attributed to the lack of diversity in participants and the current study certainly would have benefited from theoretically sampling to increase the representation of QTPoC. More specifically, purposeful sampling that utilized QTPoC events, such as the Toronto QTPoC film festival, or online groups such as Facebook QTPoC sites, would have likely enhanced to diversity of LGBTQ youth recruited. Future research that addresses the specific perspectives of QTPoC on homophobic bullying in high schools will certainly be of value, given the multiple areas of discrimination and oppression these students often endure. The diversity issues, however, did not stop at members of the QTPoC community, but also represented a lack of participant diversity with regards to social economic status and ability issues. Again, purposive sampling that recruited members with multiple intersectionalities of oppression would have strengthened the richness of the data collected.

For the LGBTQ youth, most were providing retrospective perspectives on their high school experiences. The ages ranged from 17 to 21, thus only a few candidates were attending high school at the time of the interview. Despite retrospective views risking erroneous recall or skewed perspectives, it is assumed that the closer one is to their retrospective experience the increased accuracy of their reporting. Given research (Rivers, 2001) has found that LGBT individuals who had experienced bullying were able to recall key events retrospectively with little variance over time, and that the LGBTQ youth in the current study were recalling only a few years prior, it is assumed that the researchers can feel relatively confident in the participant reports.

Finally, as previously noted, the inclusion of focus groups, in addition to the interviews collected, likely would have enhanced the richness of the data collected. Specifically, issues that
illustrated diverse participant perspectives, such as the nuances related to the definition of homophobic bullying or the disagreement around the phrase “that’s so gay,” could certainly have been more clearly delineated through asking focus groups to grapple with such questions. The limitation with utilizing only individual interviews resulted in a lack of collective agreement around these issues.

**Problems Arising During the Research**

As with most studies, issues arose during this study that required assessment and changes as the study progressed. The first issue relates to the researchers conclusion of saturation following the LGBTQ youth and teacher interviews. Saturation was assumed following initial analysis, because it became clear that no new codes were emerging, and redundancy became obvious within the last few interviews. However, during the higher-level analyses, such as theoretical analysis, it became obvious that certain emergent themes required further filling out and an increased depth of information in order for the researchers to clearly understand and feel confident in the final themes. Thus, because of this and the desire to further enhance the rigour of the study, the researchers decided to add the expert interviews.

The next issue relates to the topics that were queried during the interview, specifically that of the *why* of homophobic bullying. During the initial interviews with LGBTQ youth and teachers, this topic was not addressed. A question asking participants why they felt that homophobic bullying occurred would have likely been of benefit. However, there was also concern over the potential of ‘othering’ participants through asking LGTQ individuals to explain the reasons for their victimization. “*Other* is a construction, a set of discourses through which the dominant group defines itself” (Traustadottir, 2011, p. 13). Especially given the identity of the primary interviewer is non-LGBTQ, it seemed inappropriate to ask participants to explain the
behavior that is mostly conducted by non-LGBTQ youth. The researchers were cognizant of the possibility that such questioning might take away from the participants’ comfort in the interview, or could be perceived as placing blame or putting the onus on the youth. Thus, only the bullying advocates and LGBTQ activists provided perspectives on the why of homophobic bullying.

**Contributions to Research**

With regard to the strengths of the study, this research contributes to a growing body of research that strives to understand the interplay of variables and nuances that impact homophobic bullying. Canadian research is still limited, in terms of its understanding of homophobic bullying, and this research was conducted in order to contribute to homophobic bullying research in Canada. No similar study could be found when the researcher reviewed the literature, in terms of recruiting multiple perspectives on the subject, although Mishna and colleagues (2006) did conduct an exploratory study on general bullying that involved interviews with youth, teachers and parents. This was thought to be the first of its kind in Canada to utilize the perspectives of not just the individual, around general bullying. This is also the case with the current study; it offers a unique perspective into the ideas and concerns around homophobic bullying.

