TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF HETERONORMATIVITY IN ELEMENTARY
SCHOOLS: THE HIDDEN AND EVADED CURRICULA OF GENDER DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Goodhand: Teachers' Perceptions of Heteronormativity in Elementary Schools:
The Hidden and Evaded Curricula of Gender Diversity
(Under the direction of Kathleen Brown)

The culture of elementary schools has a significant impact on a child's academic, social, and emotional well-being. For schools to be truly equitable for all students, children need to have a sense of belonging and inclusiveness. Unfortunately, research indicates that most schools in the United States tend to perpetuate a heteronormative culture which denies, silences, and stigmatizes children who display any atypical gender behavior and/or are (or perceived to be) lesbian or gay. And, although sexual discourse and gender identity exploration begin in early childhood, there is a significant gap in the educational literature addressing this critical stage of human development. The purpose of this study was to describe elementary educators' beliefs about, awareness of, and willingness to confront heteronormative culture within an elementary setting.

This study employed a combination of transformative, queer, and cultural theories (TQCT) for the framework. Both quantitative and qualitative findings were used to assess changes in teachers' perspectives on and readiness to confront homophobia and gender oppression in educational settings. Teachers volunteered to participate in a book club, where they had the opportunity to begin to see the heteronormative culture of their school through various lenses.

This study shed light on the importance of providing a transformative learning experience for teachers and its value towards reframing their viewpoints. The results of the

intervention study indicated that teachers 1) continue to be fearful to approach this topic of gender and sexual diversity, 2) recognize internal and external barriers to confronting heteronormativity, 3) made growth in their willingness to confront the heteronormative culture through a transformative learning model, 4) desire more support through training, and 5) acknowledge the need to begin earlier rather than later confronting and interrupting heteronormative practices that sustain and reproduce this negative culture.

This study concluded that there is a need for strategic practices that confront and interrupt homophobia, through federal policies, building social capital, inclusive curricula, professional development, and a call for social justice leaders within the schools. Since children experience homophobic violence, oppression and discrimination as early as elementary, these recommendations are of utmost importance.

DEDICATION

This dissertation study is dedicated to my mother. Sadly, due to her horrid disease, she was unable to understand that I had started this journey towards a doctorate. My mother taught me to be an activist and face the fear of rejection and pursue my goals. Through her words and actions she taught me that fighting for social justice needed to be at the core of my soul. Her dedication to her religion, community and family was evident in every choice she made in her work and personal life. As a result, her granddaughters, my three incredible children—Kiah, Emma and Leah—continue to emulate a disposition in which they accept everyone for who they are and how they live. Their love and caring is unmistakable in their personal and professional lives as they too strive to work for social justice within their communities.

I also add a dedication to Michael Morones and his family. *Bronies forever*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

There were more murders in 2011 instigated by anti-gay hate than any previous year since 1998, when the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs began collecting data (Shapiro, 2012). In 2007 alone, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) received 1,265 reports of hate crimes against individuals identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), a 6 % increase from 2006 (Marzullo & Libman, 2009). The types of hate crimes included murder, manslaughter, rape, aggravated assault, intimidation, arson, and damage or vandalism of property (Willis, 2004). According to the FBI, hate crimes against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community are actually underreported due to individuals' fear of being "outed" (Shapiro, 2012).

In addition, harassment and assault against lesbian and gay students (or those perceived to be) as well as children with atypical gender behaviors in school is prevalent (GLSEN, 2012). In the 2011 Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) study, researchers found that approximately 90% of LGBTQ-identified students had experienced harassment at school in the past year, and nearly two-thirds felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation. It is well documented that victimization and harassment often target students due to perceived sexual orientation, which is often based on students' nonconformity to gender norms (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2001; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun, & Laub, 2004; Pascoe, 2007).

This violence can cause children who are, or are perceived to be, LGBTQ to feel depressed and to experience internalized homophobia. One devastating consequence of this violence and self-hatred is that one third of all suicides in the United States are committed by individuals who identify as gay or lesbian (Halady, 2013; Rivers, 2001; Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo, & Austin, 2013; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). In 2011 Jamey Rodemeyer, at age 14, committed suicide as a result of ongoing bullying. Jamey's mother reported he had experienced this violence since elementary school (Praetorius, 2011). This bullying targeted at LGBTQ youth or children with variant gender behavior within the schools can be damaging and destroys children and families' lives.

The present day culture of heteronormativity and heterosexism is the origin of this violence toward gender nonconforming and LGBTQ students (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). Gender regulation, which frames norms and student interactions, is the core of heteronormativity that places students who violate gender norms at risk for victimization. The reality for children who do not conform to traditional gender roles or who are LGBTQ is that they enter schools daily where adults and children create a culture that ignores or silences topics of gender and sexuality. This hostile enviornment can lead to internalized homophobia, isolation, and oppression, resulting in physical, emotional, and psychological health issues for youth (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003, p. 237).

Schools are a microcosm of the larger society and thus replicate the same social hierarchies. And like all major institutions, a school's culture can normalize and privilege heterosexuality through language and daily routines, as well as within the actual curriculum (Bryan, 2012; Meyer, 2010; Solomon, 2012). The formal school curriculum consists of the state-mandated course of study and academic skills, while the informal or implicit curriculum

includes the day-to-day experiences, procedures (e.g. "Girls line up first"), and messages that teachers and children explicitly or implicitly teach. Teachers and children typically avoid topics surrounding sexuality and gender or even implicitly reinforce heterosexism within the lessons (e.g. "A family is a mother and father with children"). This hidden and evaded informal curriculum can be seen as a method of social control in which teachers regulate students' thoughts and, later, actions in relation to sexuality within the school environment. From a Foucauldian perspective, the hidden and even explicit curricula that reinforce heterosexuality are the result of ways in which the policing of sexuality establishes a locus of social control within the educational system (Foucault, 1975). Through their actions and discourse, faculty, students, and community members regulate what are acceptable gender behaviors for "boys" and "girls," and "men" and "women" (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Khayatt, 2006; Lugg, 2006; Solomon, 2012). Through this social reproduction, many schools continue to be institutionally homophobic or heteronormative by their very structures, procedures, and policies (Adam, Cox, & Dunstan, 2004; Meyer, 2010).

One method of policing this topic of sexuality is through the rigid definitions of gender roles into binary constructs, which are at the root of LGBTQ student harassment (Meyer, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2012; Toomey et al., 2012). In the everyday play and interactions of the elementary classroom, gender and sexuality norms are interwoven and reinforced. Many bullying behaviors are acts of gender policing, and much of the aggression that occurs within student social culture can be connected to gender norms. Consequently, the research indicates that schools help to create and sustain a fearful and hostile environment in regards to sex, sexual orientation, and gender expression of students (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Sham, Sims, & Rigdon, 2009).

U.S. mainstream society as a whole continues to accept and privilege heteronormativity, and school cultures mirror this paradigm, creating a climate of hatred and oppression within their walls. From society as a whole to the very institution that claims to provide equity in education, children, families, and school staff become the victims of homophobia if they do not fit in the accepted socially constructed norms of the heterosexist culture (Khayatt, 2006).

Background and Context of the Problem

In the half past century American society has moved from seeing homosexuality as immoral and deviant to seeing it as slightly more acceptable (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Opfer, 2000). In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses (Ford, 2013). More recently, the Supreme Court has decriminalized sexual practices and granted partnership statuses (Barclay, Bernstein, & Marshall, 2009). Despite legal advances at the federal level, individual states continue to discriminate against LGBTQ people, and many students endure ongoing harassment, oppression, and marginalization within and outside the school walls.

Despite these legal advances, inclusion of gay issues and homosexuality in the classroom remains a controversial and stigmatized dispute in American education, especially at the elementary level. Teachers, families, and community members mistakenly believe that primary schools are asexual environments, but that is not true (Meyer, 2010; Renold, 2002). This misconception leads to adults, within the school setting, monitoring and avoiding topics of sexuality and gender. Bryan (2012) explained that the heteronormative expectations within our classrooms have a strong impact on all elementary children and influence their

perceptions of family norms and their own self-identity. Elementary children are aware of gender and sexuality issues when they enter school.

Further, elementary schools are the key sites where teachers and children construct and affirm patterned gender expectations. In the classroom, children learn that biological sex, gender, and sexuality are theoretically interconnected, and through limit-setting by their teachers and peers, they quickly learn what is "normal" and how they should "perform" to fit in as boys and girls (Connell, 2009; Payne & Smith, 2012). Classrooms are designed with activity centers such as a "building block corner," kitchen, or dress-up area. Teachers and peers give clear messages about what is considered gender appropriate behavior (e.g., "Girls don't like trucks"). Often teachers ask students to organize themselves into these binary categories: "Girls line up here, and boys line up here." Through this play and procedures in the class, two distinct gender groups are more visible and reinforced for children regularly (Payne & Smith, 2012).

School staff and children perpetuate these mutually exclusive categories of gender, and finite views of how boys and girls should behave result in identity confusion and isolation for young children who do not conform to the expected norms (Meyer, 2010; Morris, 2000, 2005; Solomon, 2012). Research indicates that children at the age of 3 or 4 years are aware of their gender and by the age of 9 or 10 become cognizant of their sexual orientation (Bryan, 2012; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002; Hunt, 2010; Solomon, 2012). Teachers can provide opportunities for children to be fully included and appreciated which can reduce bullying and help children understand in the early years of schooling that there is not just one "right" way to be a boy or a girl (Payne & Smith, 2012).

School leaders and teachers are the mentors who can help define a reality for their students in terms of social justice and equity. According to Brown (2008), "Social justice

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activists espouse a theory of social critique, embrace a greater sense of civic duty, and willingly become active agents for political and social change" (p.711).

School leaders and teachers play a key role in setting the culture of an inclusive school environment by teaching an inclusive curriculum and developing policies and procedures that do not perpetuate the binary gender system. Kothlow and Chamberlain (2002) asserted that professionally it is every educator's responsibility to create a school environment where children can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. Shields (2004) added that educators must confront and disrupt unjust situations in schools. Shields claimed that educational leaders must earnestly find ways to overcome an aversion to differences and must work overtly to displace deficit thinking through actively forming meaningful relationships to provide a socially just and academically excellent education for all.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The researcher synthesized transformative, queer, and cultural theories as a framework for this study, yielding *Transformative Queer Cultural Theory* (TQCT). Cultural theory provided the researcher with a lens that aligns with the context of the classroom that typically reproduces society's cultural norms. Elementary children are just becoming aware of their own identities and how those identities compare to their peers. "Queering" disrupts these traditional frames that define gender or sexual identity (Butler, 1990; Meyer, 2010). Queer theorists claimed that categories of sexuality and gender are socially constructed and reinforced by the dominant culture. Teachers who create a culture of accepting of all children's gender performance will allow children to be fluid and open in their play (e.g., center choices) and social interactions. Using a queering approach necessitates that the

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curriculum, policies, and practices of schools are inclusive of all individuals. For example, schools need to use gender-inclusive language on all event communications, including invitations. Consequently, students may perceive their environments as safer, especially those who deviate from gender and sexuality norms (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). To begin to confront heteronormative culture, educators could engage in experiences and conversations that give them an opportunity to see these critical issues with a new lens through transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997). As educators participate in transformative learning, this new understanding can lead to promoting a cultural change within the schools as they confront heteronormativity. This research drew on a combination and synthesis of three theoretical frames: transformative, queer, and cultural (TQCT).

