Acceptance, Inclusion, Advocacy:  
Creating a Generation of LGBT Allies in the Elementary School

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Teaching  
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative research study was to discover the ways in which primary and junior educators can work towards creating school environments that are safe and inclusive for individuals of all gender and sexual identities. The main research question of this study was: How do educators create equitable and inclusive environments within the elementary school community in order to create “safe spaces” for students with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations? Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with three participants who had worked in the field of education for a minimum of two years. The findings of this study indicate the need for continued LGBT equity work in schools, due to the persistent existence of homophobia and transphobia amongst students and staff. In order to decrease instances of discrimination based on gender or sexual identity, this study demonstrates the importance of individual student support, infusion of LGBT themes in classroom teaching, and whole-school LGBT equity programming. The experiences of educators in this study and within existing research determines the need for increased funding and support for educators who engage in LGBT equity work, as well as the need for solidarity from fellow staff and administrators.

Key Words: LGBT equity, safe spaces, allyship, elementary schools
Acknowledgements

I wish to recognize the individuals who have supported me throughout the process of developing my Master of Teaching Research Project. I am very thankful for your presence throughout this journey and I offer you my sincerest gratitude.

First, I would like to thank my three participants, Kathleen, Andy, and Naomi. Each of you provided a unique perspective on this research topic, and I found your experiences both incredible and encouraging. Thank you for your willingness to be open and honest with me about your professional and personal experiences. Your commitment to equity work in the domain of education is truly inspiring, and you have encouraged me to continue pursuing equity initiatives in my career. I wish you the very best of luck.

I would like to acknowledge my family, especially my mom and dad, for their continuous love and guidance. You have always encouraged me to pursue my goals, and you have worked very hard to ensure that I had everything that I needed to achieve them. Thank you does not begin to express my gratitude.

Thank you to David for being the person who encouraged me to choose OISE as the place where I would continue my education. You set me on the path to this place, and you have been a source of wisdom and support ever since. Thank you for always guiding me in the right direction.

I would like acknowledge my instructors, Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic and Sarah Cashmore, for their tireless efforts in the research portion of this program. Your mentorship and commitment to students is a testament to our success in this program. Thank you.

Finally, a big thank you to my fellow P/J 271 cohort members. I am so happy to have shared this two-year journey with all of you. Congratulations, we did it!
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

The efforts of activists, allies, supporters and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities have resulted in significant strides in creating and sustaining legal rights for the diversities of gender identities and sexual orientations in Canada. These significant moments of triumph include the legalization of gay marriage and, within the domain of education, the revised edition of the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

Teachers in Ontario are now required to implement topics regarding gender and sexuality within the elementary curriculum. However, these efforts have been met with much opposition. Gabriel Flores (2014) explains that “some colleagues and straight allies who implemented LGBT themes in their classroom had more problems with parents; some had been verbally abused and/or harassed” (p. 115). As a result, the need to promote equity for members of LGBT community is still present. Scholars such as Renée DePalma and Mark Jennett (2010) argue that education must “play a major role in transforming deep-seated prejudices, both at personal and institutional levels” (p. 15). The education of students within the primary and junior years is essential in restructuring our understanding of gender and sexual diversity and to protect individuals of these minority groups. Through teacher discussions, curriculum, and pedagogy, educators will be able to create generations of students that are accepting and supportive of all identities.

1.1 Research Problem

Efforts to promote LGBT equity within the domain of education have been “distinctly cautious when compared to actual societal change on these fronts” (Rayside, 2014, p. 191). As
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outlined in the second chapter of my research study, misconceptions regarding the understandings of young children in relation to gender and sexuality, as well as the preoccupation with protecting the innocence of children have served as barriers to approaching these subjects within the elementary grades (Kehily, 2004, Renold, 2000, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, Wallis & VanEvery, 2000).

The work of Joseph R. Jones (2015) indicates that while issues of discrimination and harassment based on gender identity or sexual orientation do occur within the primary school, “most homophobic bullying is not addressed by school officials” (p. 108). Additionally, DePalma and Jennett (2010) acknowledge that “school-based homophobia” is mostly discussed “in the context of secondary school or post-secondary school” when it is “described in popular media or school-based policy” (p. 16). They also recognize that “transphobia is barely recognized at all” (2010, p.16). Despite this lack of acknowledgement, educators and scholars recognize that elementary school students are aware of gender roles and the existence of sexuality through observations of their peer interactions (Kehily, 2004, Renold, 2000, Wallis & VanEvery, 2000). Furthermore, the hegemonic reflections of heterosexuality and the gender binary within the elementary school create detrimental effects on the development and well-being of students who do not conform to traditional identity roles. Emma Renold (2000) confirms these dangers in her research by stating “the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality to conform has particularly damaging consequences for those boys and girls who are positioned as Other to the normalizing and regulatory (heterosexual) gendered scripts” (p. 324). Implementing discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation through pedagogy is essential in working towards the goal of creating equitable environments within the elementary school for students of diverse gender and sexual identities. Through student awareness and understanding, educators
will hopefully transform existing prejudices towards members of the LGBT community, and the elementary school will in turn become a safe space for individuals who may be questioning their gender or sexual identity or going through their self-identification process.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Through this qualitative research study, I explored the various ways in which educators can support the goals of the new Health and Physical Education Curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015) by creating equitable environments that maintain the safety and well-being of students with diverse gender and sexual identities. I have chosen the word “educator” because, ideally, the promotion of gender identity and sexual orientation inclusivity would be implemented by all staff members within the school community, including teachers, administrators and support staff. The term “school community” refers to all areas within schools; ideally, gender and sexual inclusivity would be implemented in areas such as classrooms, administrative offices, lunchrooms, playgrounds and schoolyards. I believe that this particular research topic is essential due to the increasing societal awareness regarding the diversities of sexual orientations and gender identities. Additionally, the subject of gender and sexuality in education has become very current with the release of Ontario’s newest Health and Physical Education Curriculum (2015); more research is needed in this field in order to best support teachers who are now required to approach gender and sexuality education in primary and junior classrooms. Furthermore, due to the fact that the updated Health and Physical Education Curriculum requires teachers to educate students about diverse gender and sexual identities, it is very important for educators to create environments that promote mutual respect and support for students of all identities.
1.3 Research Questions

The following question was the central focus of my research study:

How do educators create equitable and inclusive environments within the elementary school community in order to create “safe spaces” for students with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations?

Additionally, other important issues regarding gender identities and sexual orientations in elementary schools were addressed with the following subsidiary questions:

1. How do participating educators support individual students who are questioning their gender or sexual identities?

2. How are educators promoting a culture of LGBT equity within broader school contexts through whole-school programming and educational initiatives?

3. How, if at all, do educators work with parents to support a student who is questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation?

4. What are some challenges that arise when attempting to challenge the traditional gender binary and heteronormative constructs within the school community?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

As a cisgendered, heterosexual student, I was not aware of my privilege regarding gender and sexual identity until these topics were briefly addressed during my high school education. Throughout my experiences as a Residence Life Staff member during my undergraduate and graduate studies, I have encountered many members of the LGBT community who have told me their stories of struggling to find a place within the heteronormative structures of societal institutions. These difficulties were especially prevalent during their schooling experiences, where many of these individuals were questioning their gender or sexual identities. Many of
these students also described their struggles with non-conforming gender identities due to the existing gender binary that is foundational in societal establishments.

The majority of these students chose to disclose their personal experiences to me because part of my mentorship role as a Residence Life Staff member was to be their confidant; I lived within the residence community and assisted my groups of first year university students with their transition to university. It was during this time in their lives when many of my students decided to outwardly disclose their gender identities or sexual orientations. These students told me that being away from home and finding new peer groups at university helped facilitate their coming out process because they were away from potentially unsupportive family members and friends who had always known them as heterosexual or cisgendered. These students trusted me enough to recount their experiences of being taunted on a daily basis because they exhibited effeminate behaviour compared to other boys, or because they had no interest in being heterosexually desirable and finding a boyfriend. I was very touched by the openness of these students and their ability to confide in me. I also found many of their stories of being bullied or harassed in elementary or high school quite troublesome, especially because I was working towards the goal of becoming an elementary school teacher one day. Their stories made me realize how important the elementary school environment can be for students who do not necessarily have safe spaces to go home to after school. These students also taught me how devastating and damaging bullying and harassment can be when an individual is already in the process of questioning their gender or sexual identity. This research study was conducted with these students in mind, and with the hopes of finding ways to ensure that all children, regardless of gender or sexual identities, feel safe, welcomed and supported within their school communities.
1.5 Overview of the Study

I have responded to the aforementioned research questions by conducting a qualitative research study. I have used purposeful sampling approaches to interview between three to five educators about their strategies in creating communities that are inclusive of diverse genders and sexualities within elementary schools. In the second chapter of this study, I have reviewed the literature regarding the existing barriers to educational approaches, the hegemonic reflections of the gender binary and heteronormativity in elementary schools, and the need to expel existing homophobic and transphobic prejudices through education. In Chapter Three I elaborate on the research design, and in Chapter Four I have reported my research findings, as well as a discussion about their significance in relation to the existing research in this field of study. In the fifth chapter I explain the implications of my research findings, relating to my own teaching practices and for the educational research community. I have also provided a series of questions that were raised during the research process, and identified the areas for future research regarding gender and sexuality education in elementary schools.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The discourses surrounding the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations have broadened over the last decade. Western culture has shifted its understandings of the pluralities of gender and sexual identities, and our society has continued to become more accepting and supportive of individuals of the LGBT community. Despite this progress, acknowledging and shifting the discourses surrounding gender and sexual identities has been delayed within the field of education. The primary school in particular has been an environment in which the existence of pluralities within gender identity and sexual orientation is not overtly discussed through teacher instruction, curriculum and pedagogy (Cullen & Sandy, 2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, DePalma & Jennett, 2010).

In this chapter, I report the existing research of previous scholars to discuss the importance and need for explicitly teaching primary and junior students about the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations. I begin by discussing the barriers to teaching gender and sexuality that exist due to misconceptions regarding the need to protect childhood innocence and the level of awareness that children possess in relation to gender and sexuality. Secondly, I discuss the role of the elementary school as a microcosm of larger society for its students, and the reflections of hegemonic perceptions regarding the gender binary and heteronormativity that exist within the institution and amongst peer groups. I conclude my literature review with a discussion regarding the importance of transforming learned prejudices towards members of the LGBT community by challenging hegemonic understandings through education. By overcoming existing barriers and informing elementary school students about the pluralities of gender identities and sexual orientations, educators can create school communities that celebrate gender
and sexual diversity, and support individuals who may be at different stages of the self-
identification process.

2.1 Deconstructing Barriers: Teaching Gender and Sexuality in Elementary Education

The release of Ontario’s newest Health and Physical Education curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015) indicates significant progress in recognizing the importance of educating students of all grades about sexual orientation and gender identity within the public education system. An example of the progressive additions of the new curriculum can be found in Strand C, titled Healthy Living. This strand includes a subsection regarding Human Development and Sexual Health, which begins in first grade and continues to eighth grade. The expectations in this section begin at the basic level of identifying “body parts, including genitalia, using correct terminology” (p. 93) in first grade. By eighth grade, students are required to “demonstrate an understanding of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation” (p. 216) as well as identifying “factors that can help individuals of all identities and orientations develop a positive self-concept” (p. 216). The inclusion of learning about LGBT identities in the junior years, as well as a focus on developing positive self-perceptions demonstrates a progressive stance and commitment to maintaining the health and well-being of members of the LGBT community, either present or in the future.

Although Ontario teachers are now required to teach topics relating to gender identity and sexual orientation, there are still barriers in place that make the task of approaching these subjects very difficult within the classroom. The research of Flores (2014) reports that teachers have faced parental backlash in response to implementing LGBT themes within their pedagogy. Additionally, David Rayside (2014) has identified teachers’ personal beliefs and attitudes regarding gender and sexuality norms can affect their motivation to implement LGBT equity
themes within their practice. This problem becomes more complex for teachers and
administrators when their students are younger, specifically within the primary grades. Fin
Cullen and Laura Sandy (2009) have also reported that one of the most significant barriers to the
implementation of LGBT themes within primary education is teachers’ “reluctance to engage
with the subject area at all” (p. 144). Furthermore, Renée DePalma and Elizabeth Atkinson
(2010) discuss the challenges that arise due to the absence of LGBT representation amongst staff
in elementary schools. More specifically, the perceived “absence” of LGBT identities within the
elementary schools creates a difficulty “for teachers…to challenge perceptions of the
(apparently) absent ‘Other’.” (p. 1671).