The study also provides further insight surrounding the covert and detrimental aspect of verbal homophobic bullying. This is not to say that no other study has looked at verbal aspects of homophobic bullying before, as this is certainly not the case, but this study highlights how the participants emphasized verbal bullying and the intense frequency of this problem, over physical violence. Moreover, the study also exhibited the negative impact of implicit messages being communicated around verbal homophobic bullying, which appear to teach, perhaps unwittingly, that such discrimination is tolerated and condoned. Finally, it appeared that participants lacked a clear understanding of what homophobic bullying is and what comprises it. Participants were
mixed with whether phrases like “that’s so gay” fit within the construct. This highlights the need to concretize a more standardized understanding of this phenomenon.

Next, the development of *The Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model*, (Dowling, 2016) derived from Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model, is also unique in the field of homophobic bullying. This study highlighted how this model is useful not only in understanding what homophobic bullying is, but also in all of the micro- to macro-levels that influence change within it. Such multifaceted change should be viewed as vital, given the widely held beliefs and evidence that the high school experience for many LGBTQ individuals is still detrimental and challenging. An important aspect of the *Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model* is the focus on broader values and ideologies, as well as the individual and micro influences. How students and teachers learn to be inclusive and promote diversity and belonging, rather than exclusion and heteronormativity, is also an important topic for enhanced understanding. So often, the answer comes down to education. If those making decisions in the exosphere can increase and encourage learning around inclusivity, if they can tout this topic as an important topic for education, than it is likely it will trickle down to the microsystem. Such curriculum changes are initiated by the administration (exosystem) and create changes within the microsystem, and then teachers and students within the microsystem can take this new learning from their curriculum to create changes within the norm and culture within the school. Such shifts, may then, in turn, expand to create even further changes within the macrosystem. Thus, it is a whole system approach that serves as an excellent example of the way that positive change can occur throughout the *Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model*.

Lastly, this study utilized triangulation between three varied participant groups all holding diverse knowledge and experience on the topic of homophobic bullying. The purpose of
using triangulation was to enhance the confirmation and completeness of the findings (Breitmayer et al., 1993). Expert interviews were added to those of the LGBTQ youth and teachers, in order to gain feedback on the accuracy and fit of the emergent themes, while also adding to the depth of understanding on this complex issue. The successful use of triangulation is believed to increase the reader’s confidence in the findings and the associated interpretations (Breitmayer et al., 1993).

**Conclusion**

In summary, homophobic bullying is a complex phenomenon that includes various spheres of influence that range from the micro to the macro level of our world. Despite efforts to create change, high school climates appear to remain unwelcoming and non-inclusive for LGBTQ youth. While it is true that change is slowly occurring, that homophobia is decreasing (Anderson, 2009), and that schools have seen slight declines in homophobic bullying (Kosciw et al., 2014), these changes are occurring at a slow and unacceptable rate. For current or upcoming LGBTQ students to experience a recognizable qualitative shift in their school experience, this pace of change must increase. It is believed that acquiring a system of change that employs all spheres of the *Influencing Homophobia Model* to work in concert can contribute greatly to an improved rate of change through the enhanced conceptualization of the major influences on this phenomenon.

The stories and ideas that were shared in this research highlight the continued multifaceted struggles of LGBTQ youth, and the need for enhanced multifaceted solutions. The data, and emergent themes, highlight that more sophisticated programs are needed to directly and explicitly address the bullies, the victims, the bystanders, and the teachers. But it is also clear that the issue of homophobic bullying is broader than just these individual or micro levels, and in
order to create compelling and influential changes, we cannot neglect the larger institutions or the dominant political and social ideologies. Gender norms, homophobic beliefs, heterosexist assumptions and continued oppression are embedded in these ideologies. The researcher is in agreement with Payne and Smith (2013) who stress the importance of focusing less on the individuals at play within homophobic bullying, and more on the systemic marginalization of LGBTQ individuals and the “cultural privileging of heterosexuality and gender normativity” (p. 1). Alternative arts-based schools appear to be successful in creating this broader change, and according to participants, have created an environment with a different ideology, where sexual and gender diversity is accepted and normalized. It makes it more understandable why a majority of public schools, which do implement anti-homophobic bullying initiatives but neglect to address the normative culture, find they fall flat. How can these initiatives land with students, if the over-arching mentality remains hetero-normative and continues to endorse and teach gender stereotypes?