Cultural theory seeks to understand and explain human patterns of beliefs, values and discourse within society (Smith & Riley, 2011). Within the schools, children learn through socio-cultural interactions with peers and adults what are considered to be acceptable behaviors in relation to gender (e.g., "Boys play rough"). Although children enter school with an understanding of gender and sexuality, they continue to explore their own identities and attractions. As children interact with their peers, they are actively constructing gender (Blaise, 2005). Their perceptions about the popularity of various behaviors and what is explicitly and implicitly reinforced in these social exchanges guide their behavior (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). For example peers and/or adults at times redirect boys who might choose the "dress up" center for center time by saying that "Dress-up is for girls." According to Butler (1990/2006), however, children will naturally experiment and "perform" their own gender in an environment free of regulated expectations for behavior. Gender development is not linear and is in fact a dynamic and evolving process (Bryan, 2012; Solomon, 2012).

This very fluidity is inherent in queer research (Levy & Johnson, 2011). Queer theory challenges and disrupts the traditional ways of knowing (Meyer, 2010). By questioning actions or words that suggest children should act a certain way based on their biological sex, teachers and school leaders can interrupt these binary concepts of gender.

Using queer theory to teach educators that children's identities are performances and interrelated will allow educators to transform the school culture into an accepting, inclusive environment while confronting and interrupting heteronormative discourse and patterns (Meyer, 2010). Queering provides a new lens for understanding heteronormativity and helps teachers accept identities that do not fit into socially constructed binary definitions of gender (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005).

This study planned to disrupt the status quo by using the voices of teachers to gather insight into their attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about gender nonconformity, the LGBTQ community, and the heteronormative culture within schools and society. Within this study, the researcher hoped that these educators, through transformative learning, would co-construct a new understanding of how cultural norms impact their students and, through a queer theory framework, challenge and disrupt current practices of heterosexism. Ideally, this reframing will be a catalyst for educators to become social justice leaders in disrupting the heteronormative culture of a classroom.

Statement of the Problem

Discrimination, intolerance, and abuse of LBGTQ families, colleagues, and students, or those with atypical gender behavior are prominent in most elementary schools. The problem is that many teachers often do not recognize heterosexist patterns, and if confronted with these issues they are too fearful or ill-equipped to challenge instances of heterosexist

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discrimination (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). This avoidance usually stems from fear of criticism from parents and administrators, lack of professional training, or their own negative attitudes about gender diversity or the LGBT community (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Meyer, 2010). This evasion allows heteronormative culture to prevail through the discourse and policies of schools, thereby perpetuating domination of one group over another (Baker, 2002). As a result, this bullying and rejection may lead to isolation, runaway behavior, homelessness, depression, suicide, drug and/or alcohol abuse, and truancy or academic failure (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Herek, Gillis, & Coqan, 1999).

The heteronormative culture in schools causes children who deviate from traditional gender behaviors or who have LGBTQ parents to feel deficient (Bickmore, 1999; Meyer, 2010). Children vulnerable to feelings of not belonging are the most susceptible and prone to being victims of bullying (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). Through policies and the curriculum, schools often create a culture that excludes LGBTQ families as well (Baker, 2002; Meyer, 2010). For example, same-sex families are not represented in literature, and forms ask parents to identify "father" and "mother" to contact. As a result, these families remain silent due to fear of repercussions. Parents worry their children will suffer consequences of exclusion and bullying at school due to their nontraditional lifestyle. Schools risk losing the rewards of actively engaged family members when they ignore these issues of discrimination and marginalization (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). And when children from LGBTQ families are subjected to harassment and other mistreatment at school, schools become unsafe and thus fail an entire community of students.

In addition to the exclusion of students and families, thousands of LGBTQ school educators and leaders in this country often remain closeted because of fear of discrimination.

Teachers reported being afraid of losing respect and credibility with their peers and students and of losing their jobs if they were identified as LGBTQ (Graves, 2009; Griffin, 1992; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). The ramification of "outing" causes genuine fear (Fraynd & Capper, 2003). Consequently, their only alternative is to remain silent and to feel isolated and marginalized within their own school community.

To address these many issues that perpetuate heterosexism, it is critical to begin within the schools. One significant obstacle to addressing discrimination and harassment is the lack of training for educators who are ready and willing to look beyond society's misperceptions and fears and address heterosexism. LGBTQ students who do not conform to traditional gender roles experience hostility nationwide within the schools through both physical violence and the exclusion of LGBTQ issues from the curriculum. School and other community figures often fail to provide support to LGBTQ youth or children displaying atypical gender behavior (Payne & Smith, 2012). Faculties can learn strategies to address bullying and to include topics of gender or sexuality, thereby relaying the message that this harassment or policing of topics is unacceptable (Schneider & Dimito, 2008; Smolkin & Young, 2011).

In addition to feeling unprepared or unable to address these issues of gender and sexuality in schools, educators face the reality of today's pressures in schools. School demographics are shifting, and the needs of students have become complex (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). Over the past 30 years, the student body within the United States has become more racially, linguistically, culturally, and socio-economically diverse, and teachers are charged with finding material that is relevant to their students while addressing a need to build a community of learners from diverse backgrounds (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). An

additional obstacle for teachers in the current educational system is the individualistic competitive model of high stakes testing (Ravitch, 2011; Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). These standardized performance measures have a profound effect on defining what counts as responsive or effective teaching and genuinely put schools in jeopardy of deteriorating in terms of the educational responses to issues of equity and social justice (Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). These reforms, Mezirow and Taylor (2009) asserted, undermine collaborative learning within the schools, which is a key component to sharing the worldviews and cultural awareness that advance tolerance and acceptance.

To prepare students to live in a global community, teachers will need to find ways to expand children's worldviews. Transformational learning is a cultural change teachers can imbue within the schools to prepare students for this complex globalized world. Educators who create an environment where critical thinking, building relationships, and diverse experiences are valued in the classroom prepare their students for the twenty-first century. Additionally, teachers who address issues of equity establish an expectation for students to challenge injustices within the school and the community (Kaur, 2012). Mezirow and Taylor (2009) contended that school communities that provide a space where staff and students feel safe and respected support students' ability to be open to learning new worldviews. When educators help children learn about diverse perspectives, students become more tolerant and accepting of peers who do not represent the dominant culture (i.e., white, able-bodied, and heterosexual). The teacher can create a culture where lessons and conversations reduce prejudice and minimize conflict between all children despite their gender identity or sexuality.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs and attitudes of teachers regarding children, families or colleagues who identify as LGBTQ or who express gender atypically. Understanding, uncovering, and reflecting on society's attitudes toward the LGBTQ community can be a valuable step towards reframing viewpoints. Once society becomes aware of its biases and attitudes, understanding may result in tolerance and acceptance (Payne & Smith, 2012).

Prejudice and discrimination are rooted in the history of a culture and continue to be formed through the practices and structures of the institutions (Hawley, 2013). In order to disrupt a heteronormative climate, Kosciw and Diaz (2008) recommended identifying five key areas of change within the school culture to address these structures and practices: 1) language, 2) safe zones, 3) comprehensive bullying policies and laws, 4) inclusive curriculum, and 5) training for staff. These are necessary action steps schools need to adopt to disrupt heteronormativity (Kosciw & Diaz, 2012; Meyer, 2010), thereby building tolerance and changing the culture of the school. Teaching tolerance can never start too early (Letts & Sears, 1999; Lugg, 2006; Meyer, 2010; Solomon, 2012). With tolerance education, children learn about respect, diversity, and the differences of others in society (Kumashiro, 2002; Nieto, 2002). Discussions can help children dispel misinformation, confusion, and labels, and, instead, have a better understanding of the diverse cultures of gays and lesbians (Baker, 2002; Bickmore, 1999).

This research included qualitative and quantitative methods. Using two questionnaires, the researcher gathered baseline and post-study data about teachers' knowledge and attitude about LGBTQ individuals. Through the book club format, a volunteer group of teachers had

the opportunity, over a two-month period, to begin to see the heteronormative culture of their schools through various lenses. The underlying assumption in this qualitative research was that when teachers have the opportunity to read, reflect, discuss and understand the perspectives of parents with children who have nonconforming gender behaviors or the perspectives of children who are questioning their sexual orientation, teachers' awareness and knowledge will increase and that this acknowledgement would lead to action steps to confront heterosexism. This awareness makes "the other" seem less different, strange, or exotic, which can discourage stereotyping (Hawley, 2013). As a result of this book club, these educators had an opportunity to view these issues with a new lens that helped them to reframe their own understandings in an effort to have these teachers confront and disrupt heteronormative culture.

This research utilized the qualitative methods of a book club to promote transformative change. Noblit (2008) explained that qualitative research in education is often concerned with transformative promise through sense making, identifying inequalities, and attending to those who hold institutional power. This study is an attempt to continue that work and to fill the gap of the research needed to confront heterosexism and the culture that privileges heterosexism, ignoring or even intentionally silencing those who do not conform.

Researcher's Experiences and Biases

This researcher's experiences as a mother, an educator, and a lesbian have driven her quest to work for social justice. As a mother, the researcher has witnessed the direct impact of heterosexists' remarks when her daughter shared her teacher's negative remarks regarding gay marriage. As an educator, she has experienced the uneasiness and internal conflict of deciding when to remain closeted as a lesbian and when to freely share her identity.

Alternatively, because of the researcher's limited experiences, she had constraints in terms of points of view in her study. As a white woman who is privileged in terms of economic stability and race, her lens has its own limitations. By using member checking or respondent validation, the researcher was able to re-examine her initial analyses as a way to remain cognizant of her positionality throughout her research. Turner and Coen (2008) argued that this worthwhile exercise in research enhances the researcher's credibility with a more reflexive viewpoint.

Researcher's Questions

The researcher developed three questions to frame this research to understand heteronormativity at the elementary school:

1) To what extent are teachers aware of heteronormative culture in an elementary setting?

A) What are some indicators of heteronormativity that teachers are aware of in an elementary school setting?

B) How do teachers view the consequences of heteronormativity in an elementary setting?

2) How, if at all, can educators grow in their understanding of heteronormativity in an elementary school setting?

3) To what extent can educators help to disrupt heteronormativity at an elementary level?

This researcher facilitated an environment where educators had the opportunity to reflect, share, and ideally broaden their own understandings and to acquire new perspectives in regards to these controversial topics of heteronormativity. Using educators' voices and understandings, the researcher plans to share these findings in a professional development setting with a future audience of educators who are inspired to promote social justice and equity within their schools.

Rationale for the Study

Larry King was 15 years old when a classmate shot him in his classroom after Larry asked the student be his Valentine (Stuart, 2011). This tragic event and many others highlight the urgency of this issue. Educators need more information on how to address bullying and harassment that is prejudiced by gender (Meyer, 2010). If educators do not address issues of homophobia and heterosexism, students will continue to experience harassment within the schools, feeling excluded and marginalized.