The widespread notion of protecting childhood innocence has served as a barrier for
approaching subjects of gender and sexuality within the classroom (Blaise, 2009, Cullen &
beings who should not be exposed to inappropriate or controversial content has made this task
complex for elementary teachers (Blaise, 2009). Furthermore, the belief that children are asexual
beings who are not aware of sexuality or gender roles until exposure has also proven to be
problematic for teachers (Cullen & Sandy, 2009). As discussed in this section of my literature
review, research has indicated that young children are in fact aware of the existence of sexuality
and gender norms, and that this knowledge permeates throughout their peer interactions within
the elementary school.

2.1.1 Protecting childhood innocence

In this cultural climate, children are typically viewed as innocent beings that require
protection from the corruption of adult thoughts and behaviours (Blaise, 2009, Cullen & Sandy,
2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, Kehily, 2004). As a result, efforts are made to shelter children
from the complexities of adult relations. This approach involves labeling various taboo topics as inappropriate and denying children the opportunity of learning about these subjects until they reach the age of maturation (Blaise, 2009). However, it is evident that children have become increasingly exposed to what is considered “inappropriate” content in their day-to-day lives; the romantic lives of adults around them, sexual behaviour and content in the media, and even the conversations or behaviours of older children often include overt or hidden references to subjects that are not considered “child-friendly”.

DePalma and Atkinson (2010) state that an “understanding of children as asexual and naïve” beings contradicts “the fact that many [children] will undoubtedly have some personal experience with non-heterosexuality and gender variance through family and friends, and will undoubtedly be (mis)informed by popular media” (p. 1672). Despite the realities of the increasing rate of exposure, the primary school appears to remain as one of the last environments in which the existence of sexuality is not recognized as part of everyday life (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000).

Discussions involving desire and sexual references are customarily viewed as topics that are inappropriate for children. However, romantic interactions are considered child-friendly topics if they involve a heterosexual pair of consenting adults and do not acknowledge the existence of sexuality. Cullen and Sandy (2009) identify the ways in which children view the “authenticity” of heterosexual relationships through their questions and “interests in the heterosexual world of love and romance” (p. 149). Therefore, topics that include “non-conforming” gender and sexual practices, behaviours, or identities are also labeled as inappropriate content for children. DePalma and Atkinson (2010) confirm this notion in their research by stating that “non-heterosexuality has been constructed as hyper-sexual at the same
time that sex has been constructed as irrelevant, or even dangerous, knowledge for children” (p. 1672).

The existing research has shown that the notion of protecting children by avoiding inappropriate subject matter is one of the barriers faced by teachers in approaching topics of gender identity and sexual orientation in primary and junior classrooms (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, Kehily, 2004, Wallis & VanEvery, 2000). The task of bringing gender and sexuality discourse into the elementary classroom becomes increasingly challenging when we consider the following concerns of teachers: the disapproval of parents (DePalma & Jennett, 2010, Flores, 2014) and the ethics of influencing children through teachers’ existing biases (Bratsis, 2015). Although progress has been made in understanding and accepting pluralities within gender and sexuality, many adults continue to oppose the existence of these identities for reasons that include cultural, religious, and personal beliefs (DePalma & Jennett, 2010, Rayside, 2014). These adults may voice their strong opinions and disagree with their children learning about the pluralities of gender and sexual identities in school (DePalma & Jennett, 2010, Flores, 2014). Furthermore, even parents who are accepting of non-conforming gender and sexual identities may oppose to their children being exposed to these topics at a young age (DePalma & Jennett, 2010, Flores, 2014). Due to the belief that childhood innocence must be protected and that children are highly susceptible to being influenced during the primary years, parents may also voice concern regarding their child’s developmental process being influenced by discussions of gender and sexuality within the classroom (Blaise, 2009). Addressing the concerns of opposing parents serves as a barrier to approaching these subjects within the classroom, especially if their disapproval becomes a point of contention with administrators at the school. In the next section, I will discuss the existing research that demonstrates that, despite efforts to shelter children from
inappropriate content, students within elementary schools do possess an awareness regarding gender roles and the existence of sexuality.

2.1.2 Awareness of gender roles and sexuality amongst children

The existing research has shown that despite attempts to protect childhood innocence through the lack of inappropriate discourse within elementary schools, children are aware of sexuality and gender roles (Kehily, 2004, Renold, 2000, Wallis & VanEvery, 2000). This awareness translates to performance amongst peer groups, which “serves an important performative function in the enactment of desires and anxieties associated with the domain of the sexual” (Kehily, 2004, p. 70). Situated in the safety of their peer groups, children are able to act upon their curiosity or anxiety by performing learned behaviours and identities. Due to the significant dominance of societal institutions around them, these performances generally follow the hegemonic order of heterosexuality and gender binaries (Blaise, 2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, Renold, 2000). Furthermore, research on the social interactions between elementary school students has indicated that “boys and girls are indeed sexual subjects, aware of the links between gender and sexuality and the significance of sexuality to an understanding of themselves in relation to others” (Kehily, 2004, p. 71). Through play and performance, children conceptualize the implications of gender and sexual identities that may not be overtly taught through classroom instruction. Research within early childhood classroom settings has also demonstrated that “children themselves are constantly creating and re-creating meanings about gender and sexuality with each other. It is through their talk and interactions with each other that they are constituting what it means to be ‘girl’ or ‘boy’ in that particular place” (Blaise, 2009, p. 455). Although gender roles and sexual identities may not be directly approached through pedagogy and curriculum children develop an awareness regarding the existence of gender roles and sexuality
through peer interaction. Mary Jane Kehily (2004) speaks to the children’s awareness of gender roles and sexuality by explaining that children demonstrate an “active and knowing sexuality…in peer relations and social interactions…” (p. 66). Moreover, Kehily (2004) explains that “children in primary school appear aware of the links between gender and sexuality and engage in the production of sex-gender identities through social relations with peers…” (p. 70). This awareness may derive from the relationships of adults around them, the content of media that constantly surrounds them or even through peers who may have learned about these topics through parents, caregivers or siblings. Despite efforts to shelter children and protect their innocence at home or within the classroom, children ultimately learn about gender and sexuality through observation and peer interaction within the primary school (Kehily, 2004).

Through the careful observation of children’s play and behaviours amongst peer groups in primary school settings, researchers have concluded that children are indeed aware of gender roles and sexual identities (Blaise, 2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, Kehily, 2004). Although their performances generally reflect the hegemonic institutions of society around them, they certainly possess knowledge about gender and sexuality, and may even be curious or anxious about the implications of gender roles and sexuality through the developmental process amongst their peers. I would like to conclude this section of my literature review chapter by arguing that we must educate children about gender roles and the existence of sexuality in order to protect them. Through their research, Amy Wallis and Jo VanEvery (2000) conclude that “as long as primary schools are believed to be asexual environments we will not be able to provide real protection (from sexual abuse, from bullying, from self-hatred, from discrimination) for all the children who need it” (p. 420). It is important that our focus be redirected from protecting the innocence of children, to informing them about gender and sexuality-related topics that will
serve to protect them from predators, harassment, and from potentially misunderstanding their own identities.

2.2 Hegemonic Reflections of Gender and Sexuality in the Elementary School

The elementary school, as a microcosm of society as a whole, reflects the hegemonic systems of the gender binary and heterosexual relationships. These hegemonic orders are reflected explicitly and covertly in educational materials, discursive practices, and within the structures of the institution (DePalma & Jennett, 2010). Consequently, heterosexuality and conforming to the assigned male or female gender roles has been the norm within the elementary school: “schools need to examine ways in which everyday school practices, such as gendered school uniforms, school records listing ‘mother’ and ‘father’ and the persistent lack of representation of lesbian, gay and non-gender-conforming people in curriculum materials constitute institutional heteronormativity and sexism” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, p. 1670).

Students who do not conform to these norms, or who interact with individuals who have different gender or sexual identities, are labeled and treated as “the other” within peer groups. This section of my literature review discusses the existing research of scholars in determining the reflections of the gender binary and heteronormativity within the elementary school.

2.2.1 Reinforcing the gender binary

The notion of the gender binary divides gender into two distinct categories: male or female. The traditional understanding of gender deems that all individuals are assigned a gender at birth based on their biological male or female characteristics. However, more recent views of gender have strayed from the gender binary and shifted towards a gender spectrum (Linstead & Pullen, 2006). This understanding recognizes that gender does not follow the social constructs of male and female, and that individuals can emulate and adopt the aspects of gender that align with
their identity (Gender Spectrum, 2016). Despite shifting understandings of gender, the gender binary continues to dominate the structures of societal institutions (Linstead & Pullen, 2006).

The elementary school continues to be an environment that explicitly and covertly reflects the notion of the gender binary. Structures within elementary schools, such as gendered washrooms and change rooms, continue to separate students by two genders and therefore overtly reflect the gender binary that exists within society as a whole. Certain teacher interactions with students also continues to support the idea of the gender binary in a covert manner, such as addressing students as “girls and boys” or dividing students into groups based on gender (“boys versus girls”). The research of Jay Major and Ninetta Santoro (2013) asserts that “teachers play a critical role in creating the sorts of safe spaces that open up hegemonic discourses to scrutiny and enable children to construct hybrid identities” (p. 70). These moments of categorization by gender force students to explicitly identify themselves as male or female amongst their peer groups. Although this may present as a simple and routine task for most cisgendered students, this practice does not provide accommodation or even a place of belonging for students who do not conform to the traditional male or female binary. Therefore, students who do not fully identify with their assigned gender at birth are labeled as “other” and do not belong within the practices of their school (Cullen & Sandy, 2009).

The majority of elementary school students also conform to the hegemonic gender binary within their social interactions (Blaise, 2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, Kehily, 2004, Renold, 2000). The existing research of scholars has indicated that when situated amongst peer groups, children within the primary years will perform traditional gender roles that conform to the notion of the gender binary (Kehily, 2004, Renold, 2000). The division of genders through peer interactions becomes more apparent when students choose to create peer groups based on the
gender binary: “single sex friendship groups create the illusion of gender difference by defining boys and girls relationally, thus concealing intra-gender differences and points of similarity across gender” (Kehily, 2004, p. 70). Instances of gender division amongst students creates effects that are similar to the outcomes of the gender binary that is imposed on students at the institutional level within elementary schools. Children who do not conform to the traditional gender roles of male or female are labeled as other when faced with instances of gender division amongst peer groups (Cullen & Sandy, 2009).

2.2.2 Compulsory heterosexuality

Although the traditional understandings of sexuality have been shifting within the macrocosm of society as a whole, heterosexuality has remained as the dominant sexual orientation. The elementary school has been susceptible to heteronormative influences, such as the lack of LGBT representation amongst teaching staff and within literary works and other educational media that is used within the classroom (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). Although sexuality is viewed as inappropriate subject matter for children, heterosexuality is portrayed as the dominant orientation for romantic or sexual adult interactions: “With young children, heterosexual norms are recognized when their social practices reinforce that there is only one best, right, or ‘normal’ way to be in a relationship and that this is a heterosexual one. Heterosexual norms are viewed as regulatory when they encourage children to maintain stereotypical gendered roles” (Blaise, 2009, p. 457). In the elementary school, heteronormativity is reinforced through the discourses and practices of adults within the institution: “The visibility of particular kinds of heterosexual relationships, through the wearing of rings, using ‘Mrs’, mock and real weddings, teaches children who do not live in families like these that part of their lives are unspeakable in public” (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000, p. 420). As with other adults in their
lives, teachers and various educational personnel have significant impacts on the way that children view and interpret adult interactions and behaviours. The lack of explicit representation in elementary schools from adults with varying sexual orientations demonstrates to students that heterosexuality is the norm. Similar to the effects of the gender binary in elementary schools, compulsory heterosexuality creates an othering and isolating effect for students who do not conform to traditional sexual orientations. The research of Robert McGarry (2013) discusses the negative outcomes of compulsory heterosexuality within the domain of education, by explaining that LGBT students report “feeling less connected to their school communities” when their identities are not reflected or ignored (p. 27). McGarry states that school environments in which heterosexuality is presented as the preferred or dominant form of sexuality can “reinforce the anti-LGBT behavior by students and contribute to a hostile school climate for LGBT students” and can “lead to limited knowledge and a lack of skill development in terms of negotiating healthy sexual relationships” (p. 27). Furthermore, this sense of isolation also affects students who have affiliations with members of the LGBT community, including students with homosexual parents (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000).