Teacher training on this issue needs to occur during initial teacher education programs, during professional development seminars, in order to lessen the subjectivity and show solidarity around the need to respond to these issues. Increased standardization around how teachers react to discriminatory behavior and language is essential, and these teachers need to be guided by their superiors to feel confident in their job security, and to be supported for any bullying they themselves may receive while challenging their own belief structures on this issue, or addressing homophobic bullying directly. As well, accountability needs to occur within the school system, so that the policies create fundamental change. Government and school administrations need to implement ways to ensure that the policies are translating into action within the schools. Task forces or program evaluations should to be implemented more thoroughly, in order to confirm
the expected changes and to know which schools require extra support to achieve success. It is the duty of our leaders to ensure that each school is a safe, respectful and inclusive learning environment. The researcher remains optimistic that change is possible, and that heteronormative values and hegemonic gender roles will eventually evolve to accurately reflect the world, as it is occupied today.
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Appendix A
Handbook for Dissertation Individual Interviews

Prior to Meeting

• Inform participants that the interviews will be approximately one hour in length and that they will be audio/video taped.
• Decide on appropriate compensation for participants and communicate this to them.
• Prepare an information sheet that participants can take with them, this will include:
  ➢ Outline and purpose of the study
  ➢ Explain how their participation may impact the broader community.
  ➢ Contact information of assessor and dissertation supervisor.
  ➢ Provide contacts for support services, should the participants feel they need it after the session.
• Have consent form ready for participants to sign.
• Explain to participants how the interview is relevant to them, and how what they contribution can make a difference.
• Have system in place to remind participants of upcoming interviews.
• Have snacks/drinks available.

Determining Location

• Find location(s) that are cost effective
• Choose locations that are convenient for participants to get to.
• Especially for youth group – choose location that won’t hinder their willingness to participate (IE: buildings that they wouldn’t usually go into, or may let others know something about their privacy). Look into the possibility of conducting interviews at organizations where they are recruited.
• Choose a space that is comfortable, confidential, and inviting.

Rules for the Interviewer

• Ask questions that are open and neutral.
• Be aware of participant’s energy levels and offer breaks accordingly.
• Phrase issues/topics in terms that participants will be familiar with.
• If necessary, step-in and keep interviewee on track.
• Conducted interviews in a respectful manner and allow for various opinions to come forward.
• Create a safe environment.
• At the end, stress all that has been achieved from the interview and focus on the positives that were contributed.
Purpose of the Individual Interviews

LGBTQ Youth

• To obtain a better idea of all the types of homophobic bullying gay and lesbian youth faced in high school.
• Get a better understand of these issues from a more personal perspective.
• Obtain the perceptions of how these issues impact the participants now, and in their daily lives.
• Ask what measures they feel would have improved their high school experiences with regards to homophobic bullying.
• Discuss the climate/environment they perceived at their high school with regard to gay and lesbian identities.

Questions to be Addressed

➢ Do you feel like homophobic bullying was a serious issue at your high school?
➢ What do you consider homophobic bullying?
➢ What examples can you give of homophobic bullying that you either experienced first-hand or witnessed?
➢ Did you ever drop out of school or avoid school because of bullying?
➢ Were there people you felt you could talk to about homophobic bullying? If so what made you aware that you could approach these individuals?
➢ Was anything done by the school system to lessen or stop homophobic bullying?
➢ Were there things teachers or school administrators did to make the problem worse?
➢ How did homophobic bullying feel when it was occurring? What messages did you receive from these experiences?
➢ How do you think experiences of homophobic bullying affect people/yourselves long-term?
➢ What was the impact these experiences had on you then and now?

Teachers & School Administrators

• To gauge the level of understanding of teachers and high school staff regarding homophobic bullying.
• To gather further data regarding the types of bullying incidents that are most common
• To find out whether teachers would be willing to intervene if they witnessed or overheard homophobic bullying.
• To better understand teachers willingness to address these issues in the classroom

Questions to be Addressed

➢ What do you consider to be homophobic bullying?
➢ Can you provide examples of what types of behaviours, words, or actions would be defined as homophobic bullying?
➢ How often do you think gay and lesbian students are verbally/physically harassed because of their sexual orientation?
➢ Can you give examples of homophobic bullying that you may have witnessed or heard about that occurred at your school?
➢ How would you react if you saw homophobic bullying occurring?
➢ What has your school done to lessen and/or stop homophobic bullying?
➢ How do you feel the school climate is for gay and lesbian youth?
➢ How comfortable would you feel discussing such issues in the classroom?
➢ If not, what are some things that may hinder you from doing so?
➢ What do you think the long-term impact is on students who experience homophobic bullying?
➢ How do adequately do you think the school system addresses/takes action against homophobic bullying?
➢ What more do you feel the school could be doing for gay and lesbian students to protect them and their rights?