In June of 2001, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), together representing more than 3.6 million teachers, joined in a call for the Department of Education to protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students from human rights abuses (Kosciw & Cullen, 2002). The professional standards developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2002) state that it is essential for all children and families to be welcomed and affirmed within the school. Embracing diversity in regards to sexual orientation, however, is one of the most challenging areas in standards implementation (Baker, 2002; Bickmore, 1999; Meyer, 2010). To address this issue of inclusion for families and children, teachers will need to find ways to address issues of heterosexism. In response to negative attitudes toward homosexuals and bullying in schools, training at the district level and within teacher education programs can begin to address the topics of gender fluidity and sexual orientation as part of a multicultural education curriculum (Meyer, 2010).

Research can fill in the gaps, especially at the primary level. From a review of the literature, it is evident that research does not adequately address elementary–age students, especially those who may be gender bending, transgender, or beginning to think about their

own sexual orientation. Instead, most of the research is focused on LGBTQ youth at the high school level (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). Additionally, much of the research to date has centered on sexual orientation and identity or school climates for LGBTQ students. Gender nonconformity and the norms of gender conformity that underpin heteronormativity have received limited attention (Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009). Even when researching sexual harassment in the school setting, the focus has been primarily at the secondary level and, subsequently, the experiences of adolescents (Renold, 2002). Yet elementary school is the initial arena where regulation of sexual discourses, practices, and identities is enforced implicitly or explicitly within the culture. This research focused on the heteronormative practices and attitudes of educators in elementary school and on the neglected research area of preadolescents' experiences of different forms of sexual harassment and isolation.

It is estimated that nine to fourteen million children have one or more gay parents, but there is little to no research about these children's experiences in schools (Ryan, Huebner, Dias & Sanchez, 2010). There is little written that addresses whether school leaders are aware of the heteronormative culture of schools. Research has not focused on addressing this critical issue early enough (i.e., elementary school) for students to feel physically safe, emotionally secure, and part of their learning community. "We as teachers have a responsibility to bring the world our students will have to confront—are already confronting—into our classrooms. Anything less than that is professionally and morally irresponsible" (Hoffman, 1993, p. 55).

Limitations of the Study

This study relied on primarily qualitative methods to gather data while using descriptive statistics to triangulate. With the TQCT as the framework, the researcher used the

book club format to gather data from teachers who were willing to share their perspectives and views about the LGBTQ community, children with atypical gender behavior, and the heteronormative culture of elementary schools. The use of a book study as a research design is uncommon; therefore, this study was unable to rely on studies that have elaborated the limitations or strengths of this methodology.

In this study the researcher was an "insider-outsider." As an educator, she participated in these discussions as an "insider," but as a lesbian she was likely an "outsider" to the majority (or even all) of the participants. The researcher made attempts to be mindful of any assumptions and political stances, and she used respondent validation throughout. As the moderator of this book club, the researcher was a participant observer in this study.

For this study the researcher relied on purposeful sampling to provide a deeper understanding of the participants' learning (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The researcher actively recruited participants who were friends and acquaintances who had demonstrated through comments and actions a range of views in regards to this topic of heteronormativity. Having individuals with a breadth of perspectives but also commonalties as educators willing to contribute to this study hopefully enabled participants to share their insights while not feeling isolated within the group.

This research design was limited by the truth of the participants (Noblit, 2013) and the researcher's ability to be cognizant of her positionality. Because of the restricted number of participants, this study was also limited in its ability to make broad generalizations to other situations. In addition, the research would have benefited from the voices and perspectives of people who may have been too fearful to participate or that considered the topic taboo. These perspectives would help in uncovering the key issues that lead to why some people

may be hesitant or opposed to the disruption of heteronormativity in schools, as well as valuable ways those educators can encourage and work with others of differing viewpoints.

This study is limited by the scope of the research. With additional time, the researcher would expand the sample size to include more book clubs and participants from schools across the country. This study used participants who were open and willing to engage in this topic within a book club setting. Also the participants were all elementary teachers who self identified as female, which restricted the data collection to one school level.

In addition, the participants, although actively recruited, were self-selected and voluntarily agreed to participate; this may have resulted in similar data (i.e., responses) regarding this topic. Also, participants were involved in the process of selecting a book (from two choices) to use as the groundwork for our conversations and discussions. This choice may limit the information and perspective presented by this group.

These findings were valuable for documenting changes in beliefs, leading to teacher learning and developing awareness of children with atypical gender behavior and families or colleagues that identify as LGBTQ, as well as the heteronormative culture of elementary school. Through this research design, teachers used their own voices and knowledge to reach an audience of their peers to potentially initiate transformative change through the culture of the book club and the Transformative Cultural Queer Theory framework.

Definition of Terms

Gender expression: The gender role that a person claims for him/her self which may or may not align with his/her biological make-up (Vaccaro, August, & Kennedy, 2012*).*

Gender nonconformity (atypical): When a person's gender expression varies from what is

traditionally expected for a person assigned that sex (e.g., when a boy chooses to wear

a dress to school) (Meyer, 2010).

Heteronormativity: The belief that assumes and privileges heterosexuality, promoting the

view that gender and sexuality is binary (male-female & heterosexual) (Bryan, 2012).

Built on the assumption that everyone is heterosexual (Meyer, 2010).

Heterosexism: The discriminatory beliefs and behaviors which are directed against gay men

and lesbians (Nieto & Bode, 2008) or individuals with atypical gender behavior.

Homophobia: A fear of homosexuals, homosexuality, or one's own homosexual feelings

(Butler, 1993).

Homosexual: A person sexually attracted to persons of the same sex. Homosexuals include

males, referred to as gays, and females, referred to as lesbians (Bryan, 2012). A

homosexual is a person who identifies as gay or lesbian.

LGBT(Q): An acronym that refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer people

as a collective (Meyer, 2010).

The *Q* in the acronym LGBTQ stands for "questioning" or "queer."   Gay activists

adopted the term queer in the 1990s (Schulman, 2013).   *Queer* is often used to reject

traditional gender identities and to allow for more ambiguous alternatives to LGBT.

Throughout this study the acronyms are used in accordance with research reviewed.

Queer: Refers to individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex,

androgynous, and people who may be questioning their sexuality (APA, 2011). Gender

and desire are flexible, free-floating, and not "caused" by other stable factors (Butler,

1990).

Sexual orientation: An attraction or arousal, sexual activity or behavior, or one's identity as a

homosexual or heterosexual (APA, 2011).

Social justice leaders: Leaders who emphasize moral values, justice, respect, care, and

equity; keep in the forefront a consciousness about the impact of race, class, gender,

sexual orientation, and disability on schools and students' learning (Cambron-

McCabe & McCarthy, 2005).

Transgender: Describing a person who lives part- or full-time in a gender role opposite to

genetic sex (Bryan, 2012).

Conclusion

Heterosexism and genderism have continued to pose barriers to cultural proficiency

in schools (Arias, 2009). Scheurich and Skrla (2003) claimed that the only agenda public

schools should uphold is honoring equity and excellence as one in the same. The public

education system cannot truly be excellent if it is not equitable (National Academy of

Education, 2009). In the United States, however, public schools help to create and maintain a

hostile environment in regards to gender expression or sexual identity of students (Sham et.

al., 2009) and, therefore, do not ensure a culture of equity and excellence for all. Meyer

(2010) stated that, although most educators would prioritize safety and inclusion of all their

students as number one in schools, children with LGBT families or children who do not

conform to traditional gender expression do not feel safe. The heteronormative culture of

schools silences and marginalizes these youths and their families. Schools help to create and

re-create the existing cultural beliefs and practices of the dominant culture, socially

reproducing dominance, hegemony, and marginalization (Baker, 2002; Bickmore, 1999;

Bristin, 2000: Meyer, 2010). Through this social reproduction, schools continue to be

institutionally homophobic and heteronormative by their very structures and procedures and policies (Adam et al., 2004, Meyer, 2010).

There is a gap in the research on how to make elementary schools safe for children with LGBTQ families and those who do not conform to traditional gender expression. This area of equity is under-investigated and must be addressed to ensure students and families feel safe and welcome. While society struggles with how and when to deal with LGBTQ rights; students, their families and staff who are LGBTQ or do not conform to the expected gender norms are marginalized. This research will address the issues of the heteronormative culture in schools and even an intentional *silenced voice* in our educational communities.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 is organized into three main sections. The first section offers a definition of hegemonic heteronormativity as a product of reviewing the literature. This section also provides an overview of the manifestations of homophobia at the 1) macro-level (societal), 2) meso-level (institutional—schools), and 3) micro-level (targeted at individuals). The researcher examined literature that illustrates the restricted definitions of gender that are at the core of heterosexism and which result in the silencing and marginalization of children, families, and staff within schools. The second section describes the diverse and multiple issues that educators need to confront to disrupt heteronormativity at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Finally, section three provides a definition of the researcher's theoretical framework that combines queer and cultural theory with transformative learning as the foundation for this study.

Hegemonic Heteronormativity

Homosexuality has existed throughout human history and is even accepted and celebrated in some cultures (Hunt, 2010). However, according to Adam (1987), antigay prejudice has been perpetrated throughout modern history, from the Nazi exterminations of homosexuals to the enforcement of anti-sodomy laws in the US. In American society, heterosexism continues to be the norm. As such, non-heterosexual and/or transgendered people are invisible and unimportant, while homosexuals or those who do not fit the perceived norm are considered abnormal and deficient (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Meyer, 2003; Smolkin & Young, 2011; Toomey, et al., 2012). The ideology that non-

heterosexual identities are pathological or immoral has created unequal access to legal rights, social privileges, and safety, and these accepted policies of inequities have helped preserve heterosexist attitudes (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003).

Heterosexism has a significant and negative impact on lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and the transgendered within United States culture, and contrary to other forms of oppression in society, homophobia is more accepted (Perez, 2005). Federal and state laws give preferential treatment to heterosexuals, and many governmental, cultural, and religious institutions uphold this belief (Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock, 2011; Perez, 2005). As a result, members of the LGBTQ community often suffer the adverse effects of being marginalized (Perez, 2005). U.S. culture is based on the systematic privileging of heterosexuals, a system called *heteronormativity* (Chesir-Teran, 2003). Toomey, McGuire, and Russell (2012) clarified that heteronormativity is a system within U.S. society that supports a hierarchy which provides both opportunities and sanctions to individuals grounded on presumed binaries of gender and sexuality. Power is maintained through the repetition of daily routine activities, and the hegemony of heteronormative practices, discourse and policies continues to be customary within U.S. culture (Rush, 2008).

One critical factor at the base of this heteronormativity is that gender is defined as a binary system (Horn et al., 2009). Within U.S. culture, it is strongly held belief by the general population that people fit into two categories of gender—male and female (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005)—and that these roles are complementary and all intimate relationships should only exist between a male and a female (Khayatt, 2006; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Solomon, 2012). According to Connell (2009), people often take gender for granted, quickly identifying in day-to-day life who is male or female. Discourse within Western

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society is traditionally filled with a focus on binary opposites (e.g., man/woman, gay/straight, masculine/feminine), and patterns in our interactions and social practices often reinforce this discourse. As a result, this communication propagates these norms among group members (Kincaid, 2004).