The research of previous scholars has indicated that primary school students reflect heterosexuality within their social interactions (Blaise, 2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, Kehily, 2004, Renold, 2000). Students within the elementary school adopt the gender binary and heteronormativity that is depicted by the adults and the structures of the institution, and use these traditional identities as performative functions amongst peer groups (Renold, 2000). These peer interactions also indicate the perceived link between gender and sexuality; in order to act properly according to their assigned gender identity, students must perform as either the male or female roles within heterosexual relationships. The research of Renold (2000) has confirmed that
both girls and boys are expected to adopt the conventions of heterosexuality in order to adhere to strict gender roles. After observing the peer interactions of primary school students Renold stated the following regarding the performative gender roles of females: “for many, the pressure to perform as heterosexually desirable and to access the position of girlfriend was too overwhelming to resist, so fundamental, it seemed, were heterosexual performances in the construction of and investment in a ‘proper’ femininity” (2000, p. 315). Regardless of their sexual orientations or their opinions regarding sexuality, Renold’s study confirmed that female students must strive to capture the attention of male students and to attain the relationship status of a heterosexual couple, in order to conform to the social norms within the peer group of the primary school. This study also revealed troublesome information regarding views of homosexuality amongst male elementary school students. Renold observed that “discourses of homophobia were expressed vehemently by boys who did not engage in overt heterosexual boyfriend/girlfriend relationships and more frequently than by boys who did ‘have girlfriends’ and who were ‘going out’” (2000, p. 322). Similar to female students, male students are also required to strive for and engage in heterosexual relationships in order to adhere to the rules of the elementary school peer group. However, males who were not involved in heterosexual relationships at the time exhibited homophobic behaviour in an attempt to project and defend their masculinity.

The involvement in or desire for heterosexual involvement in elementary schools reflected the heteronormative constructs within the microcosm of larger society. Furthermore, heteronormativity reinforces the existing gender binary within elementary schools by encouraging students to perform their assigned gender roles of male or female within their heterosexual interactions. Scholars have also concluded that heteronormativity not only produces
damaging effects on children who do not conform to hegemonic gender roles or sexual orientations, but on all gender and sexual identities: “the ‘heterosexual matrix’ or ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ is not only oppressive to lesbians, gays, bisexuals and others who do not conform to the hegemonic construction of heterosexuality, it is also the basis on which gender, as a relation of domination and subordination, is constructed” (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000, p. 420). In order to create a safe and welcoming place for all students within the elementary school, regardless of gender and sexual identities or power relationships, we must challenge hegemonic understandings of gender identity and sexual orientation through education.

2.3 Transforming Existing Prejudices and Challenging Hegemony Through Education

Educating elementary school students about the pluralities of gender identities and sexual orientations is essential to their understanding of the complexities of adult relationships and identities in the larger societal context. Elementary school teachers play an instrumental role in creating generations of young students who are open-minded about the diversities of gender and sexual identities. Flores (2014) explains that it is the responsibility of all educators to “teach tolerance and acceptance” to all students, as well as “providing the necessary tools and preparing the student population for the diverse world in which they will live and thrive” (p. 119). Consequently, it is through education that children will be more supportive of each other’s identities; hopefully this will reduce the instances of homophobia and transphobia that occur within educational institutions. Furthermore, informing children about the diversity of these identities will lead to more acceptance and support for individuals who have already chosen to and will chose to adopt non-conforming identities later on in life (Biddulph, 2006, McGarry, 2013, Young, 2011). Ensuring that students understand the pluralities of gender identities and sexual orientations also assists students who may be questioning their gender or sexual identities.
or who students who may be moving forward with their self-identification processes (Biddulph, 2006, McGarry, 2013, Young, 2011).

2.3.1 Bullying of students with non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientations

Students within all educational institutions may be susceptible to bullying, harassment or isolation based on particular aspects of their identities. This risk increases for students who do not conform to hegemonic labels and are members of minority groups, such as students who do not conform to traditional gender roles or students who do not outwardly express heterosexual desire (McGarry, 2013, Young, 2011). The research of Abe Louise Young (2011) provides insight on the experiences of LGBT students and the prevalence of LGBT bullying and harassment within the school environment:

In a school of 1,000 students, up to 100 will be gay, lesbian, or bisexual; 10 will be transgender; and one will be intersex (biologically neither male nor female). If their lives are average, 87 of them will be verbally harassed, 40 of them will be physically harassed, and 19 will be physically assaulted in the next year because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Sixty-two will feel mostly unsafe going to school. Thirty will harm themselves in what may be suicide attempts. Their academics will suffer because social and emotional needs go hand in hand with educational needs, and nervous students don’t learn easily. (p. 35)

Furthermore, the effects of othering individuals with non-conforming gender identities or sexual orientations reaches beyond the classroom. Students with exposure to these identities outside of the classroom (for example, through family members) are also othered and are susceptible to bullying and harassment: “homophobia and transphobia are not limited to LGBT people, but can affect anyone, including those with lesbian and gay parents and anyone who does not conform to

The current method of approaching incidents of bullying in relation to LGBT students is reactive; isolated incidents are addressed after the harassment has already taken place. DePalma and Atkinson confirm that “homophobic bullying continues to be cast as a particular problem rather than as a systematic institutional manifestation of cultural bias, and this can leave room for institutional oppression on the grounds of sex, gender and sexuality” (2010, p. 1670). In order to minimize the risk of harassment for students who do not conform to traditional gender or sexual identities, we must implement teachings about different identities from an early age. Educating elementary school students about the existence of non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientations must be implemented as the means to promoting acceptance and support for all identities.

Explicit acceptance and support for non-conforming gender or sexual identities within the school system will create safe spaces for all identities during the potential stages of their self-identification processes (McGarry, 2013, Wright, 2010, Young, 2011) Although the process of questioning or identifying their gender or sexual identities may still be challenging for students, creating a safe and welcoming environment within the entire school community may ease some aspects of their identification processes. McGarry (2013) explains that “attending a school with an LGBT-inclusive curriculum is related to both a less-hostile school experience for LGBT students and increased feelings of connectedness to the school community” (p. 27). Students of the LGBT community may feel that it is easier to self-identify or come out within the peer group if the school environment is supportive and welcoming. Moreover, for some students the elementary school may be safer than their home environment due to misunderstandings of prejudices that are present within the family structure.
The support and guidance of teachers is essential in creating safe spaces for students within the elementary school. Not only will teachers work towards the goal of reducing the risk of homophobic or transphobic bullying and harassment through educating their students about the pluralities of gender and sexual identities, but they can also act as supportive adults who will advocate for students who are working through the self-identification process. The research of Young (2011) argues that “students learn more, make better grades, and have enhanced emotional well-being when the adults in their school stand up for their right to learn free of verbal and physical harassment” (p. 35). The overt presence of LGBT educators also greatly assists in creating safe spaces within the elementary school by providing role models for students who may be questioning or identifying their gender or sexual identities. However, research has demonstrated that there is currently a lack of representation of LGBT adults in elementary schools: “None of their teachers are lesbian, gay or bisexual, as far as they can tell. By hiding their sexuality on the grounds of protecting the children from the teasing, which could result, children learn that it is inevitable that bullying will occur if they are ‘different’ in this way” (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000, p. 420). By educating and creating open dialogues about gender identity and sexual orientation within primary and junior classrooms, teachers can assist in creating safe spaces for LGBT students and staff members within the elementary school environment.

2.3.2 Educational approaches and barriers

Educational discourses regarding the pluralities of gender and sexual identities within elementary school classes is essential in creating generations of supportive and respectful students that are accepting of all identities. Despite societal progress in understanding and supporting members of the LGBT community, individuals with diverse gender or sexual
identities are still regarded as minorities and the topic of gender and sexuality is still labeled as inappropriate content for children (Blaise, 2009, Cullen & Sandy, 2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, Kehily, 2004). The existing research of scholars has demonstrated that although teachers may be passionate about promoting gender and sexual diversity in the classroom, many struggle to approach these topics within the elementary school (Cullen & Sandy, 2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010).

Literature and various forms of media that normalize and inform elementary school students about the diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, serve as an appropriate manner to introduce these topics within a classroom of young learners (Cullen & Sandy, 2009). Despite the existence of texts such as picture books and stories that include characters who identify as members of the LGBT community, research has indicated that teachers do not feel that these texts are adequate in terms of availability or content: “Whilst the resource books are useful tools in exploring sex–gender identities and family structures, there is a need for wider, more inclusive texts that are comprehensible to children. These texts may explicitly locate characters as lesbian, gay, bi or trans, yet such characters’ gender–sexual identities may be incidental to the plot” (Cullen & Sandy, 2009, p. 152). In order to support teachers who wish, and are now required, to discuss topics of gender identity and sexual orientation within elementary classrooms, there must be an increase in the availability of appropriate teaching materials for the primary and junior age groups.

Teacher anxieties regarding parental backlash and lack of support from other educators has also served as a barrier to creating open dialogues regarding the pluralities of gender and sexual identities within the elementary classroom (DePalma & Jennett, 2010, Flores, 2014). The research of scholars has also indicated that “while many teachers reported that they were willing
to respond to homophobic bullying, such as reacting to homophobic language, very few were willing to engage in curriculum-based work. Again, there was a general fear that parents would disapprove of ‘promoting’ homosexuality on religious or moral grounds, and that these grounds would be seen as legitimate” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, p. 1671). Despite progress that has been made in supporting gender and sexual diversities within the last decade, many adults continue to oppose non-conforming gender and sexual identities. Although other adults may not outwardly oppose the existence of pluralities within gender and sexual identities, teachers may encounter parents who fear that their child may be encouraged to “practice homosexuality” if exposed to this subject matter within the primary and junior classroom. In order to ensure that the fear of disapproval from parents does not continue to act as a barrier to teaching gender and sexual diversity within the classroom, administrators and fellow staff members at the elementary school must support each other, as well as relying on support from the Ministry of Education and the Ontario College of Teachers.

2.4 Conclusion

The existing research of educational scholars has concluded that throughout their lived experiences, children develop an understanding of sexual and romantic relationships. This awareness usually corresponds with the dominant heterosexual pattern of relationships and the binary of genders. Minorities of gender identity and sexual orientation are usually excluded or unacknowledged within curriculum and pedagogy, unless the child has received direct exposure from adults in their lives.

The elementary school also serves as the main social setting for the majority of its students. The explicit and covert reinforcements of hegemonic gender binaries and heterosexual relationships in the microcosm of the elementary school do not reflect the pluralistic identities in
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the macrocosm of society as a whole. In the majority of elementary schools, students perform traditional gender roles and engage in heterosexual relationships, labeling students who do not conform as “other”.

The existence of bullying and the process of othering students who do not conform or who associate with individuals who do not conform to traditional gender or sexual identities are prevalent through all stages of educational institutions. Education of elementary school students is essential to creating generations of individuals who will accept and support all identities. However, despite progress in this field, teachers face many barriers to approaching these subjects within the classroom due to existing prejudices towards non-conforming identities.

In conducting this research, I hope to make a contribution to the existing research regarding the need for LGBT equity within elementary schools. Through the voices and lived experiences of my participants, my research aims to provide a diverse range of whole-school and in-class strategies to promote LGBT equity and safe spaces within the domain of primary and junior education. Furthermore, the lived experiences of educators in this study supports the existing research of scholars by demonstrating the continuous need for LGBT equity practices in schools, as well as further research on the topic of gender and sexuality within the elementary school.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the research methodology and explain the significance of the research approach given the parameters and purpose of my study. I begin by providing an overview of the research approach and the procedures used within the study, before describing the central method of data collection. I then provide insight regarding the participants of my study, including the sampling criteria and procedures used to acquire participants, as well as brief biographies of the educators who participated in the study. I also explain the data analysis procedures before clarifying the ethical procedures that were taken into considering during the completion of this study. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this methodological approach, as well as identifying the strengths of the methodology in relation to my research purpose and questions. I conclude this chapter by summarizing the main methodological decisions that were used in completing this study.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach. Two key methods were employed to explore the research question: reviewing existing literature and research that was relevant to the research topic, and conducting semi-structured, in-person interview with two or three educators. Qualitative research begins by building upon the existing research of previous scholars. The researcher studies the findings that have already been discovered in relation to their topic of study, and works to advance the existing understandings regarding their research problem. The qualitative researcher then gathers data regarding their research problem from the perspectives and lived experiences of individuals who have been exposed to the topic of the research. In his article regarding the uses and importance of qualitative research, Roger Jones
(1995) states that “qualitative research begins by accepting that there is a range of different ways of making sense of the world and is concerned with discovering the meanings seen by those who are being researched and with understanding their view of the world…” (p. 2). By conducting interviews with selected participants, the researcher gains first-hand insights and opinions regarding the topic of the research: “the qualitative researcher relies on the participants to offer in-depth responses to questions about how they have constructed or understood their experience” (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 23). Qualitative research studies are comprised of the voices and narratives of their participants; they are given an avenue in which to discuss meaningful experiences that they have encountered. The focus of qualitative studies and the data collected centers on understanding the “richly textured experiences” of individuals and their reflections on those experiences (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 22).