INTERVIEW PROCESS

➢ Introduce myself, give brief background and areas of research, thank participant for coming in.
➢ Let participant know that all ideas put forth will be respected. Create an environment that is safe for all participants.
➢ Go over purpose of study, explain how participation will contribute.
➢ Handout consent forms and explain. Ask if there are any questions before starting.
➢ Ask questions – starting general and becoming more specific.
➢ Re-phrase ideas and summarize topics.
➢ Ask if there are other issues that weren’t addressed that need to be discussed or included in this topic.
➢ Thank participants for coming.
Appendix B

Participant Information and Consent Form

(Interview)

Kristen Dowling, a Ph.D. graduate student in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology (AECP) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) is conducting a study with the goal of examining the experiences of both lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and teachers and school staff on homophobic bullying in high schools. This project is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the Ph.D. requirements by the AECP Department at OISE/UT, and is being supervised by Dr. J. Roy Gillis.

Participation in this section of the research will involve taking part in a face-to-face interview. A trained interviewer will be asking you questions about your opinions and experiences around homophobic bullying. You may also be asked about attitudes, perceptions, teacher responses, and school policy with regards to homophobic bullying. With your consent, the interview will be audio taped for later transcription and analysis. The interview will be conducted in a private office at OISE/UT, and is anticipated to last for about 1 hour. You may find it uncomfortable to discuss private aspects of your experiences of homophobic bullying and victimization. Alternatively, discussion of these issues may help to highlight and focus some questions you may have already been considering. You are not required to provide answers to any questions or reveal any information that you do not want to. In addition, you will be provided with a list of contacts for support and counselling around gay and lesbian issues and bullying.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point. Upon written request and prior to the beginning of data analysis, the data gathered from you, can be withdrawn and not used in the research, if you so choose. You are also free to decline to participate in any aspect of the research, or choose not to answer any questions.

Members of the research staff will transcribe and analyze the audiotapes of the interviews. Only members of the research team, and no one else, will have access to your research data including tapes and transcriptions. All identifying information will be removed from transcribed documents. The audiotapes, transcriptions and demographic information form will be stored in a locked file cabinet to which only project staff will have access. The tapes, transcriptions, and demographic information form will be kept for up to 5 years (until August 2013) for research purposes, after which point they will be destroyed. Reports of the results of this study will not contain any information that could personally identify you as a participant in the research. Overall results may be published or presented in total or in part in various psychological, academic and community sources, while maintaining the privacy of all participants.

You are advised that the researchers will make the greatest effort to protect your privacy.
However, if information regarding child abuse or child sexual abuse where the victim is under 16 years of age is disclosed during participation, the researchers are obligated by law to report this information to the authorities. As well, if participants reveal any suicidal intention, the researchers are again obligated by law to report this to the necessary party(ies).

Kristen Dowling will be available to answer any questions or concerns you may have for the duration of the study. Ms. Dowling may be reached at:

dowling@oise.utoronto.ca

You may also contact The Office of Research Ethics at any time if you have questions about your rights as research participants at ethics.review@utoronto.ca, or at 416-946-3273.

Supervisor:

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If you would like to receive a summary of the research, please contact Kristen Dowling at the above email address at a later date, and she will provide you with a summary of the research.

I……………………………………………………………………..agree to the audio taping of my interview.

Signature: ........................................... Date: ...........................................

I…………………………….. have read and understood the above, and consent to participate in the study, and have been given a copy of this consent form. I agree to allow the data collected to be used for research purposes that could include the publication or public presentation of the data following the guidelines specified above.

Signature: ........................................... Date: ...........................................