Contrary to the ideology that gender is binary and self-evident, gender is not a biological manifestation or an absolute fixed dichotomy in people's lives but rather is the product of daily activities and practices that govern how individuals perform gender. Gender is the result of socially created standards that influence how individuals act and behave to fit into the categories of "boy" or "girl," which give the illusion that gender is stagnant and unchanging. Gender, however, is always changing as people encounter new situations or life circumstances (Connell, 2009).

The terms *gender*, *sex*, and *sexual orientation* are typically used as if they fit into dichotomies. And many professionals (e.g., doctors, researchers) often conflate *gender* and *sex*, using them interchangeably and resulting in confusion within discourse and research. These concepts, while closely related, describe aspects of individuals' bodies and identities (Butler, 1990; Meyer, 2010). *Sex* refers to the biological characteristics of a person related to the reproductive system. Historically, animals have been labeled with this binary system of terms, male and female, even though some do not fit clearly into these categories (Meyer, 2010). According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2011), *gender* refers to attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex. Behavior that is viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitutes gender non-conformity. *Gender identity* refers to "one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender" (APA, 2006). *Transgender* is an umbrella term that refers to those with

identities that challenge the socially constructed categories between the genders. *Sexual orientation* refers to the sex of those to whom the individual is sexually and romantically attracted (APA, 2011) and is generally determined at a very young age (Meyer, 2010; Solomon, 2012). Some research indicates that sexual orientation is fluid for some people (Connell, 2009). *Queer* is both an umbrella term that refers to LGBTQ people and a political statement that challenges the binary thinking of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1993; Jagose, 1996).

Surtees (2008) and Connell (2009) explained that gender is socially constructed as female or male. Gender is not an expression of biology but rather a pattern learned from societal structures (Connell, 2009). Girls and boys learn as early as 3 or 4 years old what is expected in terms of these gender roles (i.e., how to interact, dress, and speak to "fit in"). And within the social institution of school, everyone is forced into one role, male or female, and assumed to be heterosexual (Connell, 2009; Meyer, 2010; Adam et al., 2004). Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe (2010) explained, "These polarized opposites of gender behavior and attitudes are the product of deliberate social and cultural practices that are based on hegemonic heteronormativity" (p. 248). As early as preschool, children's understanding of gender as distinct binary categories is reinforced daily within the schools.

For children, school is the center of their daily lives and is the institution in which they experience and learn how to conform to this socially constructed and widely accepted heterosexist culture (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Meyer, 2010). Khayatt (2006) contended that schools reflect and reinforce the conventional norms of gender and sexuality. He continued by stating that schools help to create and re-create the existing cultural beliefs and practices of the dominant culture. For example, teachers ask children to line up by "boys"

and "girls" and/or set up competitions between boys and girls, reinforcing this heterosexist climate.

Through this social reproduction, schools continue to be institutionally homophobic and/or heteronormative by their very structures, procedures, curriculum, and policies (Adam et al., 2004; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Meyer, 2010). As a result, this hegemonic norm that everyone is heterosexual remains part of the school culture (Shapon-Shevin & Straut, 2002).

This norm manifests itself in a "hidden curriculum" (Loutzenheiser & Macintosh, 2004; Shapon-Shevin & Straut, 2002). Nieto (2002) explained that in schools there is a hidden curriculum, which refers to the subtle (or not-so subtle messages) that are not part of the intended curriculum. Payne and Smith (2012) asserted that the pedagogy of schools reinforces the cultural assumption that girls and boys are essentially and naturally different. Through the hidden curriculum, classrooms, teachers, and peers continue to convey and reinforce what children should play with, act like, and aspire to be, depending on their designated gender as male or female. Children and adults reinforce assumed heterosexuality by referring to opposite gender girlfriends or boyfriends, referring to a mom and a dad, and by taking on their assumed roles (e.g., girls cook in the kitchen center) during playtime (Bickmore, 1999; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; "Gender identity," 2004). Through extracurricular events such as Valentine's Day exchanges, this invisible heterosexuality curriculum becomes very visible and is reinforced (Meyer, 2010; Smolkin & Young, 2011). Bryan (2012) shared that "heterosexual pairing" is in most children's literature (e.g., *The Berenstein Bears, Pat the Bunny*). These heterosexual images and couples are not the problem; rather the absence of alternate families is the problem (Bryan, 2012). Even the

teacher sharing about her/his own life can reinforce norms and limit openness to other discussions (Shapon-Shevin & Straut, 2002). "Tomboy," a term used in American culture for young girls who temporarily reject traditional femininity, reinforces the clear categorization of activities that are sanctioned for "girls" (Payne & Smith, 2012). Boys who like games and activities in the kitchen area or dress up corner often learn shame and to hide their play, and both adults and peers denigrate these activities with the term *sissy*. Payne and Smith (2012) emphasized that, as adolescence approaches, these children experience increased pressure to conform to more traditional gender behavior or suffer the consequences of increased stigma if they do not. These gender topics are already part of students' everyday existence as soon as they start school, and children are presumed to be heterosexual from the outset (Blaise 2005; Bryan, 2012; Meyer, 2010).

Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh (2004) contended that LGBTQ students actually suffer from a "double bind" within the school. Classroom teachers are resistant to addressing LGBTQ topics or even avoid issues dealing with gender and nonconforming behaviors, thereby policing and silencing the topic. Staff and peers force children and their LGBTQ families to be invisible within the classroom, while forcing them to be visible outside the classroom when they fall victim to name calling and pejoratives such as "that's so gay" or "sissy" (Meyer, 2010). In the classroom, the violence is often silencing, yet this "shushing" of LGBTQ topics enables and even validates the physical violence or harassment that occurs in the halls (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004).

Manifestations of Systemic Homophobia

Throughout Western history, homosexuality has been primarily considered to be the central problem for the LGBTQ community. In reality, the issue is homophobia and the

oppression of people who are gay or display variant gender behavior. Homosexuality exists in all societies globally and is accepted in several cultures. Within Western civilization, however, it previously was criminalized and continues to be stigmatized. The Western norms that privilege heterosexuality and marginalize homosexuality are socially reproduced in all major institutions, such as schools, and these heteronormative practices are usually beyond most people's awareness, leading to implicit and explicit coercion or hegemony. These social norms are constructed by the dominant Judeo-Christian religions and governmental structure of capitalism of the West and have been sources of sexual regulation. Although political shifts beginning in the 1970s and into the twenty-first century have helped to build tolerance and even acceptance for members of the LGBTQ community, homophobia continues to marginalize and isolate children and adults.

History and Politics of Homophobia

In the premodern world, the term *homosexual* did not even exist (Boswell, 1980). Not until the nineteenth century, historians agree, did Western society find a term which pathologized and criminalized the LGBTQ community, sending them to jails and insane asylums (Foucault, 1990). Over the last 100 years, U.S. society has moved from seeing homosexuality as immoral and deviant, and thereby a threat to innocent children, to recently and slowly seeing it as more acceptable (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Opfer, 2000).

In the 1940s through the early 1960s, homosexuals were considered communists, it was a felony to engage in sodomy, and police arrested people who visited "gay bars." The McCarthy era generated fear, suspicion, and isolation, and the repression of the 1950s pushed many activist groups into a mind-set of "single-line" issues rather than co-existing and working with other groups to fight for equity. The 1960s and '70s brought a gay movement

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that understood the connections of worldwide struggles and liberation-fronts (Jakobsen, 2005). The gay movement began to challenge the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) classification of homosexuality as an illness. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses (Ford, 2013), and two years later the American Psychological Association concurred.

Sexual repressions, however, continued to be alive and well, such as when Dade County, Florida, kicked off the 1977 "Save our Children" campaign to fight against the alleged recruitment of children into the homosexual lifestyle (Rubin, 1993). In the 1980s, a wave of organizations opposed sex education in schools, which coincided with the emergence of AIDS. These groups capitalized on a climate of fear and anxiety associated with this disease and the U.S. public's perception that AIDs was closely connected with homosexuality (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). The political movement for the gay community encountered setbacks, but AIDS also prompted the community to organize and address the horrific issues this disease brought, including increased prejudice and oppression for the LGBTQ community members. Primarily, these organizations were defined as AIDS (not gay) organizations, and there was a struggle in competition for resources (Armstrong, 2002).

Out of this struggle came a decline of gay identity organizations in the early 1990s, and queer politics emerged in the United States (Armstrong, 2002). Queer politics questioned the gay and lesbian movements that focused primarily on assimilation to an alternative more fluid and inclusive perspective. Queer activists rejected the concept of seeking the approval of dominant heterosexual society rather than challenging it. Queer politics was intentionally provocative and confrontational, moving beyond tolerance and acceptance. Morris (2000) explained that queer politics does more than challenge and confront the attitudes and norms

that socially reproduce oppression for LGBTQ individuals; rather, the goal is to destroy the institutionalized heterosexism that privileges heterosexuals and marginalizes queers. Queer politics shifts from identities to interests, from gay identity to queer resistance.

Opfer (2000) agreed that educators, leaders, and queer activists needed to find ways to "force the hegemonic political system and its theorists to recognize alternate issues and forms of activism" (p. 99). Meyer (2010) challenged teachers and school leaders to do away with the "docile" form of learning called *banking (*Freire, 1970/2000) and the cultural norms that police students' language and actions. According to Kumashiro in *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Anti-Oppressive Education* (2002), "learning is about disruption and opening up to further learning, not closure and satisfaction" (p. 43). Kumashiro, in his more recent work *Against Common* Sense (2004)*, stated, "the most significant way that anti-oppressive teaching is queer is its use of discomfort or crisis" (p. 27). This disruption or challenge to the status quo, however, is in conflict with the most recent school climate of accountability and competition. Schools' high stakes testing and global competition mindset sorts students into binary categories of proficient and non-proficient, and low test scores result in negative sanctions for many schools. This outlook of accountability ignores the multi-dimensional needs of students, and, because anti-oppressive education cannot necessarily be measured on a computer-generated assessment, it is not considered a priority within the schools. To reduce prejudice and minimize conflict between all children despite their gender identity or sexuality, teachers need to be able to create a culture that opens children's ability to learn about worldviews.

Conflicts involving sexual orientation and gender identity are deeply rooted in American society and its institutions, but according to D'Emilio (2002) there have been some

positive changes for the LGBTQ community in recent years. Gays are now visible on reality

TV and sitcoms, in advertisements in magazines, and on college websites. And in July 2013,

the United States Supreme Court overturned parts of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

This Supreme Court ruling provides that individuals who are defined to be legally married by

a state must be granted access to federal benefits that previously were available only to

married couples made up of one man and one woman. The world has begun to change, yet

students who are LGBTQ still endure daily violence, isolation, and injustice within schools,

while children with gender variant behavior or LGBTQ families are excluded at the

elementary level (Blaise, 2005; Cobb, 2005; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Meyer, 2003).