Qualitative methods are regularly used in the field of social science research, and are often centered on research questions and purposes regarding social justice issues (Cooley, 2013, Jones, 1995). The qualitative research method presents a “richness of detail” that provides personal understandings regarding the “complicated nature of teaching and learning” through the lived experiences of educators that is recounted through interviews (Cooley, 2013, p. 250). I believe that a qualitative method is the best approach given the nature of my research topic and its focus on gender identity, sexual orientation and equity for these identities within school communities. The work of educational scholars such as Aaron Cooley (2013) have stated that “… [qualitative research] has increased the understanding of the complexities of everyday educational predicaments and specific sites of social interactions” (p. 254). My research aims to understand the existing social inequities within the education system, and the ways in which educators have worked towards equitable and safe spaces for all gender identities and sexual
orientations. I believe that the experiences of educators in working with students who identify as members of the LGBT community are invaluable to my research topic. The insights and recounted efforts of the participants of my study have provided frameworks and approaches that can be implemented in other schools in order to create populations of students that are accepting and supportive of all identities.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The data collection process in qualitative research studies is generally conducted through structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews of individuals or groups (Jackson et al., 2007). Given the parameters, purpose and questions of this qualitative study, the main method of data collection used was a semi-structured interview protocol. Barbara DiCicco-Bloom and Benjamin F. Crabtree (2006) explain that semi-structured interviews “are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee” (p. 315). Semi-structured interviews are often used as the instruments of data collection in qualitative studies, due to their informal, open-ended, yet in-depth nature that allows researchers to be flexible and responsive to emerging themes within the interview process (Jackson et al., 2007, DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview approach was advantageous in completing this study as it allowed for a natural development of rapport between researcher and interviewee, as well as the ability to collect more detailed data regarding the individual lived experiences of participants.

The interview protocol for this study was organized into four distinct categories (see Appendix B). Interviews began with general questions regarding the participant’s background information, including their employment experiences in the field of education and specific
information regarding their current school. The second section of the interview protocol focused on the beliefs and perspectives of participants regarding gender identity, sexual orientation, the reasons for their interest in gender and sexual equity, and their experiences with the LGBT community. Although personal in nature, this section of the interview protocol was implemented in order to collect in-depth data regarding the lived experiences of participants in relation to the social issues outlined in the study (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview protocol continued with questions regarding the practices of participants in educating students about the pluralities of gender and sexual identities, and the measures taken to promote safe spaces for all identities within classrooms and throughout school communities. Next, participants were asked to discuss available supports and challenges that they have faced in promoting gender and sexual equity within school settings. The final section of the interview protocol focused on the next steps that participants have planned and the advice that they have for creating safe spaces for all gender and sexual identities within school communities.

3.3 Participants

This section of the research methodology chapter explains the methodological decisions regarding the participants of my study. I have outlined the sampling criteria that was developed and used in order to find participants that best find the parameters of the study and the research purpose. I have also explained the sampling procedures that were adopted in order to find and recruit educators for this study. Lastly, I have also provided brief biographies of the participants involved in the study.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following criteria was used during the educator participant recruitment process:

1. Educators will have a minimum of two years working in the field of education.
2. Educators will have demonstrated leadership and/or expertise in the area of LGBT equity.

3. Educators will have witnessed and/or experienced instances of homophobic or transphobic bullying, harassment, and/or exclusion within a school environment.

4. Educators will have demonstrated a commitment to the creation and implementation of “safe spaces” for LGBT students within the classroom and/or throughout the school community.

The sample of participants within a qualitative research methodology should be reasonably homogenous; interviewees should “share critical similarities” through lived experiences related to the research question (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Due to the fact that the main research question of this study is contemporary and addresses relatively recent considerations within the field of education, participants are only required to have a minimum of two years working in school communities. This criterion was purposefully established in order to expand the number of participants in the study to include educators who are newer to the profession. Participants were also required to show leadership and expertise regarding LGBT equity by demonstrating initiative such as participating in or leading professional development opportunities, completing research studies or developing teacher resources and support materials.

Another sampling criteria requirement involved participants’ experiences with transphobic or homophobic harassment or exclusion. These experiences relied on the lived experiences of participants; they could have been personal in nature or through witnessing the bullying of a student, either in their personal lives or within their role as an educator. This specific criterion was implemented in order to ensure that participants understood the inequities faced by LGBT students, and were driven to promote social change within the peer groups of students. Lastly, in
order to address the main research question of this study, participants were required to
demonstrate commitment to the creation of safe spaces for LGBT students within school settings.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Qualitative research sampling strives to “draw a representative sample” from the larger
population, in order to generalize the results of the studying sample back to the population as a
whole (Marshall, 1996). Qualitative research methodology can involve several types of sampling
procedures, including purposeful and convenience sampling. Purposeful sampling “seeks to
maximize the depth and richness of the data to address the research question” (DiCicco-Bloom &
Crabtree, p. 317). During the purposeful sampling process, qualitative researchers select the
“most productive” participant sample in order address the research question (Marshall, 1996).
Convenience sampling procedures are also used in qualitative research methods, and involve
selecting participants that are the “most accessible” to the researchers (Marshall, 1996). In
comparison to other sampling procedures, convenience sampling also requires less time and is
less costly to the researchers (Marshall, 1996).

Given the limitations of this qualitative study, in terms of time, cost, ethics approval, and
my role as a graduate student, the convenience sampling procedure was used to recruit
participants. As a teacher candidate and graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in
Education, I have the benefit of being immersed in a community of teacher colleagues and
mentor teachers. For the purpose of this study, I have relied on my existing contacts and
networks within the field of education to recruit educator participants. Teacher colleagues that
were consulted for the recruitment of participants included my fellow teacher candidates at
OISE, as well as other teacher candidates that I have encountered during professional
development sessions, practicum placements, and personal friends from other teacher education
programs. Additionally, mentor teachers that assisted me during the participant recruitment process included associate teachers and their colleagues from practicum placements, professors from the Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning department at OISE, teachers that I am acquainted with in my personal life, and teachers that I have met through professional development opportunities.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

Three participants were selected for interviews in this study. All participants occupy professional roles in education in the Greater Toronto Area, Canada. At the time of interviews, two of these individuals were classroom teachers and one was a learning coach; all three were employed by the local public school board. All participants had been working in the domain of education for a minimum of nine years, and demonstrated considerable experience and expertise regarding fostering and maintaining LGBT equity in schools at the primary and junior levels. All three participants identified with the LGBT community in their personal lives. In order to maintain anonymity, all participants have been assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of this study.

Kathleen

Kathleen has worked in education for eleven years, and has taught at her current school for approximately eight to nine years. At the time of the interview, she was a core French teacher for grades four to eight. Kathleen also taught dance and drama for the second and third grades at her school, and taught kindergarten in the summer. Kathleen has occupied various roles as a teacher during her time in education, such as coaching various sports teams and supporting student cabinet. At the time of the interview, she was employed at a model school in the GTA that was situated in a culturally diverse community. During the interview process, Kathleen
stated that she identifies as bisexual.

**Andy**

Andy has worked in education for nine years, and was in his fourth year of teaching at his current school. At the time of the interview, Andy was teaching grade five/six at a downtown, inner-city school in the GTA. Andy describes his school as very culturally diverse, and that families in the school community were of lower socio-economic status. Andy stated that he personally identifies as gay during the interview process.

**Naomi**

Naomi has been working in the field of education for ten years. At the time of the interview, Naomi had been employed as a STEM learning coach for two years. Naomi has occupied various roles during her career in education, and most notably, started the first Gay-Straight Alliance group in one of the schools in which she was employed. Naomi has also run a few different school clubs, has been an active member of school equity committees, and was chair of the model schools for inner-city committee. During the interview process, Naomi disclosed that she personally identifies as lesbian.

**3.4 Data Analysis**

Qualitative research methodology focuses on various forms of social inquiry that generally rely on “non-numeric data”, including the analysis of various text forms such as “content, conversation, discourse, and narrative analyses” (Jackson et al., 2007). The data analysis process in this study began with transcribing the interviews that were conducted with educator participants. The following steps included coding the interview transcripts, and using the research questions of the study as interpretive tools. This approach followed the data analysis protocol for quantitative research, in which researchers “review and identify text
segments…while making interpretative statements during the process of identifying patterns for organizing text” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, p. 318). Each transcript was coded individually in order to identify categories of data and recurrent themes within these categories. Next, the categories and themes from interview transcripts were compared in order to synthesize themes where appropriate. The final stage of the data analysis process in this study involved comparing the themes identified through my research findings with the conclusions that have been made through the existing research of other scholars. Later on in this study, I speak to the meanings that derive from a comparison of my research findings and that of the existing literature that was reviewed during this study.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Ethical considerations in qualitative methodologies involve the safety of participants and protection of human rights (Carr, 1994). In order to protect the safety and human rights of all participants, the following ethical considerations were taken into account during the completion of this study: consent, confidentiality, risks of participation, right to withdraw, member checks and data storage. The process of informed consent is the main method used to protect participants within a qualitative study (Carr, 1994, Orb et al., 2001). All participants in this study were asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix A), which provided an overview of the study, addressed ethical implications and specified the expectations of participation. In signing this letter, participants gave their consent to be interviewed, audio-recorded and agreed to participate in one semi-structured interview that lasted approximately forty-five to sixty minutes in length.

Given the sensitive nature of the research questions in this study, the confidentiality of all participants was of utmost importance. In an article discussing the ethics of qualitative research, Angelica Orb, Laurel Eisenhauer and Dianne Wynaden state that “if researchers are maintaining
the principle of beneficence, overseeing the potential consequences of revealing participants’ identities is a moral obligation. The use of pseudonyms is recommended” (p. 95). In order to protect the identities educators involved in this study, all participants were assigned a pseudonym. Furthermore, any identifying markers related to the schools or students of participants were excluded from the writing process of the study.

The personal and sensitive nature of the topic of this research study created minimal risks for its participants. The interview process included questions of sensitive subject matter, including participants’ personal connections to the LGBT community, their reasons for being involved in implementing and sustaining LGBT equity, and personal or witnessed accounts of bullying, harassment, or exclusion based on LGBT identities. It was possible that these particular questions may have made participants feel vulnerable by triggering emotional responses. Considerable effort was made to minimize this risk by providing participants with interview questions ahead of time. Throughout the interview process and consent letter, participants were reminded that they could refrain from answering any questions that they were not comfortable answering. Before the data analysis process, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews in order to clarify or retract any statements. Furthermore, participants were also notified and reminded of their right to withdraw from participation in the study at any stage of the research process.

Although confidentiality is of vital importance in order to protect the safety and human rights of participants, scholars have stated that qualitative research also requires a sense of “confirmability” (Orb et al., 2001). This means that all activities pertaining to the research study must be documented (Orb et al., 2001). Participants in this study were notified that all data, including audio recording and transcripts, has been stored on my personal, password protected
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The methodological limitations of this quantitative study involve the limited scope of the research. This includes the limited number of participants in the study, as well as the limited viewpoints that are reflected through interviews due to the similar roles that participants occupy within school communities. Scholars have stated that one of the main restrictions of qualitative research is the fewer amount of participants that are recruited for studies (Jackson et al., 2007). Due to this limitation, the data collected by qualitative researchers cannot be used to generalize the views and perspectives of other individuals within similar populations as that of participants of qualitative studies (Jackson et al., 2007). This specific limitation is certainly present within the scope of my research study. The findings reported in my study through the lived experiences of educator participants cannot generalize the experiences and perspectives of teachers within the broader education community.

Furthermore, the parameters of the ethics approval that has been granted for this study only allowed research to conduct interviews with educators as the means for data collection. These restrictions pose as limitations for the scope of the research study because they prohibit the conduction of interviews with students or parents within school communities. The perspectives and lived experiences of these individuals would have been greatly advantageous given the personal and developmental nature of the social justice issue outlined in my research question. The voices of parents and students who are affiliated with the LGBT community could have provided meaningful insight into the experiences of LGBT students within school communities. Furthermore, the ability to deviate from the interview structure by implementing other forms of data collection could have also been beneficial for this study. Conducting
anonymous surveys or observations within classrooms and the broader community could have allowed my research to gain a multitude of perspectives that are affected by LGBT inequities in school settings, as well as the ability to witness first-hand accounts of interactions between students when situated in peer groups. These personal perspectives could have also legitimized the need for increased research, educational policy and pedagogical practices for promoting LGBT equity in school communities.