Please keep one copy of this consent form for your files.
Appendix C
Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age _______

2. Gender  ____ Female  ____ Male  ____ Other

3. Ethnicity
   ____ African Canadian  ____ Caucasian  ____ Hispanic  ____ Indo Canadian
   ____ Native  ____ Asian Canadian  ____ Arab Canadian Other (specify) ________

4. Religious Affiliation
   ____ Protestant  ____ Catholic  ____ Fundamentalist Christian  ____ Muslim
   ____ Jewish  ____ Hindu  ____ Buddhist  ____ None Other (specify) ________

5. Rate the strength of your religious beliefs (Circle a number)

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
   Very Weak  ____________________________  Very Strong

6. Your Sexual Orientation
   ____ heterosexual  ____ gay  ____ lesbian
   ____ bisexual  ____ transgender  ____ other

7. Your professional/ Occupational title _______________________________________

   If you are a teacher:
   a.) What grade(s) do you teach? ________________________________
   b.) What are your teachable subjects? ________________________________
   c.) How long have you been teaching? ________________________________
   d.) Have you ever attended any workshops or training around homophobia?
      Yes  No
Appendix D
Recruitment Posters

(On OISE/UT Official Letterhead)

GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL,
TRANS, QUEER ...
MALE & FEMALE PARTICIPANTS
WANTED:
For in person interviews
Regarding Homophobic Bullying.

Seeking participants aged 16 and above.
Should take approximately 1 hour to complete

Personal experience of victimization not required
To participate

It's confidential and anonymous

Participants will be entered into a draw to win a prize worth $100!!

Please take a card (if available),

Or contact Kristen at
kdowling@oise.utoronto.ca

Questions, comments, concerns?
Feel free to contact me by email

Thanks!
TEACHERS AND HIGH SCHOOL STAFF
MALE & FEMALE PARTICIPANTS
WANTED:
For in person interviews
Regarding Homophobic Bullying

Interviews should take approximately 1 hour to complete

Personal experience of victimization not required
To participate

It's confidential and anonymous

Participants will be entered into a draw to win a prize worth $100!!

Please take a card (if available),

Or email Kristen at:
kdowling@oise.utoronto.ca

Questions, comments, concerns?
Feel free to contact me by email

Thanks!
APPENDIX E

Sample of Initial Coding Development

T3: I think mainstream schools could do a better job just by subtle little things, putting up a sticker in classrooms that say “homophobic bullying will not be tolerated,” the rainbow stickers, anything that shows that it’s concerned with everybody in school and we don’t expect students to check their identities as the door, because we certainly don’t, we ask them to give all of this information to us. The other we could be doing is encouraging staff to be out. The TDSB survey that was done a couple of years ago now, only showed that three or four percent of staff, identified as LGBTQ, and either people were reluctant to put that on a questionnaire, or we are way to low in the LGBTQ staff which doesn’t surprise me either because I’m surprised I’m sitting here as a teacher too. The last place I ever thought I’d end up was back in a school! So I understand why a lot of queer people would not be attracted to our profession. I think encouraging and making it safer for teachers to come out who are LGBTQ would make a big difference. Trying to encourage more people into the faculty of education who are LGBTQ, having our ministry write curriculum who support teachers who want to do this type of work and make it a mandatory part of curriculum. The curriculum is pretty vague in secondary, elementary it is a lot more outlined, so they could be putting pieces in to make sure that stuff happens. Making sure that every school has a GSA, that has grade 7 up, or whatever you want to call the organization, students against sexual stereotyping, my favorite is at Central Tech they have “Closet Space.” It was a former student from Triangle, he wanted to do something that no other student had; so he worked with T-M and they created Closet Space. It should be something that is talked about in schools and not pushed to the margins. The fact that we have an equity policy, I think that should be talked about in school’s, it is a useless policy if it is sitting on a Principle’s shelf, when teachers don’t even know we have an equity policy. I think that every teacher on the board should get a copy of the policy and every time it is updated they should get an updated copy of the policy.

Interviewer: And that is not standard practice?