At the 2007 annual Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, the FBI

reported there was a 16.6 % rise in hate crimes committed against individuals because of

their sexual orientation. The number of hate crimes increased from 453 in 1991 to 1,265 in

2007, the highest level in five years. Bassett et al. (2005) asserted that pervasive negativity

toward homosexuals or homophobia is evident in the United States.

Political success for the LGBTQ community has recently yielded the

decriminalization of sexual acts, granting of partnership status, legalization of gender

changes, and thriving representation of LGBTQ individuals and couples in the media (do

Mar Castro Varela, Dhawan, & Engel, 2011). Yet persecution, marginalization, oppression

and harassment continue to be the reality for many LGBTQ individuals within society and

institutions. Homophobia has been called "the last respected prejudice of the century"

(Baker, 2002, p. 2). As a result, the stigma associated with the LGBTQ community

continues to conjure up negative images for many people.

Sexual Stigma

Gender and sexuality continue to stir up controversy, prejudice, and myths (Connell, 2009). Many still believe that people are born to be opposites (man and woman) and that gender patterns are constant. Those who do not "choose" to fit into these categories are deviant, which leads to those individuals being stigmatized. Herek (2007) defined sexual stigma as a direct negative label placed on those who hold non-heterosexual beliefs, identities, or behaviors. He suggested that this stigma is unique and cannot be considered analogous to the discrimination of individuals in terms of race, ethnicity, or religion. For one, the sexual orientation of an individual is not readily obvious to an observer, and many LGBTQ individuals may choose or feel forced to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity (Herek, 2007). Furthermore, Herek contended that overt discourse or actions of prejudice that are based on race, ethnicity, or religion are commonly considered unacceptable in the United States, yet sexual prejudice is not generally regarded as objectionable. Although the majority of the U.S. population contests this sexual stigma, censure and intolerance of sexual minorities continues to be strong in many segments of society (Herek, 2007). In a Southern Poverty Law Center study, there were more hate crimes against LGBTQ people than any other minority group in the United States (Potok, 2010). Yet in 2010, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) reported that 60% of Americans believe homosexuality should be accepted versus 30% who believe it should be rejected. The survey found that a primary reason for this discrepancy in these beliefs is the generational difference; 74% of people less than 26 years of age were accepting of the LGBTQ community, while 63% of people over the age of 70 stated that homosexuality was wrong (NORC, 2010). As with all types of stigma, they are grounded in society's power relations;

therefore, sexual minorities have less power than heterosexuals. Herek (2007) clarified that when someone chooses to be identified as or is "outed" as LGBTQ (or perceived to be) his or her entire identity can become attached to this negative stigma while simultaneously others in the LGBTQ community feel forced to be invisible due to these fears of hostility. This powerlessness translates to less access to valued resources, less influence over others, and less autonomy (Link & Phelan, 2002).

Hegemony and Heterosexism

This control over the LGBTQ community is maintained through the policing and regulating of gender and sexuality that is entrenched in United States culture (and globally) (Arias, 2009; Foucault, 19795; Meyer, 2009). Brislin (2000) contended that people have created culture, perpetuated it through enculturation, and, unless challenged, will socially reproduce dominance, hegemony, and marginalization. Heterosexuality, as a norm, is constructed and reproduced in politics, media, popular culture, arts, employment, family life, and all parts of the culture (Johnson, 2002). Heterosexism in the United States is the dominant paradigm that devalues LGBTQ individuals. Gay, lesbian, and transgender people are oppressed and marginalized, and they must choose either to be invisible or open in terms of their identities. Members of the LGBTQ community who are fearful may hide their identity to protect themselves from repercussions while others choose to be out and are often subsequently labeled as deviant. This heteronormativity forms a "production of identities, relationships, cultural expressions, and institutional practices, revealing it to be a force with consequences well beyond the discrimination against lesbians (and gays)" (Ward & Schneider, 2009, p. 436).

How are hegemony and heteronormativity connected and how do these constructs relate to power and domination? Researchers do Mar Castro Varela, Dhawan, and Engel (2011) reflect on this question about hegemony and heteronormativity in a collection of essays, *Hegemony and Heteronormativity; Revisiting the Political in Queer Politics*. They described the relationship between heteronormativity and power using Foucault's philosophy "power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere'" (Foucault, 1982, p. 773). This power permeates society and is in constant flux. A key point for Foucault is that power is an everyday, socialized, and symbolized phenomenon. He contends that individuals are the instruments of power. Foucault's theory clarified that norms are so embedded in society that they are beyond most individuals' perception, causing adults and children to police themselves without any intentional coercion from others (do Mar Castro Varela et al., 2011; Meyer, 2009). Members of the dominant society hold power through their daily interactions and discourse that reinforces what are considered acceptable norms, which results in the oppression of those who do not conform.

This invisible and naturalized power or domination of one group over another is *hegemony* (Baker, 2004). Litowitz (2000) explained that the theory of hegemony is Marxist, originating mainly from the work of Antonio Gramsci. Foucault's view agreed with Gramsci's work as Foucault also called these subtle but powerful messages that infiltrate everyday life, hegemony (Meyer, 2010). Gramsci (1995) argued that schools provide a space where hegemony functions: "Everything that influences or may influence public opinion directly or indirectly belongs to [hegemony]: libraries, schools, groups and clubs of different kinds, right up to architecture, street lay out and street names" (p. 155). Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) asserted, "the potency in hegemony is that its power is often hidden" (p. 76).

Within the explicit and implicit curricula, schools perpetuate the dominance of presumed and expected heterosexism. Heterosexual practices are inherent in the school day, from stories about married male and female couples to the punishment of atypical gender behavior (Blaise, 2005).

The general public agrees that schools are the major socializing force in the lives of children and that what students learn in schools, in both the explicit and hidden curriculum, has a huge impact on students' larger societal expectations, norms, and values (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003 p. 106). Educational theorists support this belief that the explicit and hidden curricula of schools preserve the dominant heterosexual structure, thereby excluding, marginalizing, and oppressing children who are (or are perceived to be) LGBTQ (do Mar Caro Varela et al., 2011; Herek, 2007; Kincheloe, 2005; Meyer, 2003). Schools have been a pivotal battleground in the culture wars for over 50 years in the United States (Meyer, 2010; Opfer, 2000). Fears derived from children and adults wanting to fit into the acceptable heterosexist cultural norms become the source of sexual stigma and sexual regulation and are reproduced in school and limit students' educational freedom.

Religion, Capitalism, and Homophobia

To understand the contemporary controversy surrounding homophobia and heterosexism as the LGBTQ community becomes more visible within United States culture, it is worthwhile to examine the socio-historical frameworks of Western society. Recognizing the historical connections between sexual freedom, regulation, and the structure of Western capitalism may benefit attempts to find ways to reframe and confront this sensitive issue of heteronormativity.

According to Jakobsen (2005), sexual regulation has been a critical piece of American politics for the last century. Consider DOMA, the impeachment of Bill Clinton due to his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky, and the Republican Party developing a close affinity with social conservatives. Jakobsen expounded that at the root of U.S. history is a Puritanical ideological framework, which includes an emphasis on sexual repression. Traditionally, many Americans have considered religious conservatives to be the force behind regulating sexual behavior; therefore, the answer to this problem of repression would be freedom from religion. However, this sexual repression is at the root of modernity and social relations during the rise of capitalism, as illustrated in Max Weber's 1930 book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber described the concept of freedom in the United States as regulated activity that makes the market possible. He argued that, for capitalism to be successful, the cultural influence of the Protestant ethic of predestination was essential to the work ethic (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). Religious believers, unable to influence their fate, work hard to ensure their salvation, ultimately reinvesting their profits in the market, which is an essential component of capitalism. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, capitalism is defined as the system of free market controlled by individuals rather than the government. Regulations of social and sexual relations are at the core of this modern freedom. These regulations included traditional notions of marriage between a man and a woman; homosexuality was considered chaotic and did not adhere to these guidelines of society (Adam, 1998).

A contemporary perspective from Opfer (2000) contributed to this conversation regarding religion and heterosexism by claiming that the religious right has been

characterized as "extremist" and "paranoid" by the media and in scholarly articles in regards

to homosexuality. The religious right, Opfer defined, is a group that is unified by a pre-

existing belief system. Often included into this category are Christian fundamentalists and

evangelicals, who believe that the Bible is the flawless word of God and should be

interpreted literally (Opfer, 2000). The story of Sodom, in the book of Genesis, is the basis

of these religious groups' condemnation of homosexuality. Corinthians 6:9-10 states, "make

no mistake, no fornicators…. nor men who practice homosexual perversion … will possess

the kingdom of God." If this is their belief, Opfer asked, "Can we say that anti-homosexual

beliefs and actors are irrational?" (p. 95). Opfer reasoned that by labeling the religious right

as extremist, gay activists are forced to embrace traditional political theories of the dominant

culture. This labeling, she asserted, "locks people into competing theories of activism,

separatism and assimilation, neither of which serves gays' and lesbians' interests well." She

continued by adding, "the potential for political change depends, not on separatism nor on

assimilation, but on forcing the hegemonic political system and its theorists to recognize

alternative issues and forms of activism" (p. 99). Cobb (2005) agreed that the religious ethic

of the American system of law and justice, which relies on moral family values, could not be

disrupted by any policy gains made by queers. Jakobsen challenged queer activists and allies

to develop a better understanding of the role that religion plays on both sides of the debate:

"in terms of sexual regulation and in our concept of freedom, using [the role of religion] as

the foundation of our discourse might help us reformulate current politics" (Jakobsen, 2005,

p. 289). Jakobsen clarified, "If, in modernity, sex plus freedom equals regulation, then one of

the jobs of queer theory now is to change the arithmetic of our politics" (p. 304). Jakobsen

and Opfer believed reframing this issue may lead to more productive conversations and ultimately acceptance and unity between the heterosexual and homosexual communities.

Manifestations of Homophobia in Schools

Bickmore (1999) asserted, "elementary schools are places where young people's identities are formed as individual and as citizens" (p. 15). Within these major social institutions, teachers, families, and community members play vital roles and have a major impact on students' emotional, academic, and social well-being. The hidden and explicit curriculum within schools, however, helps perpetuate a hostile environment for children, families, and staff who do not conform to traditional gender norms or those who are or perceived to be LGBTQ.

Equity in Schools

In the mid-1600s, schools in the United States were mainly established for children to learn to read the Bible and to adhere to the values of the church. In the mid-1800s, American leader Horace Mann was a prominent force behind the ideology that public schools were to be an equalizing opportunity, and he paved the way with the Common School Movement, leading to free, public, and locally-controlled education for all children (Brick, 1983; Hazlett, 2011; Russell & Richardson, 2011). Since that time, political climate shifts in the United States have influenced the educational system at the government and grassroots level (Bakalis, 1983). In the 1954 landmark case *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate was not equal for students. In response to this ruling and the political changes of the 1960s and 1970s, school desegregation, gender equity, and equal access for children with disabilities were legally mandated, and values of equity for all

children were incorporated into public education systems across the United States for the first time (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005).