Despite the limitations of this study, the qualitative research method was invaluable in collecting the lived experiences of educators who have developed expertise in the area of LGBT equity in school settings. The intimate nature of the qualitative research interview allows for the collection of “rich data” that is produced by providing “an illuminating picture of the subject” that demonstrates “intricate details” regarding their lived experiences in relation to the research question (Orb et al., 2001). Conducting semi-structured interviews with educators has allowed me to gather in-depth lived experiences and perspectives from individuals who have considerable experience within the field of education. Qualitative research scholars have stated that “…the strength of such an interactive relationship is that the researcher obtains first-hand experiences providing valuable and meaningful data” (Orb et al., 2001, p. 718). The process of collecting data through one-on-one interviews also provides a space for teachers to discuss their values and opinions regarding the research question. Providing educators with the ability to voice their perspectives and opinions validates their view and practices by giving them the ability to express and reflect on their lived experiences. The invaluable perspectives and expertise of educators gained through this qualitative study will add to the body of existing research regarding LGBT equity in the education system, and hopefully, assist other educators in implementing and sustaining safe spaces for all identities within their school communities.
3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained the methodology of my research study. I began by discussing and defining the qualitative research procedure, and explaining the significance of this method in relation to my research purpose and question. I continued by describing the main instrument of data collection, explaining the semi-structured interview protocol and the benefits of this approach given my research question. I then provided detailed insight about the participants of my study; I described the sampling criteria and the sampling procedures used to recruit participants. The sampling criteria for this study purposefully required teachers to have had personal or witnessed experiences of homophobic and/or transphobic harassment, in order to provide an understanding of the experiences of LGBT students. Furthermore, teachers were required to demonstrate knowledge regarding LGBT identities and communities, as well as a passion for LGBT advocacy through their teaching practice. In order to recruit participants, I relied on my existing network of colleagues within the domain of education. I also conducted research regarding individuals or organizations who have made significant contributions to fostering LGBT equity in education; these individuals and organizations were contacted and invited to participate in this study. I also provided brief descriptions of each educator participant that was interviewed in this study. I continued by discussing the data analysis process that was used in this study, which included transcribing, coding and interpreting data that was collected during the interview process. I also provided a discussion regarding the ethical review procedures of my study, outlining measures that were taken to protect the safety and human rights of all participants. Lastly, I acknowledged and discussed the methodological limitations of the study including the limited scope of the research, as well as the limited number of participants and the similar roles that they play within school communities. I also discussed the
strengths of my research methodology, such as the detailed insights of the lived experience of educators regarding my research topic. In the next chapter, I report the findings of my research study.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I present the findings of my research by comparing and contrasting the voices of my research participants, as well as the existing research of scholars that was discussed in my literature review. My research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with three GTA teachers who have had considerable experiences in implementing LGBT equity strategies in elementary schools and within the field of education more broadly. All three participants identified as members of the LGBT community, and shared their insights in working with students, parents and staff. The purpose of these interviews was to determine the ways in which educators are working to promote LGBT equity and fostering “safe spaces” for individuals of all gender and sexual identities within elementary schools. The research findings presented in this chapter are examined through four themes. In the first theme, I discuss the notion that despite existing homophobia and transphobia in schools, establishing positive relationships with teachers assists students in feeling safe and supported within the school community. My second theme acknowledges that embedding LGBT themes in the classroom and empowering students to become allies fosters LGBT equity within the broader school community. In my third theme I present teachers’ experiences with backlash from parent communities, and discuss the fact that despite parental backlash, the Ontario Ministry of Education mandates LGBT equity work in schools and offers protections for teachers who perform this duty. My final theme explores challenges that teachers have faced in implementing LGBT equity strategies in schools, including a contested lack of support from the school system, conflicting beliefs amongst teaching staff and discrimination towards LGBT teachers. These topics are discussed in further detail through specific sub-themes, including ways of addressing
homophobia, backlash from parent communities, homophobic attitudes amongst teaching staff, and the role of GSAs and broader school programming. Finally, I conclude this chapter by summarizing the key learnings from my research and discussing the significance of my findings.

4.1 Despite Existing Homophobia and Transphobia in Schools, Establishing Positive Relationships with Teachers Assists Students in Feeling Safe and Supported Within the School Community

Participants in this study indicated that they have either directly worked to support at least one LGBT student or have encountered colleagues who have had this experience at the elementary level. This section focuses on research findings regarding the ways in which teachers can provide support for individual students who are at various stages of questioning or learning about aspects of their gender or sexual identity. Providing one-on-one support for LGBT students is of utmost importance given the emotionally challenging and complex aspects of students’ journeys. A teacher’s role in providing individual support can become complicated given the marginalization of LGBT students in schools and teachers’ level of comfort in approaching this subject. The participants in this study have shared meaningful insights and strategies for supporting individual students, including the existence of homophobia in schools, ways in which teachers can support LGBT students and concerns regarding student safety.

4.1.1 Homophobia is still prevalent within schools at the primary and junior levels, and teachers strive to use these instances as teachable moments

Teachers interviewed in this study confirmed that homophobia is a persistent problem that exists at the elementary school level. Two participants in particular, Andy and Kathleen, stated that both general and targeted instances of homophobia and transphobia are very prevalent issues within their schools. Kathleen stated that homophobic and transphobic bullying is still a
“huge problem” in her school. She explained that students will avoid LGBT topics in front of teachers, and that as a result, bullying will happen outside of the classroom: “a lot of kids will not say certain things to please the teacher, but then you know on the school yard or in the hallway it will come out.” Andy described the homophobia in his school as “regular” and “rampant” amongst the students, and indicated that there was severe backlash from the parent community in response to the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum that was released in 2015. Andy provided an example of a targeted homophobic bullying incident that occurred within the grade that he was teaching at the time:

One of my students, his dad had passed away quite a number of years ago…and he’s always perceived to be, you know, he sort of has stereotypical qualities of a gay person. So he gets picked on a lot. And, actually this was at the end of the year too, one of the other students said to him “this is why your dad died, because you’re a big faggot.”

This incident aligns with existing research which indicates that children are labeled as other amongst peer groups when they do not conform to traditional gender roles or follow the structure of the gender binary (Cullen & Sandy, 2009). The observations of participants in this study and the existing work of scholars confirms that homophobia and transphobia continue to be problematic within elementary schools. Regardless of students’ perceived or confirmed LGBT identities, students are targeted for not conforming to the gender binary or to existing heteronormative structures. The next section of this theme presents participants’ preferred approaches in addressing instances of homophobia and transphobia within school communities.

During the interview process, participants were asked about their reactions to homophobia and transphobia within their respective schools. All participants stated that instances of homophobia or transphobia, whether targeted or general derogatory statements, should be
used as teachable moments. Kathleen discussed the importance of diverging from planned lessons to address these instances because “sometimes you just have to put the curriculum aside. And if you see these things that’s totally a teachable moment.” Andy and Naomi both stressed the importance educational and productive approaches to instances of homophobia or transphobia. Naomi discussed the rationale for diverting from punitive measures based on observations made throughout her practice: “we’re not going to punish and we’re not going to reprimand, we’re going to have discussions…kids will repeat a lot of what they say or they hear at home so it’s just education that’s why we’re here.” Andy’s focus on educating instead of reprimanding also included the acknowledgement that young students often repeat words and phrases that are commonly used around them without a proper understanding of the meanings of these terms:

Sometimes kids say things and they don’t really know what it means like calling someone a fag and they don’t know where that history comes from. And it’s not just “hey go to the office because you said that” you can’t just do that, you have to educate at the same time. And so I use those opportunities to be those teaching and learning moments.

All participants in this study also stressed the importance of ensuring that school staff members adopt similar strategies in responding to instances of homophobic or transphobic behaviour. Participants indicated that the common goal in addressing these incidents should work towards a change in students’ understanding of derogatory terms and targeted LGBT harassment.

Although participants in this study discussed their views on the best ways to approach instances of homophobia and transphobia, existing research indicates that many educators are still not adopting any methods with which to approach these incidents but are choosing to ignore them instead. In his study of pre-service teachers’ preparedness in approaching LGBT equity,
Jones (2015) found that “the most alarming data revealed most homophobic bullying is not addressed by school officials” (p. 108). These findings contrast with the discussions of participants in this study, who emphasized the importance of promptly addressing homophobia and transphobia amongst students. This contradiction is discussed further in this chapter in a subsequent section regarding teachers’ conflicting beliefs and approaches to LGBT equity.

4.1.2 Students must feel safe in order to learn

During their respective interviews, Andy and Naomi both discussed that in order to students to have the ability to perform academically, they must feel that their personal safety is not threatened while they are at school. Andy provided an explanation for why students are unable to learn when they do not feel safe at school:

…there’s a part of our brain that shuts down when we feel unsafe in schools, when people are struggling with their sexuality, when there is homophobia, when there is sexism, when we don’t feel safe, when we don’t feel like we are ourselves our brains shut down and we are unable to learn.

Andy also uses this explanation with his class at the beginning of each academic year in order to set the tone for the year and establish a set of community standards. Naomi also mentioned this topic in her interview by stressing the importance of having LGBT equity in schools because “nobody can learn if they don’t feel safe.” Despite this understanding, homophobic and transphobic bullying continues to occur within elementary schools, as explored in the preceding section of this chapter. The work of Young also acknowledges the correlation between students’ feelings of personal safety and their capacity for learning in school (2011). Young states that “their academics will suffer because social and emotional needs go hand in hand with educational needs, and nervous students don’t learn easily” (p. 35). Young’s research also argues
that “students learn more, make better grades, and have enhanced emotional well-being when the adults in their schools stand up for their right to learn free of verbal and physical harassment” (p. 35). Therefore, teachers and school staff members play an essential role in advocating for their students and creating an environment in which all students, regardless of gender or sexual identity, have the ability to maximize their potential for learning without fear of maltreatment from peers.

**4.1.3 Fostering trusting relationships with students is essential in supporting students with diverse gender and sexual identities**

Establishing and maintaining student rapport was identified as one of the key strategies to supporting LGBT students by participants in this study. Although only one participant had experienced the moment of students coming out to them, the other participants agreed that developing a supportive connection with students could provide them with an ally if they began to question or experience the coming out process in the future. Naomi described her reaction to the experience of students coming out to her, an occurrence that started at the beginning of her teaching career:

> When I started teaching from my first year I had kids come out to me. I don’t know maybe because of the kind of teacher I was or I’m very open to talking about things but they gravitated towards me and they started to, like in Grade Six and Seven, they would start saying this is what they were feeling.

Kathleen echoed the notion of students understanding that they can have open and candid discussions with a teacher that they trust. Kathleen discussed the importance of this open communication with students who are conflicted in different ways. Whether or not they identify...
with the LGBT community, Kathleen has interacted with students who are inquisitive about the pluralities of gender and sexual identities:

> A lot of kids that I find in our community are conflicted with religion, but they’re so curious they’re like “I want to know more but I can’t talk about this with mom and dad” …and so a safe space would be like “okay well let’s talk about that, and we don’t have to tell anyone else.”

Kathleen also stated that in order to build a trusting relationship with teachers, students must feel that the teacher cares about their well-being and has their best interest in mind. Michael E. Bratsis (2015) discusses ways in which teachers can support LGBT students with a focus on students who have been bullied or harassed because of their identities. While outlining these strategies, Bratsis also states that in order “to help LGBT students, teachers need to be aware of their own biases and consider how their own viewpoints might influence how they talk with students” (2015, p. 12). This statement applies to both of the approaches discussed by Kathleen and Naomi; supporting students who identify with the LGBT community as well as students who are conflicted about LGBT subjects can be viewed as a sensitive topic, and therefore teachers must be aware of their own influences on students’ perceptions and beliefs. Kathleen and Naomi’s experiences indicate that students may have questions regarding LGBT subject matter, and given the existing research, should be cautious when approaching these conversations and be aware of their influences on students’ perceptions and beliefs.

Participants in this study stated that establishing and working to maintain a safe space within the classroom plays an essential role in supporting LGBT students. Andy’s description of safe spaces focused on the importance of feeling accepted, rather than merely tolerated, within the community:
Well safe space to me is about accepting students for who they are…making someone feel like they belong, that they’re accepted, it’s not just for tolerance it’s about acceptance and making people feel safe in the space that they’re in.

Andy’s distinction between students feeling accepted instead of simply tolerated is a notable aspect of his answer to this question. In contrast, Kathleen’s understating of safe spaces focused on young students’ natural identities as curious beings and the desire to explore. Kathleen stated that “safe space is a place where students can ask… a place where you can ask and be curious and be supported.” Kathleen also mentioned the importance of teachers ensuring that students understand that the space is safe, in order for them to have the liberty to ask questions and explore their thoughts and beliefs. In his work about the implementation of LGBT inclusive curriculums in schools, McGarry (2013) discusses the impacts of LGBT equity on students’ feelings of safety and inclusion at school. McGarry states that “attending a school with an LGBT-inclusive curriculum is related to both a less-hostile school experience for LGBT students and increased feelings of connectedness to the school community” (2013, p. 27). One of the essential elements of providing individual support to LGBT students, as determined by existing research and the experiences of participants in this study, is ensuring that students feel safe as they move through their day-to-day experiences as active members of school communities.