T3: No! I was never given a copy of that document by the TDSB. It is available online at our print center for three or four dollars a copy, but it should be talked about. In services should be done on anti-homophobia. One thing that ticks me off, I don’t know if you are going to talk to S? He gets out and does anti-homophobia workshops across the TDSB, wherever he is invited, but often he goes back to the same schools all the time. Why? Why aren’t you training the staff so they can do the workshops themselves? Other things I’ve heard as well, is sometimes when those workshops are being done, the teachers go and do something else which sends a message that it is not very important. Teachers really need to participate in it.
Category = *How to create Change*:
- Talk about it
- Knowledge of policies
- Disseminating policies
- Ensuring consistency
- Student Initiatives
- Inclusive curriculum
- Teacher Education

Category = *Who is/can Create Change*:
- Admin
- Teachers
- Students
- Government
- External societal Influences
  - Community
  - Religious affiliations
  - LGBTQ community

**Thematic Development – Factors that Influence Homophobic Bullying:**

**Individual Factors:**
- Gender
- Gender Expressions typical vs. atypical
- Social support (or lack thereof)
- Student attributes

**School Factors:**

**Contextual Factors:**
- School demographics, student make-up
- Type: Alternative Arts, public school, catholic, etc.
- Visible support for LGBTQ youth: GSAs, out teachers, pride flags

**Process Factors:**
- Students upholding norms by staying in the closet/presenting as
gender typical
- Teacher Influence – do they intervene?
- School action – Teachings, assemblies held?
- Top-Down Approach – e.g., are the school boards developing
  appropriate policy and are these being communicated effectively?

**Social Factors:**
- Community Influences
- Family Influences
- Politics and legislative influences
Memos that contributed to the Development of the "Top Down Approach"

The following memo was initiated when reviewing a quote through the coding process by Teacher T3:

So the schools, well you are talking about what can they be doing, well they need to have better leadership. Well how can you have better leadership, how can you ensure this leadership, I mean the principal is the one who sets the tone for the school, so if the principal realizes the potential and the human rights angle with having a gay/straight alliance than he or she should support that and educate his or her staff about the need. Because it has been proven that having a gay/straight alliance in a school has helped those who don't identify as heterosexual feel safer in a school.

**My Memo Writing:**
This quote could be a catalyst for an idea about theory #1 = using a top-down approach to ensure that schools can uphold policies and use them to create action that can support LGBT youth. It isn't simply one persons job, or one departments job, to ensure that the expectations, communicated through policies, are doing what they are supposed to do. Government initiates Charter, school board initiates policies, and principles and staff continue the implementation.

→ A Follow-up memo focused on the addition influences on the social norms of whether change is easily implemented or if change is resisted. This Memo was entitles Upholding the Social Norms.

**My Memo Writing:**
Is there safety in upholding the norms of the majority? Public schools that have a conservative approach seem to foster the idea that discrimination against LGBT individuals is okay, or acceptable, whereas alternative schools appear to uphold the majority perspective that acceptance is the acceptable way to go and being LGBT is considered positive. Discrimination is strongly condemned.

What does the broader society say? Laws that make gay marriage legal or illegal, certainly these impact beliefs and perspectives. Churches that view being gay as a sin, political parties that uphold conservative ideals and advertise their values as being discriminatory towards LGBT people. Then we look to the closer sphere, the family...how do they respond, how does the community respond? Continued review of the various 'levels' needs to be explored.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>SUB-CATEGORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|        | Recommendations for Change | Further Education on HB  
|        |          | • Educating teachers  
| Macro to Micro Levels of Influence on Homophobic Bullying in High Schools |          | • Educating students  
|        |          | Contributing to General Mentality Change  
|        |          | Pre-Service Teacher Training  
|        | School Action | Enhancing Inclusive Curriculum  
|        | Teacher Action | Increasing Visibility & Resources for LGBTQ Youth  
|        |              | Top Down Approach  
|        |              | • Government  
|        |              | • School Board  
|        |              | Upholding Policy  
|        | School Variants | Limited School Action Around Homophobic Bullying Efforts  
|        |              | Sexual Education Issues  
|        |              | Factors that Stop Teachers From Taking Action  
|        |              | Negative Teacher Influence  
|        |              | Positive Teacher Influence  
|        |              | Alternative Arts School  
|        |              | Catholic Schools  
|        |              | Inner City Schools  
|        |              | Student Population Factors  
|        |              | • Dominant Ethnicity  
|        |              | • Cultural Influence  
|        |              | Size of School  