Equity for all children continues to be a goal in education today. The National Academy of Education (2009) asserted that every child deserves the opportunity to attain an excellent and equitable education, and the public education system cannot truly be excellent if it is not equitable for all students, families and staff. Scheurich and Skrla (2003) claimed that the only agenda public schools should uphold is honoring equity and excellence as one in the same.

One of the biggest challenges facing teachers and school leaders as schools become even more diverse is creating a school culture that is effective and equitable for all children (Kaur, 2012). Many of the pressures on teacher education today are a result of the spread of neo-liberal ideas and policies about markets, privatization, deregulation, and the private vs. public good (Kumashiro, 2010). Standardized performance measures in schools, increased accountability, and an emphasis on efficiency have overwhelming effects on defining what counts as responsive and effective teaching, totally undermining the educational responses to issues of equity and social justice (Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). Ladson-Billings (1999) stated that educators are losing sight of social issues, including race and racism and language diversity, and their impact on youth (Nieto, 20002). Heterosexism is neglected even more and "denial and silence shroud the reality of lesbian- and gay-identified (LG) youth in schools" (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003, p. 237).

Children

        For students to receive an equitable and excellent education, they should be engaged in school and have their basic physiological needs met according to Maslow's 1942 hierarchy of needs pyramid, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Maslow's 1942 Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid. This figure illustrates the sequence in which individuals' material, social, and personal needs must be met in order for them to pursue self-actualization.

The most basic needs are food, water, and shelter, but the need for safety and belonging, for which school plays a key role, is also essential. A great deal of research shows that without fulfilling the basic needs of safety and belonging students will not take risks in school (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; Osterman, 2000). Without positive, safe, inclusive school climates, students cannot thrive and succeed. Perry (2012) explained, "Primal learning is driven by curiosity, which leads to exploration, discovery, practice, and mastery. In turn, mastery leads to pleasure, satisfaction, and confidence to once again explore (para. 5)." Perry cautioned, however, that this cycle of wonder could be stopped by fear. Fear is ingrained into the human brain, and any threat (e.g., hunger, thirst, pain, shame)

results in a response to keep people safe. A person's focus can only be information that is important for survival. "Fear kills curiosity and inhibits exploration" (Perry, 2012, para. 2).

Research has suggested that public schools do not ensure a culture of equity and excellence for all but rather help to produce and maintain a fearful and intimidating environment in regards to sex, sexual orientation, and the gender expression of students (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Sham et al., 2009). Meyer (2010) claimed that although most educators would prioritize the safety and inclusion of all their students as number one in schools, "Our children with lesbian and gay families or those children that do not conform to traditional gender roles or gender expression do not feel safe" (Meyer, 2010 p. 47). Even though the stakeholders in education, such as school boards, legislators, and school leaders, agree safety is a priority, they often deny or ignore the homophobic culture of schools (Shapon-Shevin & Straut, 2002). "Schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBT students, the overwhelming majority of whom hear homophobic remarks and experience harassment or assault at school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression" (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boson, & Palmer, 2012, p. 4). For example, the term *gay* has become associated with negative connotations and attitudes, and it is commonplace and even acceptable in today's classrooms to hear the word *gay* as an expletive to bully and intimidate other children (GLSEN, 2012; Meyer, 2010). Children engage in cruel name-calling and even physically abuse LGBTQ-identified youth or individuals who display atypical gender behavior. Intolerance is obvious in many forms: name-calling, slurs, sexual harassment, and put-downs regarding gender, perceived sexual orientation, or gender identification (Teaching Tolerance, 2013).

Table 1

Percent of Students Who Hear Derogatory Remarks

Remarks	Percent of Students
Sexist remarks	75%
"That's so gay"	72%
"Faggot" or "dyke"	65%
Negative specific to LGBT family members	17%

Note: Adapted from Kosciw & Diaz. (2008). *Involved, invisible, ignored: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents and their children in our nation's K–12 schools.* New York: GLSEN (p. 50).

Although it is assumed that only older school children are exposed to this type of oppression, elementary children with LGBTQ families often hear sexist and homophobic remarks. For example, Kosciw and Diaz (2005) found many of these children heard derogatory remarks frequently (see Table 1). The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Network (GLSEN) 2012 publication, "Playgrounds and Prejudice: Elementary School Climate in the United States," summarizes results of a survey that questioned 1,099 elementary students and teachers of 3rd to 5th graders about their experiences with biased remarks and bullying and their attitudes about gender expression and family diversity. The survey documented four aspects of elementary students' experience of homophobia:

1) The most common biased words heard in a negative way were "gay" and "that's so gay." About 50% of teachers heard homophobic words at school, such as "fag" or "lesbo."

2) Students who did not conform to traditional gender roles were more likely to feel unsafe at school (58%) than other students (39%). They were more likely to want to stay home because of a feeling of being scared. Also, 56% of children who did not conform to traditional gender roles reported being bullied or made fun of at school.

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3) Seventy-two percent of students said they had been taught that there are many different kinds of families, but only 18% had learned about LGBTQ families.

4) The most common reason for being bullied or called names, as well as feeling unsafe at school, was physical appearance.

Elementary aged children with LGBT family members are victims of bullying and harassment within their school setting.

A 2013 Human Rights Campaign (HRC) study found that LGBT youth, 13-17 years old, identified school as one of the places they most often hear negative messages about their sexual orientation or gender identity. When asked, 74% of the youths identified school as the primary place to hear negative messages (Figure 2).
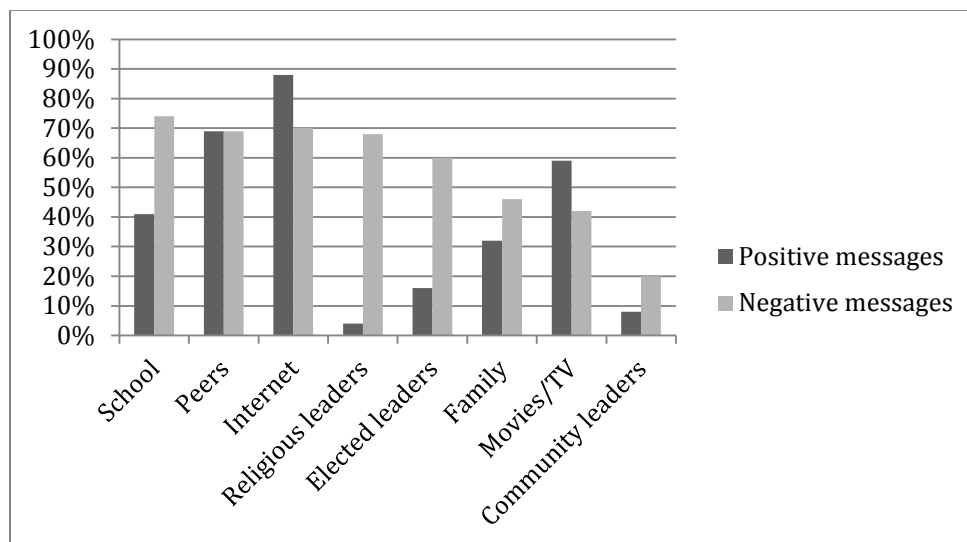
Figure 2. Where Students Hear Positive and Negative Messages about LGBT Issues. This figure illustrates the locations in which students hear positive and negative messages about LGBT issues.

Although most school staff would agree that safety is a school's priority, confronting anti-gay remarks by staff and school leaders does not happen regularly (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Peters (2003) found that 86% of students reported that school staff rarely confronted anti-gay harassment. Even more disconcerting, students identified school staff members as being sources of derogatory remarks: 49% of students heard sexist remarks, and 39% heard

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homophobic remarks from teachers or other school staff in their schools (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).
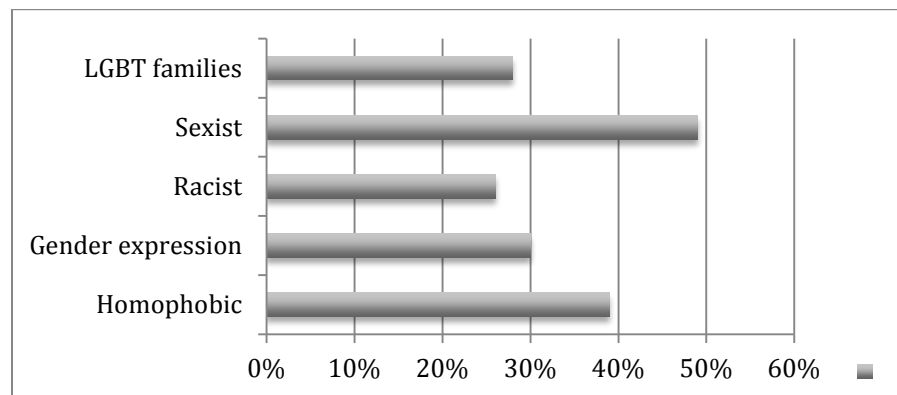
Figure 3. Percentage of Students Who Heard Biased Remarks From School Staff. This figure illustrates the percentage of students who heard discriminatory comments from school teachers and staff.

The professional standards developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2002) stated that it is essential that all children and families are welcomed and affirmed within the school. Embracing diversity, however, in regards to sexual orientation is one of the most challenging areas in standards implementation (Alexander, 2002). Children with gay parents frequently hear homophobic remarks and feel the effects of negative perceptions of LGBTQ people (Baker, 2002). Kosciw and Diaz (2008) reported 30% of students with gay and lesbian family members did not feel like they could fully participate at school. Also, about a fifth (22%) of students stated that a teacher, principal, or other school staff person had discouraged them from talking about their LGBTQ family at school, and more than a third (36%) felt that school staff would not validate their LGBT family (e.g., by not permitting one parent to sign a student's form because s/he was not the legal parent/guardian). According to one child, "When people and our teachers talk about LGBT people in class and everyone laughs because they think it's gross or something,

I feel uncomfortable because I'm the only one not laughing. It's like they're making fun of me in a way" (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008, p. 66).

Families that identify as LGBTQ also feel the effects of intolerance and isolation, as reported in Kosciw and Diaz (2008) in their study, *Involved, Invisible, Ignored.* LGBTQ families were more likely to be involved with their child's school than heterosexual families (67% vs. 42%), yet 26% of these parents reported being harassed by other parents, 21% reported hearing homophobic comments from students at their child's school, and more than half (53%) felt excluded from the school community. One parent reported, "For mother's day my son's teacher did not allow him to make 2 items for each mother" (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008, p. 79). Overall, families were left feeling invisible and isolated. According to another parent, "When our daughter first started to attend the school, all of the questions were directed to me and the teacher turned her back to my partner" (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008, p. 81). When LGBTQ parents feel unwelcomed or invisible at their child's school, it creates a barrier between families and educators, and schools risk losing the rewards of actively engaged family members.