4.2 Embedding LGBT Themes in the Classroom and Empowering Students to Become Allies Fosters LGBT Equity Within the Broader School Community

The purpose of this study was to determine strategies for promoting LGBT equity and inclusion in elementary schools. In order to foster a community that is safe and inclusive for all identities, students must feel protected both in the classroom and within the school as a whole. This section of my research focuses on the following question: how can educators ensure that
LGBT students are safe from harassment and discrimination when there is no teacher available to defend them? Broader school locations in which students could interact without direct supervision includes hallways, the lunchroom, washrooms, the playground or schoolyard.

Participants indicated that in order to create a school community that is in itself a safe space, educators must work to create a generation of students who understand the importance of LGBT equity and can act as allies for LGBT students. Themes discussed in this section of my research findings include pedagogical approaches to infusing LGBT equity in the classroom and empowering students to be leaders through whole-school equity programming.

**4.2.1 Teachers embed LGBT themes in their practice by representing LGBT individuals and histories through literature, various forms of media and topics explored in the classroom**

In order to normalize and de-stigmatize topics related to the pluralities of gender and sexual identities, participants stated that sexuality and gender equity must be embedded into daily teaching practices. Kathleen, a core French teacher, expressed that at times she has had difficulty infusing LGBT issues within her teaching of French language, grammar and culture. However, she did urge that LGBT topics must be talked about “all the time” and should be woven into as many different units as possible. Andy, a homeroom elementary teacher, discussed the ways in which he has infused LGBT-related topics in his classroom teaching:

> It’s embedded all year round and it’s in all the picture books that you use. It’s in the examples that you use, it’s embedded in the novels and the heroes that we talk about or the people that are part of our history.

McGarry (2013) also echoes that “lesson plans through the curriculum should include positive representations of LGBT people” (p. 27). The voices of participants in this study and educational
scholars stress the importance of LGBT infusion within daily teaching practices that occur throughout the academic year. In order to normalize the existence of diverse and gender identities, LGBT themes must be reflected in pedagogy through individuals, histories and topics that are explored in the classroom.

4.2.2 Empowering students to become LGBT allies and using school-wide programming promotes LGBT equity beyond the classroom

Participant in this study identified two central strategies in promoting LGBT equity through whole-school initiatives: empowering peers to become LGBT allies and school-wide programming that teaches students about the LGBT community. Kathleen and Naomi both discussed the importance of reaching out to existing groups within the broader school community in order to encourage students to become allies and activists in working towards LGBT equity. Kathleen stated that, in her experience, encouraging mutual respect amongst students and working with specific groups of students to promote LGBT equity has proved to be successful in working towards the goal of reducing instances of LGBT bullying: “Empowering student leaders is a huge part of ending or stopping that bullying.” During her interview, Naomi’s description of her school climate indicated higher levels of student activism through student groups and clubs. This includes her work in creating a Gay-Straight Alliance group (hereafter referred to as GSA) within her school. Naomi’s experience in empowering students to become LGBT allies included a proactive approach that was created by the students in her school’s GSA:

The students got together and they created an hour workshop. So we had all of these Grade Five kids that were going to be feeding into our school for Grade Six. So we went to all of those schools and invited all the Grade Five classes to these workshops that were
on challenging gender stereotypes…you want to set the tone of you’re coming into our school, this is how we feel, we’re very inclusive and language is important.

Naomi also stated that there were students, and parents of students, who chose to enroll in her school because of the inclusivity that was demonstrated during these outreach workshops. Young (2011) articulates the need for encouraging peers to work towards equity within schools because “a climate in which intolerance of any kind flourishes puts undue pressure on all students. The choice is stark: either hide one’s own differences, or risk standing up against peers in conflict” (p. 35). According to the existing research and the experiences of participants in this study, student leaders and allies must be encouraged to permeate the message of acceptance and inclusivity throughout the school community, in order to reduce the occurrences of homophobic and transphobic behaviour that occurs amongst students.

Participants provided contrasting, and sometimes opposing, observations regarding school-wide initiatives for promoting gender and sexual equity in their respective schools. Given Andy’s earlier description of the “rampant” and ongoing homophobia in his school, it was not surprising to discover that there were no school-wide resources for LGBT students at his school. Andy discussed the perceived implications of this lack of resources on students who may identify with the LGBT community: “Unfortunately, because I’m feeling like the school doesn’t feel safe for kids who might be questioning or LGBT, I think they stay in the closet and there would be no resources for them.” Andy also speculated that there would be mixed reactions from students if a GSA club was created in the school; although some students would be interested in participating, Andy stated that many students would oppose the idea of an LGBT affiliated group. This opposition to LGBT equity initiatives from the student body had occurred previously in Andy’s school, in response to workshops that were organized by the junior teachers at his school:
I know a couple teachers in our school brought in the TEACH program to do workshops in the school. And that was a complete and utter disaster. Not the program itself but the backlash that happened afterwards…there was some really really awful negative backlash after the students came in from the program.

The general backlash in Andy’s school in response to LGBT equity strategies derived from both students and parents within the school community. Andy’s observations of the parent backlash that occurred as a result of Ontario’s revised HPE curriculum will be discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

By contrast, Naomi described highly successful experiences in creating a group of student activists who advocated for LGBT equity within their school community through the creation of a GSA. Naomi was the teacher at her school who took the initiative to create the first GSA with her administrator. Naomi describes this process in the following excerpt from her interview:

[Creating a GSA] was put into our years of action, our four years of action for the Board. Every school had to have a positive space and there was a big promotion of GSAs in elementary schools because of that…it was really about creating a space that was safe for everyone. And our statement was always an anti-oppression statement…we called it a GSA, we wanted to claim that word.

Naomi stated that one of her intentions in creating a GSA at the elementary level was to encourage students to become aware of issues that affect marginalized groups and to encourage them to take part activism initiatives before entering high school. This goal is affirmed in Young’s (2011) research, which states that “most youth are looking for opportunities to make a better world, and want to be involved in things that matter” (p. 35). Naomi’s observations after
implementing the GSA aligned with the belief that students are generally interested in activism initiatives and working towards creating change. Naomi discusses the shift in peer relationships that she observed after students became involved with the GSA:

…and that started happening with the GSA. Other kids will come along and they will police that, they will oversee it and say “you know what you can’t say that, you can’t say fag or dyke” or whatever they were saying in the hallway or to other kids.

Naomi’s experiences in creating a GSA and viewing the ally behaviour and activism that occurred as a result demonstrates that students at the elementary level can become passionate about establishing LGBT equity within their school communities. However, the negative responses to LGBT programming that Andy witnessed at his school suggests that despite the fact that students in this age group can be very receptive to equity initiatives, the impact of prejudicial beliefs within their communities outside of school can serve as barriers to successful LGBT equity initiatives.

4.3 Although Educators May Face Backlash from Parent Communities, the Ontario Ministry of Education Mandates LGBT Equity Work in Schools and Offers Protections for Teachers Who Perform this Duty

Participants indicated that parent involvement is highly impactful when working with students, especially when working with students in the younger grade levels. Relationships between parents and teachers can become complex when sensitive matters, such as gender and sexual identity, become part of the considerations while working with parents. The fact that many adults do not share similar views about the pluralities of gender and sexual identities can also further complicate these matters. Participants in this study presented a range of experiences in working with parents; some had never experienced working with parents, whereas one
participant experienced extreme difficulties in working with parent communities in the past year. The main topics discussed by participants regarding parent involvement included parents’ responses to LGBT equity approaches and the ways in which teachers are protected to continue promoting LGBT equity in schools.

4.3.1 Fear of parental backlash serves as a barrier to promoting LGBT equity within elementary schools

Kathleen addressed teachers’ reservations in infusing LGBT equity in their practice during her interview by stating that “a huge barrier would be people who are just like ‘I don’t want to talk about it because I’m scared of backlash.’” She also mentioned that fears of backlash were not only shared by teachers, but by administrators who responded to equity initiatives within the school. DePalma and Atkinson (2010) also discuss teachers’ barriers to infusing LGBT topics within their teaching practice in their article regarding the heteronormative nature of elementary schools. They identify one of these barriers as fears of parental backlash in response to pedagogical LGBT integration:

While many teachers reported that they were willing to respond to homophobic bullying, such as reacting to homophobic language, very few were willing to engage in curriculum-based work. Again, there was a general fear that parents would disapprove of ‘promoting’ homosexuality on religious or moral grounds, and that these grounds would be seen as legitimate. (p. 1671)

Flores’ (2014) article regarding working cooperatively with parents while infusing LGBT-related subjects provides multiple strategies in approaching these conversations with parents and guardians. Flores, who reports having largely positive responses from parents, has also encountered colleagues who have had difficulties with parents: “some colleagues and straight
allies who implemented LGBT themes in their classroom had more problems with parents; some had been verbally abused and/or harassed” (2014, p. 115). These experiences, as recounted by Flores, align with the parent relationships that Andy witnessed during the 2015-2016 school year. The parent community from Andy’s school had very strong reactions to the revised HPE curriculum that was released by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2015:

…there was a lot of pushback from our school community…there was a lot of concerns from parents. We had a week where we were down to a hundred students in our school because parents had withdrawn their students as protest…in my schools two thirds of the students withdrew.

As discussed in aforementioned sections of this chapter, the significant challenges faced by staff at Andy’s school from both the parent and student community severely decreased their ability to implement broader LGBT equity programming within the school. Although backlash from parent communities can be challenging for teachers, there are numerous policy protections that allow teachers to continue the LGBT equity work that they are implementing in schools.

4.3.2 Public school teachers are required to promote equity initiatives and are protected by the Ontario Ministry of Education

Although teachers may hesitate to implement LGBT themes within their practice, there are many policies and mandates that protect their work in fostering LGBT equity within schools. Andy reported a similar mindset regarding the justification for equity work in public schools; equity strategies are mandated in the Ontario Ministry of Education and this work is therefore protected. When asked to provide general advice for new teachers, Naomi also discussed the fact that teachers are protected by the Ministry of Education and various policies: “So when parents or anyone comes to you and they say ‘Why are you doing this?’, it’s almost like the sexual health
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curriculum, you can pull out ministry documents and say ‘I’m doing my job.’” All three
participants also expressed the importance of support from school administration, and that
administrators should be relied upon to defend teachers in circumstances when their work is
being opposed or threatened. The work of educational scholars aligns with many of the
experiences recounted by participants in this study. After conversing with fellow teachers, Flores
(2014) discusses teachers’ reasons for continuing to work for LGBT equity despite disapproval
from parents:

When colleagues asked the teachers what made them continue with the process, they
simply responded that they had the support of their principal and district policy and it the
fair thing to do. They continue with their inclusive program today. (p. 115)

Flores also mentions an important argument that should be remembered when working with
parents who oppose LGBT initiatives within schools: “Remember, as educators you are teaching
tolerance and acceptance and providing the necessary tools and preparing the student population
for the diverse world in which they will live and thrive” (2014, p. 119). The experiences of
participants and the work of scholars indicates that even if parents present challenges and oppose
policies that are mandated by school boards and ministries of education, teachers are in fact
protected through multiple layers of the educational system and are working hard to prepare
students to become accepting and empathetic members of society.

4.4 Lack of Support from the School System, Conflicting Beliefs Amongst Teaching Staff
and Discrimination Towards LGBT Teachers Serve as Challenges to Implementing LGBT
Equity Strategies in Schools

Although the need for LGBT equity has been identified as an essential initiative in most
schools, teachers continue to face challenges in implementing these strategies. Participants in this
study have identified areas of difficulty that were or continue to serve as barriers for LGBT equity work. These challenges are significant because the inability to implement LGBT equity in schools greatly hinders the safety and security of questioning or LGBT students and staff members. Examples of challenges identified by participants include a lack of funding for LGBT equity initiatives, misconceptions and conflicting beliefs amongst teachers, as well as homophobic behaviors amongst teaching staff.

4.4.1 Teachers share conflicting beliefs regarding the availability of funds and supports from the school system that could be used to foster LGBT equity initiatives

Participants presented varying responses when discussing the lack of support from the school system regarding LGBT initiatives. Two participants agreed that further support is needed for teachers, whereas one participant described the superior level of assistance that was received when implementing whole-school LGBT equity initiatives. Andy and Kathleen stated that more funding is needed from the provincial education department in order to support gender and sexual equity work in schools. More specifically, they stated that increased funds were needed for teacher resources, professional development opportunities, and the ability to provide teachers with more time to focus on extra-curricular activities and innovative curriculum planning.

Kathleen, a core French teacher, also mentioned a lack of subject-appropriate teaching resources that focuses on LGBT themes. Cullen and Sandy (2009) agree that there is a need for improved teaching resources in their article regarding literature and LGBT teaching strategies: “Whilst the resource books are useful tools in exploring sex–gender identities and family structures, there is a need for wider, more inclusive texts that are comprehensible to children” (p. 152).