*Example of Developing Hierarchy During Thematic Analysis*
Triangulation with Expert/Advocate interviews:

The concept of Micro to Macro Influences of Change had been identified by the researcher in the initial teacher and LGBTQ youth interviews. From here, the researcher then assessed this potential theme through refocused coding, from the data gleaned from the four additional expert/advocate interviews:

Coding here, revealed a similar focus on the system of influential players regarding improving homophobic bullying for LGBTQ youth. All experts discussed the top-down or bottom-up approaches (or simultaneous), without this being a specific question posed. The following quotes provide a brief example of discussions from the experts about the importance of the entire system working in concert, and being effect simultaneously by parents in the microsystem:

And then there is also the quite honest reality, and this is across the country, of administrators who want to do the right thing and are terrified of parents who induce resistance and they have to deal with that...and if they feel they are not being supported by the structure above them, they will collapse pretty quickly. And you almost can’t blame them because they will take all the heat from a bunch of angry parents and depending on the social demographic of the community, those parents might get lawyered up or they might start talking to local politicians or whatever it is, they might start talking to the newspaper. You know we’ve had all sorts of variations of that over the years and even to the point where the board gets scared off doing the right thing and doing what they are supposed to do. - Kenneth

Nobody takes any account of your fine well crafted documents because there is no political pressure to do so but political pressure that just is a occasional demonstration to shout your anger in the streets, it doesn’t actually produce any kind of blueprint for how the institution changes needs to be done and that can only be done from the inside where it will blow over and nobody pays any attention, so the two things have to go together. - Tim

Following the interviews, the advocate/experts were then given a list of the themes that had emerged from the initial 14 interviews and the model. Specific Questions for the Bullying experts and LGBTQ advocates about the Influencing Homophobic Bullying Model: The question posed to them regarding the model was as follows:

MODEL 1. INFLUENCING & CHANGING HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING - The final model that emerged from this study revolved around areas believed to increase or decrease the frequency/severity of homophobic bullying in schools. Homophobic Bullying was described as a multifactorial issue that deserved a multifactorial solution. The following diagram (that mirrors Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model) emerged as a way to illustrate all the important influences on Homophobic Bullying. However, it is of interest to note that participants varied on whether change should stem from a “Top-Down approach” or a Grass Roots “Bottom-Up approach”.
→ The model was then presented.

(Q.) Do you feel that this model adequately represent the elements/issues involved in homophobic bullying in high schools today?

All responses supported a fit with the model, however, Faye re-emphasized that she believed it needed to be thought of in terms of both directions simultaneously, top-down and bottom-up for greatest efficiency of change. Steven highlighted that of the groups highlighted within the microsystem, there should be some attention paid to the varied authority and power differentials between the differing groups. For example, principals vs. teachers, teachers vs. peer/students. He also recommended that "out teachers might be considered as a key site as he has always felt as though schools with out teachers are where LGBTQ youth feel safer and more connected.

*These aspects were taken in and the researcher then revisited the data with these ideas in mind. The power aspect that Kenneth discussed was addressed in the theme that developed from the Expert interviews, entitled The ‘Why’ of Homophobic Bullying.

Finally, the model was then examined in the context of previous research.
Appendix F

Information Letter to the Toronto District School Board

Re: Ph.D. Dissertation Project - Assessing Homophobic Bullying: Developing a Measure to Protect Gay, lesbian, and Bisexual Youth

My name is Kristen Dowling, and I am a Ph.D. graduate student in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology (AECP) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I am conducting a study with the goal of examining the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and teachers and school staff on homophobic bullying in high schools. This project is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the Ph.D. requirements by the AECP Department at OISE/UT, and is being supervised by Dr. J. Roy Gillis.