Naomi’s discussion about creating a GSA within her school also included an explanation of the support that she received from the teaching union and the Ministry of Education:
...I looked at the union, they’ve got lots of resources to support teachers. They did a lot for us as well. I went to the Ministry of Ed and they had some money to support some research that we had to do, and buy some stuff and take some trips to release teachers so we could do that.

The results of this study indicate that teachers experience differing levels of support from the education system, especially on the subject of funding. It appears that teachers such as Naomi, who actively sought out funding and resources for a new initiative within the school, reported higher rates of satisfaction with supports that are available to teachers. However, teachers such as Kathleen and Andy report areas of improvement for supports from the education system, including an increase in funding in order to expand teachers’ access to resources and increase time that could be allocated to fostering broader LGBT equity initiatives.

4.4.2 Despite the need for solidarity amongst educators, school staff members demonstrate conflicting beliefs regarding the need for LGBT equity work in schools

Although participants indicated the importance of support from fellow staff and administration in fostering LGBT equity in school communities, they also reported that misconceptions about LGBT identities pose a barrier to gaining support from staff members. Kathleen and Naomi discussed examples of the inaccurate beliefs amongst teaching staff, including the perception that LGBT terminology is inappropriate and that LGBT topics are age-inappropriate for students at the primary and junior levels. Kathleen provided an example of teachers viewing LGBT vocabulary as pejorative by recounting the following encounter that occurred with fellow teachers: “I put up a sign and people were like ‘Oh my God, you should take it down’ and it was just queer positive. And they were like ‘you shouldn’t be teaching children the word *queer,*’ things like that.”
Additionally, Kathleen and Naomi both stated that they have had encounters with fellow teachers in which they expressed the belief that children are too young to be exposed to LGBT topics. Naomi describes one of these incidents that occurred as she was trying to understand why her school did not have a GSA or a designated safe space for LGBT students:

I was told “well kids are too young” and I thought “well kids are not too young, we’re having open, authentic discussions around their own sexuality” …I’ve come across kids now as young as Grade Four or Five who are not identifying with one gender or the other. Naomi explained that at the time she in fact did not believe that students were too young to engage in conversations about gender and sexual identity due to the fact that she had several students come out to her during her first few years of teaching. The misconstrued belief that LGBT topics and terms are inappropriate is discussed by DePalma and Atkinson (2010): “Non-heterosexuality has been constructed as hyper-sexual at the same time that sex has been constructed as irrelevant, or even dangerous, knowledge for children” (p. 1672). Kehily’s research (2004) regarding children’s’ understanding of relationships confirms that “boys and girls are indeed sexual subjects, aware of the links between gender and sexuality and the significance of sexuality to an understanding of themselves in relation to others” (p. 71). Wallis and VanEvery’s work (2000), which focuses on the existence of sexuality within elementary schools, indicates the danger of believing that elementary schools are “asexual environments” because it prohibits educators from protecting and supporting students from harassment and discrimination. Comparing the existing literature and the experience of participants in this study demonstrates a contradiction between theory and practice regarding students’ perceptions of gender and sexual identities. Despite the fact that research demonstrates that students are the primary and junior grade levels are in fact aware of both gender roles and sexual identities,
participants in this study have indicated that many fellow educators believe that this knowledge is not age-appropriate, and by extension, do not believe that LGBT subject matter is appropriate or applicable to students’ lived experiences.

4.4.3 Teachers who are members of the LGBT community also experience discrimination based on gender or sexual identity in the workplace

Tiffany E. Wright’s (2010) research explores LGBT teachers’ experiences in schools and the ways in which their experience in the workplace is impacted by their gender and sexual identities. In this article, Wright provides a description of a safe school, stating that a safe school is “one in which all faculty, staff, and students interact in a positive, nonthreatening manner that promotes education while fostering positive relationships and personal growth and protecting all from harm” (p. 49). According to Wright’s definition of a safe school and participants’ discussions regarding the experiences of both staff and students in elementary school, there is a stark contrast between the idea of a safe school and the reality of the school climate at the elementary level for members of the LGBT community. Participants in this study were very open and candid about their experiences as teaching staff members who also identify as members of the LGBT community. Two participants in particular shared their perspectives on the discrimination and difficulties that they have faced in the workplace due to their gender and/or sexual identities.

Kathleen discussed the homophobic attitudes that she has encountered amongst teaching staff in the various schools in which she has been employed. Kathleen described an incident at a previous school wherein she was required to seek the help of the teaching union’s equity guide to give a workshop to the teaching staff in the hopes of addressing their homophobic practices and attitudes. Furthermore, Kathleen stated that gossip and homophobia continues to be a problem
amongst teaching staff due to the fact that she has heard other teachers engaging in gossip and speculating about other teachers that are perceived to be “gay” but not openly out amongst the school staff.

Andy also provided insights about his experiences as a gay male teaching in an elementary school. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Andy’s school had severe parental backlash in response to LGBT themes that are discussed in the revised HPE curriculum, and he described the homophobia in his school as “rampant.” Although the other two participants in this study did not clarify whether or not they are out within their schools, Andy did open up about the fact that he is not out in his classroom because he does not feel safe. Andy described his perspective on the matter in the following excerpt from his interview:

I’ll be honest with you, I’m not out to my kids. I’m out everywhere with my staff, in my personal life, with my family but being in a classroom I’m not actually out because I don’t feel safe. I’m worried about the backlash from the community…being, one, a male teacher in elementary is tricky but being a gay male teaching elementary school is even trickier because you always have these worries that kids are going to say things. Or accuse you of doing something and I’ve always had that fear.

Several times during his interview, Andy stated that he wishes that he was out amongst the students so that he could be a role model for LGBT students within the school community. As Wallis and VanEvery (2000) suggest, the value of this potential LGBT representation would be important amongst elementary school staff: “None of their teachers are lesbian, gay or bisexual, as far as they can tell…children learn that it is inevitable that bullying will occur if they are ‘different’ in this way” (p. 420). At the end of his interview, Andy stated that one of his goals for the future is to be comfortably out at school, including amongst the students. Kathleen and
Andy’s experiences of homophobia within their schools demonstrate that elementary schools can be unsafe environments for members of the LGBT community, and that the effects of homophobia can supersede the hierarchy of teacher and student within the elementary school environment.

4.5 Conclusion

The research findings analyzed in this chapter were collected through semi-structured interviews that showcased the voices and experiences of teachers who have worked to implement and sustain LGBT equity within their respective schools. Participants shared insights regarding the homophobia that continues to exist in various areas of the elementary school, and the ways in which they have developed strategies to support LGBT students, both individually and within the broader school community. All three participants agreed that in order to fight against homophobic and transphobic bullying and behaviour, educators must find ways to challenge the pre-existing discriminatory mindsets that come from home and strive to create a generation of young students who are accepting, inclusive and intolerant of homophobic discrimination.

Participants indicated that LGBT initiatives both inside the classroom and within the broader school community are essential in normalizing the pluralities of gender and sexual identities. Furthermore, the support of administrators, fellow educators, school boards and the Ministry of Education is essential in working towards the goal of creating environments that are safe for students of diverse gender and sexual identities. The next and final chapter discusses the implications of these findings and recommendations describing the ways in which this research can be used to assist educators in promoting LGBT equity in schools, as well as the need for further research on the subject of LGBT equity within elementary schools.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I discuss the implications of my research study. I begin by providing an overview of the key findings of the study and explaining their significance. Then I discuss the implications of this study, both within the educational community and upon my personal teaching philosophy and practice. Next, I provide recommendations to the educational community and stakeholders based on the findings of this study. I then provide further questions that were raised during this study and areas in which this research can be expanded. Finally, I conclude by summarizing key elements from this chapter and providing final insights about the significance of this study.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The findings of this study were organized into four distinct themes that correlate with my main research question and subsidiary questions. My first theme addresses the importance of establishing positive relationships with students in order to ensure that they feel supported, despite gender and sexuality-based discrimination that occurs in schools. All participants in this study indicated that homophobia is still prevalent in schools at the primary and junior levels; instances of homophobia ranged from personal attacks to generalized statements against the LGBT community, including the use of derogatory language. Kathleen and Andy urged that students must feel safe in order to learn. In order to ensure the safety of LGBT students, participants indicated that teachers must support them by developing trusting relationships with students who may be questioning their gender or sexual identities. Participants also described the need to ensure that all staff members respond to instances of homophobia and transphobia in a consistent manner that focuses on education rather than retribution.
The second theme in my findings discusses whole-school approaches to LGBT equity. Kathleen and Andy stressed the importance of teachers beginning LGBT equity initiatives within their classrooms. Both participants stated that LGBT topics should be infused into daily teaching practices, and that LGBT themes and individuals should be used within the texts, media and issues that are explored within the classroom. Naomi and Kathleen also stated that empowering students to become allies promotes a culture of support and inclusivity within schools. This goal can be approached through whole-school programming initiatives, including student groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances.

The third theme in this study addresses challenges that teachers have encountered from parent communities while attempting to promote LGBT equity and inclusivity in their schools. Kathleen and Andy stated that fear of parental backlash serves as a barrier to LGBT equity initiatives. Kathleen explained that many teachers are unable to perform LGBT equity work due to influences from administrators, while Andy discussed teachers’ reservations in continuing this work after severe backlash from parents within the school community. However, all participants stated that teachers should continue to foster LGBT safe spaces in schools regardless of parental influence due to influences from the Ministry of Ontario. They explained that the Ministry mandates LGBT equity initiatives and has various policies in place that protect teachers in doing this work.

My final theme examines barriers that teachers have faced in their attempts to create a culture of LGBT support and inclusion at their respective schools. Although one participant in this study did not acknowledge a lack of support from the Ontario education system, two participants agreed that increased funding, training and resources is required from their school board and the school system in order to effectively implement LGBT equity strategies in schools.
Participants also stated that school staff members must demonstrate solidarity regarding LGBT equity initiatives. However, Kathleen recounted instances in which fellow staff members and administrators directly opposed her attempts to create safe spaces for LGBT students at her school. In order to create school environments that are supportive of diverse gender and sexual identities, participants indicated that all school staff members must project accepting attitudes regarding LGBT identities. This includes the ways in which they treat colleagues, as well as their responses to instances of homophobia and transphobia amongst members of the school community.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I discuss the implications of my research findings within the domain of education. These implications are explored in two distinct areas. First, I discuss the implications in terms of the insights that they contribute to members of the educational community. Second, I describe my key learnings from this study and the ways in which these implications have influenced my teaching philosophy and practice.

5.2.1 The educational community

The existing literature and the experiences of my participants has echoed one overarching theme regarding LGBT equity in schools: instances of targeted or generalized harassment and discrimination against the LGBT community continue to exist at the primary and junior grade levels. This persistent problem addresses the need to continue LGBT equity work and research within elementary schools. Participants also acknowledged that in order to achieve academic expectations and thrive within school communities, students need to feel face and supported throughout their day-to-day school interactions.
In order to ensure that all students, regardless of gender or sexual identity, feel safe within school communities, participants stressed the need to create a community of LGBT allies within schools. In order to ensure that students are protected both in and out of the classroom, peers must feel driven to advocate on behalf of students who are bullied based on gender or sexuality. Participants suggest that inspiring allyship can occur by normalizing the existence of diverse gender and sexual identities, and by educating students about the realities and hardships faced by members of the LGBT community (both historically and in present times). These learnings can occur within the classroom through regularly embedding LGBT themes into teaching practices and educational subject matter. Furthermore, whole-school equity initiatives can also create an equitable and inclusive culture within school communities as a whole.

The educational community should also be advised that the Ontario Ministry of Education mandates equity work in schools, including initiatives that promote support and inclusivity for members of the LGBT community. Participants stated that these requirements encourage them to continue working towards the goal of fostering safe spaces in elementary schools, despite various barriers. When challenged on these practices, participants indicated that they rely on support from administrators, as well as policies and regulations that protect teachers on behalf of the Ministry. Furthermore, Naomi discussed various supports from the education system that are available to teachers who pursue equity initiatives in their schools. Although this belief was not shared by all participants, Naomi advised that educators who are interested in equity and social justice work to look to their school boards, teacher’s union and Ministry of Education for supports.

Finally, members of the educational community, fellow teachers and administrators in particular, should be aware of the important roles that they play in supporting LGBT equity
indicatives. All participants stated that support from colleagues is instrumental in creating a culture of acceptance and inclusivity within schools, and that school staff members should act in solidarity in a consistent manner when reacting to instances of homophobia and transphobia amongst students. In addition, discrimination against LGBT teachers was also a prevalent theme throughout this study. Educators should understand the implications of discriminatory actions towards fellow staff members, and should model a culture of allyship by becoming allies within the school for the benefit of students and staff who identify with the LGBT community.