Participation in this research will involve 2 different sections. The first section of the research will involve taking part in a face-to-face interview. A trained interviewer will be asking teachers questions about their opinions and experiences around homophobic bullying. They may also be asked about attitudes, perceptions, and school policy with regards to homophobic bullying. With participants consent, the interview will be audio taped for later transcription and analysis. The interview will be conducted in a private office at OISE/UT, and is anticipated to last for about 1 hour. Some individuals may find it uncomfortable to discuss private aspects of their experiences related to homophobic bullying and victimization. Alternatively, discussion of these issues may help to highlight and focus some questions Participants may have already been considering. Participants are not required to provide answers to any questions or reveal any information that they do not want to. In addition, participants will be provided with a list of contacts for support and counselling around gay and lesbian issues and bullying, if needed.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw at any point. Upon written request and prior to the beginning of data analysis, the data gathered from you, can be withdrawn and not used in the research. Participants are also free to decline to participate in any aspect of the research, or choose not to answer any questions.

Members of the research staff will transcribe and analyze the audiotapes of the interviews. Only members of the research team, and no one else, will have access to the research data including tapes and transcriptions. All identifying information will be removed from transcribed documents. The audiotapes, transcriptions and demographic information form will be stored in a locked file cabinet to which only project staff will have access. The tapes, transcriptions, and demographic information form will be kept for up to 5 years (until August 2013) for research purposes, after which point they will be destroyed. Reports of the results of this study will not contain any information that could
personally identify participants in the research. Overall results may be published or presented in total or in part in various psychological, academic and community sources, while maintaining the privacy of all participants.

The second part of the study will involve recruiting teachers to take part in an online survey. Participation in this section of the research will involve completion of an on-line survey, where they will be asked some demographic information, and about their opinions and experiences around homophobic bullying. Again, they may also be asked about attitudes, perceptions, teacher responses, and school policy with regards to homophobic bullying. Participants are not required to provide answers to any questions or reveal any information that they do not want to. The survey is anticipated to take approximately half and hour. Again, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw from the study at any point.

It is the researchers hope that the Toronto District School Board will allow me access to the teachers’ email list to recruit participants for this study. Participants of either section will be entered into a draw to win a prize of gift certificates valuing $100. Kristen Dowling will be available to answer any questions or concerns you may have for the duration of the study.

Ms. Dowling may be reached at:

kdowling@oise.utoronto.ca

Supervisor:

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Much Thanks,

Kristen Dowling, M.Ed.
Appendix G
Braun and Clarke’s (2006)
Phases of Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined 6 phases of thematic analysis. Below is a table devised to explain each one of these phases. Each phase on the left-hand side is matched with a corresponding description of how I met these phases within the current study. (Please note: This was developed from a similar table in their research outlining the key stages).

1. Familiarizing myself with the data. Conducted all interviews, and re-reading the transcribed interviews to ensure accuracy.

2. Generating initial codes. Initial line-by-line coding was conducted to gain a strong understanding of the data and to start to begin conceptualization of ideas. Line-by-line coding ensures fit and relevance of emerging themes: two important criteria for grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

3. Searching for themes. Line-by-line coding was followed by more focused coding, which involved separating and synthesizing the data through generating categories that were conceptualized to organize the passages/quotes from the data the data and to compare and contrast any emerging information. If passages did not fit with existing categories, a new category was then developed to fit the content presented.

   This led to the development of higher-level categories. Constant comparison was practiced when possible, through new emerging data, comparisons with other categories and through referring to the researchers memo’s used to track the analytic process. True constant comparison was not possible within the framework of this study however, due to the fact that data analysis and data collection did not occur completely simultaneously.

   Categories were then ‘collated’ into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Reviewing themes. Once the themes were identified, I returned to the original transcripts to compare the themes in relation to the original text. Patterns within the data began to emerge that emphasized the participants’ processes dependent on a number of particular criteria outlined from the themes (e.g., the type of school they attended, whether they were out in high school).

   Themes were then mapped out and re-organized in relation to one another in order to deepen the use and understanding of the themes. The awareness of such trajectories allowed for the development of the overall theory to come to light.
5. Defining and naming Themes. Development of a codebook to define and explain each theme was developed. Then rallying the perspectives of activists and experts in this field on homophobic bullying and gleaning their insight into the accuracy and feasibility of each theme.

6. Producing the report. Once the themes were solidified through the above-noted coding process, they were compared with existing literature to create a comprehensive understanding of related findings. Reviewing the extracts that best exemplified the themes and organizing the themes and model in relation to the research questions in preparation for writing the report.