5.2.2 My professional identity and practice

Completing this research study has provided me with significant knowledge regarding the realities faced by LGBT individuals within school settings and the ways in which educators can work towards fostering a culture that is equitable and inclusive to all gender and sexual identities. The expertise of my participants, who provided fist-hand experiences of identifying with the LGBT community in school settings, have profoundly impacted my teaching philosophy and the ideals that I would like to uphold in my future practice. They have provided a number of strategies and initiatives to supporting individual LGBT students and creating a school-wide culture of inclusivity that I will include in my practice. Examples of these practical applications include establishing positive relationships and building rapport in order to support individual students, infusing LGBT themes (including histories, celebrated persons, and examples of diverse genders and sexual orientations) within my daily teaching practice, and reducing homophobic and transphobic discrimination through education instead of punishment.

Lastly, the experiences of my participants have allowed me to understand the importance of striving of foster LGBT equity in schools as an ally. The majority of my participants, as well as many researchers drawn upon in this study, indicated that they have faced opposition to LGBT
equity initiatives or were afraid to begin these efforts due to their personal affiliations with the topic. As a cisgendered, heterosexual person, I do not face the same barriers and I will not face discrimination due to these aspects of my identity. Therefore, I will continue to promote this equity initiative in educational settings on behalf of individuals who face challenges in doing so or fear for their safety.

5.3 Recommendations

In this section I provide recommendations for stakeholders within the educational community, in order to provide these individuals with strategies to further LGBT equity initiatives in elementary schools. Members of the educational community that are relevant to this study include teachers, administrators, school boards, teachers’ unions and the Ministry of Education. The propositions that are outlined in this section are based on findings that were collected through this study, including information from existing research, as well as the expertise and insights from participants.

The experiences of participants and the work of previous scholars has indicated that discrimination and harassment based on gender or sexual identity is still prevalent within elementary schools. Participants advised that teachers and administrators must divert from punitive tendencies, and instead, react to instances of homophobia and transphobia in ways that educate students about the implications of their behaviour on others. Furthermore, Kathleen stated that when reacting to instances in which derogatory language is used, educators should focus on teaching students about the history of hurtful language and understanding the reasons why they choose to use these terms. Participants also stated that establishing rapport with students who may be questioning their gender or sexual identity is of utmost importance. By
creating positive relationships with these students, teachers can provide a safe and trusting space for students to ask questions and learn about diverse identities.

Normalizing the existence of plural gender and sexual identities also assists in creating a culture of inclusivity and allyship within schools. Embedding LGBT themes into teaching practices was identified by participants as an effective strategy to promote LGBT equity in schools. Participants stated that teachers should infuse examples of plural gender and sexual identities regularly in their teaching. LGBT identities can be depicted within pedagogy in a cross-curricular manner through works of literature and other forms of media, histories and forms of injustice that are studied in class, as well as heroes and people of distinction that are explored throughout the year. Two participants also acknowledged the importance of whole-school equity initiatives that are created and maintained by teachers in elementary schools. Naomi and Kathleen stated that students at the primary and junior levels respond well to social justice initiatives and show interest in becoming activists and allies. Both participants indicated that creating a student group, such as a Gay-Straight Alliance, promotes a culture of inclusivity and allyship. According to these participants, students who were involved in LGBT equity groups at school actively demonstrated their status’ as allies by addressing instances of homophobia amongst peers.

The remaining recommendations address the challenges that participants identified as barriers to implementing LGBT equity initiatives in elementary schools. Two participants discussed a lack of resources that would support teachers in implementing LGBT equity strategies. In order to address this challenge, school boards, teachers’ unions and the Ministry of Education need to make funding and resources readily available to teachers who wish to
undertake this work. Moreover, teachers stressed that school administrators need to also be supportive of these equity initiatives.

Lastly, cisgendered and heterosexual staff members within school communities need to be aware of their privilege in terms of gender and sexual identity, and ensure that colleagues who do identify with the LGBT community feel safe and supported in the workplace. Kathleen stated that all teachers should be required to take a course that educates them about the pluralities of gender and sexual identities, and that they should be required to demonstrate “queer-positive” attitudes within their teaching. This requirement would not only benefit in creating a culture of acceptance and inclusivity for students, it would also ensure that all educators feel safe to perform their teaching duties and feel supported in performing their LGBT equity initiatives.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

In this section of my concluding chapter, I outline questions that arose throughout the duration of this study that could be addressed through further research. Although I was able to gain significant insights from the experiences of my participants, this study also revealed contradictions amongst participants and contradictory information between participant experiences and information presented through existing literature that could be explored further.

One of the areas in which participants experienced difficulty in promoting LGBT equity at their respective schools was influences from parents within the school community. Kathleen explained that many teachers and administrators will avoid LGBT equity initiatives in fear of backlash from parents. Whereas Andy described the extreme resistance that occurred from parents in response to Ontario’s revised Health & Physical Education Curriculum. Andy also described efforts on behalf of the school to mend relations with parents, which were unsuccessful. I believe that further research is required to provide teachers with strategies in
working with parents who oppose LGBT learnings and equity initiatives within schools. This research could help teachers and students foster more positive relationships with parents, and create a culture in which LGBT equity extends beyond the school.

My participants also informed me that the barriers they face from parent communities permeate into the school community through learned behaviours of students. Participants expressed that homophobia and transphobia in schools often occurs due to oppositional values that students are taught at home. These beliefs often contribute to discrimination against members of the LGBT community and work against teachers’ efforts to create safe spaces in schools. Further research regarding specific strategies that teachers could employ to challenge students’ opposing beliefs regarding LGBT identities is needed in order to ensure that teachers can address these instances in manners that are just and productive. Although, as teachers, we cannot change the values that students are exposed to after they leave our schools, we have the ability to challenge these ideals through education.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This research study has allowed me to gain an understanding of the ways in which cultural climates within elementary schools navigate the pluralities of gender identities and sexual orientations. The experiences of my participants and the work of scholars indicates that discrimination, harassment and exclusion towards LGBT students and teachers persists at the primary and junior grade levels. In order to create school communities that are in essence safe spaces for members of the LGBT community, teachers and administrators must undertake LGBT equity initiatives within their schools. Participants encouraged teachers to ensure that LGBT equity strategies occur both inside the classroom and within the broader school community. Examples of LGBT equity strategies that participants provided include embedding LGBT themes
in the classroom on a regular basis, whole-school programming initiatives, and creating student
groups that focus on allyship.

Participants also outlined challenges to fostering safe spaces for LGBT communities in
schools. Overall, these barriers predominantly include working with individuals who share
discriminatory beliefs regarding the existence of plural gender and sexual identities. Although
participants indicated that the influence of oppositional parents can greatly hinder LGBT equity
initiatives, they also stress the importance of being supported by administrators and relying on
policies from the Ontario Ministry of Education that mandate equity work in schools.
Furthermore, discriminatory practices and beliefs amongst teaching staff also serve as barriers to
fostering safe spaces for LGBT teachers and students. Participants urged the importance of
ensuring that teachers present as a united front when confronting instances of LGBT
discrimination, and that administrators must urge all school staff members to adopt queer-
positive rhetoric within their teaching practices.

Creating and maintaining a cultural climate in which individuals of diverse gender and
sexual identities feel safe is essential in maximizing the learning and social growth potential of
all students. In order to achieve this goal, teachers must strive to create a generation of young
students who support and advocate for members of the LGBT community. Educators play an
instrumental role in shaping young minds. It is through the efforts of teachers that we can create
a culture of acceptance, inclusion and advocacy that can transcend prejudice and translate to
institutions beyond the borders of the elementary school.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date:

Dear ____________________________,

My Name is Alana Shahfazlollahi and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on whole school approaches to creating “safe spaces” for students of all gender identities and sexual orientations. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have demonstrated leadership, expertise, and a commitment to LGBT equity in school settings. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

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

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

Sincerely,

Alana Shahfazlollahi
Phone number: (XXX) XXX-XXXX
Email: a.shahfazlollahi@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Angela MacDonald-Vemic
Email: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.
I have read the letter provided to me by _________________________________ (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn the ways in which educators have created “safe spaces” for all gender identities and sexual orientations in classrooms and within broader school communities. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your experiences in promoting gender and sexual equity within school settings. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio recorded.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. How long have you been working in the field of education?

2. What is your current position?
   a. What grade(s) [and subjects] are you teaching currently?
   b. Which grades have you taught in the past?
   c. In addition to your teaching role, do you currently fulfill any other roles in the school community? (e.g. advisor, coach, councilor)

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

4. Can you tell me more about the school you work in?
   a. Size?
   b. Demographics? How would you describe the community in which your school is situated?
   c. Program priorities? (e.g. equity, inclusion, environmental ed. etc.)

1. What experiences have you had that have led to your interest in gender and sexual equity in education?
   a. Personal experiences? Have you had any experiences with the pluralities of gender and sexual identities in your personal life? Could you describe the nature of these experiences, if you are comfortable?
   b. (If applicable) Do you believe that your affiliation with the LGBT community has had an impact on your role as a teacher? Could you describe the nature of these effects, if you are comfortable?
   d. Educational experiences? (e.g. university course work, teacher’s college, additional
qualifications, professional development). How did you learn about the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity through schooling (i.e. elementary, senior, postsecondary studies)?

e. Professional experiences? (e.g. employment, teaching experience, observations of what happens in schools)

6. What experiences have contributed to preparing you to undertake this work in your classroom and school?

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

1. What is your understanding of the term “sexual orientation”?

2. What is your understanding of the term “gender identity”?

3. Why do you believe that it is important to promote gender and sexual equity in school communities?

4. In your view, is this a commitment that the Ontario education system takes seriously? What leads you to believe that?

5. From your perspective, what are some of the significant barriers to fostering gender and sexual equity in schools?

6. How do you understand the notion of “safe space”? What does this mean to you?

7. In your view, what kinds of considerations do schools and teachers need to make to foster safe space and why?

8. In your experience, how prevalent is homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools? What evidence of this have you seen? Could you describe the nature of these incidents, if you are comfortable?

Teacher Practices

1. What does teaching for gender and gender equity look like in your teaching practice?
   a. If I were to spend a day in your classroom, what evidence would I see and hear that you take gender and sexual equity seriously?
   b. What range of ways do you approach this topic with students?

2. How do you address instances of homophobic and/or transphobic bullying, harassment, and/or exclusion within the school environment when you see it happening?
   a. Can you provide me with some examples of how you have responded to these incidences?
   b. What are your goals when responding?
   c. What is the nature of your response?
d. How do your students respond? What outcomes do you observe from them?

3. How do you address the topic of homophobic and transphobic bullying, harassment, and exclusion as part of curriculum (not only in response to an incident)? How have you approached the topic of the pluralities of gender and sexual identities through pedagogy?
   a. What curriculum do you align this with and why?
   b. What are your learning goals?
   c. What opportunities for learning do you create?
   d. What are some educational resources that you have used to teach students about the pluralities of gender and sexual identities?
   e. What outcomes do you observe? How have students responded to your lessons on the pluralities of gender and sexual identities?
   f. Have you faced any challenges?
   g. (If applicable) How have you approached/overcome these challenges?

4. How do you translate your understanding of safe space into practice?
   a. How do you create safe space in your classroom? What strategies have you used within the classroom to create a safe space for all gender and sexual identities?
   b. How do you create safe space in your school?

5. How, if at all, do you teach students about gender neutral pronouns? Do you use gender neutral pronouns? If so, why? If not, why not? What are some terms that you use to address students?

6. What are some strategies that are used within the broader school community to create a safe space for all gender and sexual identities?

7. How have these strategies changed the dynamics between students of varying gender and sexual identities? What have you observed about the extent that these initiatives have an impact on students’ attitudes toward gender and sexual identity and on their peer/social relationships?

8. How do you support a student who is questioning their gender or sexual identity?

9. How, if at all, do you work with parents to support a student who is questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation?

**Supports and Challenges**

1. What are some supports and/or resources that have been made available to the staff at your school regarding fostering gender and sexual equity?
   a. Have you referred to any of these supports and/or resources?
   b. (If applicable) What do you think of these supports and/or resources?
   c. What key factors and resources do support you in this work? (e.g. books, websites, curriculum materials, guest speakers, music, videos, literature etc.)
2. What are some barriers that you have faced in implementing safe spaces for all gender and sexual identities at your school? How have you approached/overcome these barriers?

3. Have you encountered any challenges regarding gender and sexual equity from colleagues? If yes, how have you responded to these challenges?

4. What are some challenges that you have encountered in response to your teaching about gender and sexual equity? Have you heard from any parents? How have you responded to these challenges?

**Next Steps**

1. What are some goals that you have in terms of developing your work in this area, both in your own classroom and in your school more broadly?

2. What is your advice for beginning teachers who would like to create safe spaces for all gender and sexual identities within their classroom/school?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.