This exclusion of and discrimination against LGBTQ families and children can also be found in public school policy decisions. In 2012, Todd Parr's *The Family Book* caused a great deal of controversy for the Erie, Illinois school board. The book shares information about all kinds of families. It speaks of families of different ethnicities, single-parent families, and families with gay or lesbian parents. "Some families have two moms or two dads": This single line in the book caused the school board to have the book taken off the shelves of its elementary school (McGonnigal, 2012). According to the American Library Association (2000), two of the most challenged books are *Heather Has Two Mommies*

(Newman & Souza, 2000) and *Daddy's Roommate* (Willhoite, 1990), the first picture books with gay parents. It is rare to find these books in school libraries.

Lack of knowledge and awareness is another issue that sustains discrimination against LGBTQ families. Robinson (2002) shared a remark from one of the educators interviewed: "We haven't dealt with these issues because we haven't had gay and lesbian families in our setting. It isn't really a concern to us" (p.426). This comment reveals teachers' misconceptions and misunderstandings about the LGBTQ community and implies that these issues are important only to a "minority" of people who identify as non-heterosexual and not to those who are heterosexual (Robinson, 2002). Educators need training to eliminate their own misperceptions about issues of gender and the LGBTQ community in order to model acceptance and ensure a safe environment for all children.

Teachers

Gay and lesbian teachers have traditionally dwelt in the deepest of closets due to fear and persecution. Graves, in her book *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers* (2009), detailed how teachers were targeted, interrogated, and stripped of their professional credentials during the Cold War era. Examining more recent treatment of lesbian and gay teachers, Griffin (1992) and Schneider and Dimito (2008) studied LGBTQ teachers' experiences within schools and found that lesbian and gay teachers are a large minority group within schools that often remains invisible due to fear of discrimination or accusations of being immoral or child molesters. Gay and lesbian teachers reported that they believe they must live in secrecy at work or risk losing their jobs (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Therefore, the teachers were constantly vigilant about hiding their personal lives from colleagues and administrators, causing them to feel isolated at work.

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These teachers reported that the negative stigma of the LGBTQ community was evident within the schools, making it difficult to feel like "good teachers" (Griffin, 1992). They reported being bound to lose the respect of and credibility with their peers and students if they were identified as LGBTQ. According to one teacher, "People wouldn't be able to see beyond my lesbian identity to see me as a good teacher, [so] I'm usually afraid to open up at school. Sometimes I'm afraid I am crazy" (Griffin, 1992, p. 179). LGBTQ teachers need allies in order to become visible within the school. There is still legitimate fear of discrimination and negative repercussions if these teachers chose to openly identify as LGBTQ.

For schools to be equitable, students, families, and staff need to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion. Without this basic need fulfilled, schools cannot be truly excellent (National Academy of Education, 2009). The silencing and marginalization of sexual minority children or those who have LGBTQ families sends a message that they are not valued or welcome to be fully themselves at school (Meyer, 2010). Kosciw and Diaz (2008) shared in their research that a school culture is about more than just physical safety; it is an issue of a student's right to an education without fear, isolation, or being ostracized. Additionally, feeling excluded from the school community can and does have serious implications for the quality of the family-school connection: parents may not have the same access to resources and information related to their child's education. Staff members who identify as LGBTQ often work in a paradigm of fear, which is not only inhuman but fosters distrust (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Khayatt (2006) argued that this kind of discrimination is systemic and can be harsh, hateful, and demeaning.

Manifestations of Homophobia against Individuals

Homophobia is the fear of or the negative attitudes towards homosexuals. This aversion to homosexuality or gender diversity leads to many negative manifestations for children and adults who are identified as or perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender or who do not conform to assigned gender roles. The manifestations of this homophobia targeted at individuals can result in suicide, violence, physical and mental illness, poor school performance, homelessness, disruption of relationships, and family rejection. According to Meyer (2010) many schools leaders and teachers are responsible for ignoring and devaluing children with gender or sexuality diversity through the formal or hidden curriculum of the schools and silencing these crucial issues of heteronormativity. Brank, Hoetger, and Hazen (2012) contended that the negative effects of bullying on the victim could be far-reaching with long-term impacts on every aspect of students' social, emotional, and physical health.

Fear and Silence

Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) explained that matters dealing with sexuality (gender, sex, sexual orientation) in any form or fashion are so ideologically charged that they are silenced within the school walls. According to Meyer (2010), children have been caught in the crosshairs of this controversial issue. Lugg (2006) explained that in this climate, educators, school leaders, and the children themselves are expected to act as gender and sexuality police and to facilitate the social reproduction of heterosexual gender norms. In order to fit in or be part of the mainstream accepted group, children understand from an early age that they need to follow socially constructed gender roles (Connell, 2009; Toomey et al.,

2012). Children learn to police themselves and their peers in regards to sexuality. This policing includes fear and the silencing of non-heterosexual topics or behaviors. Foucault compared this fear and silence to the panopticon. The panopticon was a prison designed to give the prisoners the perception they were watched at all times by an invisible source of power. Foucault (1975) asserted many institutions, including schools, resemble prisons in that they are highly structured and subject to scrutiny by societal norms, institutionalized ethics, and colleagues. Sexuality becomes self-regulating through the same structure.

Similar to the prison panopticon, school staff polices the students, themselves, and each other to be silent about LGBTQ issues. This silence sustains hierarchical power relationships by acknowledging and validating heterosexual behaviors and ignoring or even banning topics dealing with sexuality or gender diversity. Every year, the American Library Association shares a list of books censored by schools that always includes books describing families with same-sex parents (Block, 2013). Smolkin and Young (2011) and Schneider and Dimito (2008) explained that teachers are hesitant to broach topics related to the LGBT community for many reasons. They fear personal or legal ramifications if they seem knowledgeable and are concerned they will be labeled LGBTQ themselves (Rowell, 2007). By policing and scrutinizing behavior and language, school structures dictate a culture of hyper-heterosexuality using the curriculum and extracurricular activities (Meyer, 2010).

In the classroom, this silencing becomes violence (Loutzenheiser, & MacIntosh, 2004). When educators do not respond to gay slurs, this sends a message that anti-gay harassment is acceptable and tolerated. Fear and silence surround LGBTQ issues and realities in schools and in some school cultures (Marshall, 2005). Such mandates may actually be overt and openly reinforced via policy. In 2011 the Anoka-Hennepin, Minnesota school

district, after several student suicides, took steps to revise its anti-bullying policy to protect LGBT students. The district, however, maintained a sexual orientation curriculum policy that forbade teachers from discussing LGBTQ issues with students in class. According to Price (2011), this policy is essentially a gag order and basically keeps staff from acknowledging the existence of LGBTQ children, families, or community members. This silencing of gender diversity and gay issues sends a message to LGTBQ students and families that they are not valued.

Hermann-Wilmarth (2007) and Meyer (2010) noted that many teachers could not conceive that topics of gender and LGBTQ families are appropriate for elementary age children, thereby silencing these topics. Since school staffs assume that children are too immature for certain issues (Adam et al., 1977), these subjects become part of the evaded curriculum, and teachers ignore, step around, or simply omit these discussions (Fields, 2008). This evaded curriculum, however, sends a message itself by avoiding these topics altogether and consequently making it taboo to discuss non-normative gender or sexuality in schools. In addition, many teachers do not know how to approach topics connected with sexuality in elementary school. Less than half of the teachers surveyed by GLSEN (2012) indicated that they felt comfortable responding to questions from their students about gay, lesbian, or bisexual people. Just the mention of this topic to a second grade teacher may elicit a giggle of discomfort or a frown of disgust (Meyer, 2010).

Through this evasion, policing, and social reproduction of the heteronormative culture in schools, children who deviate from the traditional gender behaviors or who have LGBTQ parents experience feelings of being deficient and fearful (Baker, 2002; Bickmore, 1999; Meyer, 2010). When children do not feel like they belong, they are vulnerable to being

marginalized and bullied (Juvonen et al., 2003). Potential victims and taboo topics are part of the formula for bullying situations.

Suicide

LGBTQ youth are at a particularly high risk for suicide (Halady, 2013; Rivers, 2001; Russell et al., 2011; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010). According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2008), risk factors for committing suicide are directly connected to discrimination and stigma. According to the Center for Disease Control (2011), adolescents who identify as gay, lesbian, or transgender are four more times likely to have made suicide attempts than their heterosexual peers. And youth who are beginning to question their sexuality are three more times likely to attempt suicide. In the last 40 years the teenage suicide rate has increased 300%, and in the last decade the suicide rate for prepubescent children (ages 10 to 14) has tripled (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002). Hardy and Laszloffy questioned, "Why are these youth so ready to end their lives?" (p. 7).

Violence

Violence and physical threats are reality for many in the LGBTQ community, and gay, lesbian, and transgender people are the most frequent target for hate crimes in the United States (Herek et al., 1999; Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). For the majority of youth who identify as LGBTQ or do not conform to traditional gender roles, schools are one of the hostile environments they experience daily (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Harris Interactive & GLSEN 2005; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2007; McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski, & Elizalde-Utnick, 2013). In 2011, GLSEN conducted a national survey of 8,584 secondary school students. The results showed that approximately 90% of the LGBT identified students experienced harassment at school in the past year. Over 63% of students reported abuse due to their

sexual orientation and 43.9% in regards to gender expression, compared to only 6 to 12% of other students that felt unsafe due to their religion, disability, or another reason (GLSEN, 2011) (Figure 4).

Students reported being subjected to various forms of harassment, from verbal to emotional to physical abuse. Eighty-five percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed, and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 20121).
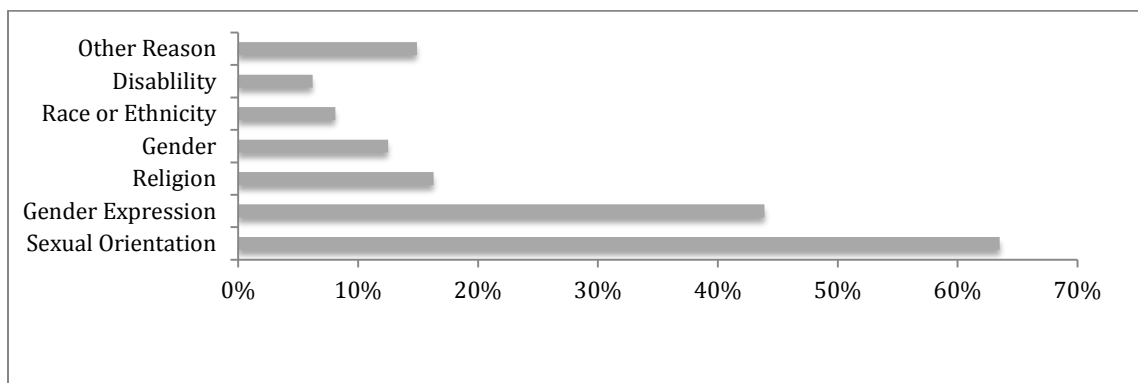
Figure 4. Percent of Students Who Feel Unsafe at School and Reasons. This figure illustrates the percentage of students which students feel unsafe and the reasons for which they feel unsafe.

McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski and Elizalde-Utnick reported in their 2013 study that 43% of participants testified to hearing epithets such as "that's so gay" among students once a month or more frequently, and 8% and 45% of respondents stated that these epithets were spoken by other staff members at least once a month or once a year, respectively (GLSEN, 2012; Meyer, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2012). Children engage in cruel name calling to ostracize and abuse identified LGBTQ youth or individuals who display atypical gender behavior. Children at a very early age frequently associate the term *gay* with negative attitudes. "That's so gay" is regularly used to describe something as stupid or un-cool.

Although many students report suffering bullying at school, for LGBTQ youth the

incidence of victimization is higher in many areas of abuse (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; GLSEN, 2011; HRC, 2012; Juvonen et al., 2003; McCabe Rubinson, Dragowski & Elizalde-Utnick 2013; Rigby, 1999). In a Human Rights Campaign (HRC) survey (2013), LGBTQ students reported being victims of physical assaults, exclusion, cyber bullying, verbal abuse and name calling at a higher rate than students who identified as non-LGBTQ (Figure 5).
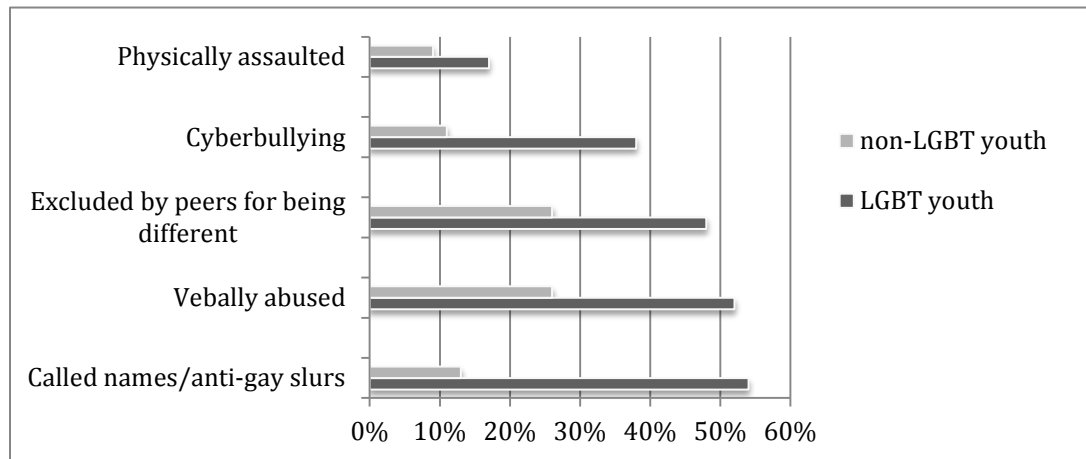
Figure 5. Harassment of LGBT and Non-LGBT Youth. This figure illustrates the relative percentages of youth who are subject to various forms of sexually-motivated harassment. Human Rights Campaign, (2013). *Safe schools improvement act of 2011* (S. 506).

At the elementary level, bullying and harassment are not uncommon occurrences for any student (GLSEN, 2012; Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). But being a victim of this abuse is especially likely for students who may be vulnerable because of personal characteristics, such as physical appearance and gender variant behavior (GLSEN, 2012). GLSEN's research study found that students who did not follow traditional norms for their prescribed gender were more than twice as likely to suffer from teasing, rumors and a sense of feeling unsafe at school (Table 2). The victimization of students through bullying can have significant physical and mental health consequences and can have far reaching effects on school, relationships, psychological wellbeing, and physical health (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Brank, Hoetger, & Hazen, 2012; Juvonen et al., 2003; Kosciw et al., 2013; Rigby, 1999).

Table 2

Bullying of Elementary Students Who Do and Do Not Conform to Gender Roles

Bullying Actions	Do Not Conform to Gender Roles	Conform to Traditional Gender Roles
Called names, made fun of sometimes	56%	33%
Rumors or lies spread about them	43%	20%
Felt unsafe at school	35%	15%
Cyber bullied	7%	2%

Note. Adapted from GLSEN & Harris Interactive (2012). *Playgrounds and prejudice: Elementary school climate in the United States, A survey of students and teachers.* New York: GLSEN (p. 56).

The National Mental Health Association (2013) has classified LGBTQ students as an at-risk population, and gay and lesbian children are at high risk for mental illness as a result of the hatred, prejudice, and bullying that surrounds them in their day-to-day interactions at school. This mental illness is not inherent people who are born gay or lesbian identity. Meyer (2003) shared that LGBTQ people have a higher prevalence of mental disorders due to the social stress referred to as *minority stress*. Minority stress is the significant amount of stress that an individual experiences due to his or her social category as a minority (Meyer, 2003). High rates of victimization, bullying, and feelings of being deficient at school are factors in this excess stress (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2010; Smart & Wegner, 2000).

Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, and Sanchez (2011) found that youth victimized in school because of their LGBTQ identity had significantly more challenges with health and social adjustment in young adulthood than their peers who experienced low or moderate levels of school victimization. In 2002, Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) surveyed 9,188 high school adolescents. Out of these students surveyed, 315 self-identified as LGBTQ. This study examined six health risk behaviors: smoking, alcohol, marijuana or cocaine use, sexual risk, truancy due to fear of harassment, and suicide. The study showed that LGBTQ youth

were victimized at a higher rate than any other group and were more apt to demonstrate these higher health risk behaviors (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). Many of these youth turned to dangerous behaviors such as skipping school, drug and alcohol abuse, and risky sexual behaviors. This harassment can lead to lower grades, lower immunity and, most tragically, suicide (Meyer, 2010).

Physical and Emotional Health

Children who grow up to be gay, lesbian, or transgender also have a higher risk of being physically or psychosocially dysfunctional due to the long-term impact of being targeted for bullying (Juvonen et al., 2003; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). As shown in Table 3, when comparing heterosexual to LGBTQ students, Rivers' (2001) research shows that LGBTQ youth are more likely to have substantially increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases, risky sexual behavior, depression, and drug use than non-LGBTQ youth.

Table 3
Increased Health and Behavior Risks for LGBTQ Youth

Risk	Likelihood Relative to Non-LGBTQ Youth
Sexually transmitted diseases	2 times more likely
Risky sexual behavior	3 times more likely
At risk of contracting HIV	2 times more likely
Clinical depression	6 times more likely
Drug and alcohol use	2 times more likely

Note: Adapted from J. Almeida, R. Johnson, H. Corliss, B. Molnar, & D. Azrael. (2009, August). Emotional distress among LGBT youth: The influence of perceived discrimination based on sexual orientation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 38*(7), 1001-1014; Human Rights Watch. (2001, May 1). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools.*

Homelessness and School Performance

Biegel and Kuehl (2010) reported that the rate of LGBTQ youth running away and teen homelessness remains disproportionately high. According to the Substance Abuse &

Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2007), an estimated 1.7 million children, ages 12 to 17, experience homelessness in the United States each year. Durso and Gates (2012) reported an estimated 40 % of these youth identify as LGBTQ compared to 10% of the overall population. Many of these young people are disowned by their immediate families when they come out, others leave abusive homes or foster care, and still others seek out more accepting environments (Forge, 2012; HRC, 2012; Ray & Berger, 2007). Solomon (2012) noted that more than half of transgender people are rejected by their families and often end up on the streets.

Isolation and harassment interfere with students' ability to focus on schoolwork and increase the likelihood of their dropping out of school (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003). An adverse sense of school safety affects student success, and a hostile school climate results in students avoiding classes or missing entire days of school to avoid harassment and abuse (GLSEN, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2011). Kosciw et al. (2011) found that students who experienced higher levels of harassment in regards to their sexual orientation were three times as likely to have missed school than those who experienced lower levels (57.9% vs. 19.6%, respectively). This avoidance of or feeling excluded from school can lead to poor academic performance and lower aspirations in terms of future goals for these youth (Brown & Taylor, 2008; Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Rothon, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2010). Further, Kosciw et al. (2011) found that adolescents who were victims of harassment because of their sexual orientation or gender expression reported lower grade point averages than students who were less often harassed (2.9 vs. 3.2 points), and they were twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (e.g., college or trade school) than those who experienced lower levels (10.7% vs. 5.1%) of harassment.

Social Health

The HRC (2012) surveyed youth 13-17 years of age regarding their biggest concerns in life, and it compared the responses of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ youth. Table 4 provides the responses of LGBTQ youth surveyed in regards to the three top things they would like to change compared to non-LGBTQ youth.

Table 4
Disparity in LGBT and Non-LGBT Youths' Desire for Change

Top Three Things Youth Would Like to Change

LGBT Youth	Non-LGBT Youth
1) Understanding hate/tolerance	1) Money/finance
2) My parents/family situation	2) Weight/appearance
3) Where I live/who I live with	3) Improving mental health

Note. Adapted from Human Rights Watch. (2001, May). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools*.

Table 5
Disparity in LGBT and Non-LGBT Youths' Perceptions of Biggest Problem

LGBT Youth	Non-LGBT Youth
1) Non-accepting families	1) Exam grades
2) Bullying/school problems	2) College/career
3) Fear of being out or open	3) Financial pressures related to college

Note. Adapted from Human Rights Watch. (2001, May). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools*.

As shown in Table 5, LGBTQ youth's perceptions of their biggest problems include issues of rejection from families, bullying and non-acceptance, and fear of being "outed" while their non-LGBT peers' concerns focus on money and future plans (HRC, 2012). As previously stated in Maslow's 1942 Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid, a sense of belonging is essential for students to succeed in school. Non-LGBTQ youth are nearly twice as likely as LGBTQ youth to say they are happy (67% v. 37%).

Family Rejection

In addition to the stress of school victimization, their families often reject LGBTQ youth. Many gay, lesbian, and transgender children encounter tension and even rejection within their biological families, leaving them more isolated and vulnerable to mental and psychological health issues (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). As evidenced in the research, many LGBTQ adolescents who disclosed their sexual orientation to their families stated that they endured verbal and physical abuse by family members, and they admitted that they had more suicidal thoughts or even attempts than youth who had not come out to their families (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001), Solomon (2012) explained that, since LGBTQ youth often are born to straight parents, there is not a common identity. Unlike children of color or of a specific nationality who have a "vertical identity" with their parents based on shared common traits and cultural norms, LGBTQ children do not have this same experience. Instead, their only connection to social acceptance is through horizontal identity with peers or other LGBTQ individuals. But as schools continue to police and ignore the needs of sexual minority children, this ability to even make a horizontal connection to their peers' identity is limited and at times nonexistent, leaving LGBTQ children with atypical gender identity more isolated and marginalized. Children who are gay, lesbian, or transgender often have no support at home, adding to the stress and anxiety of a heterosexist school culture.

Disrupting Heteronormativity: Systemic Change in Society

The culture of a school has a direct impact on students' ability to learn and interact with their peers. There are steps legislators and educators can take to disrupt heteronormativity within the schools. Although some federal laws protect LGBTQ students,

policies need to be clearly written and enforced by teachers and school leaders to protect all students. In addition, counterpublics focused on supporting LGBTQ students, families, and staff within the school setting can be additional support in confronting heteronormativity and providing an inclusive school culture.

Legal Action

The legal responsibilities of educators to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in America's public schools are the same as those owed to any student (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). Russell and McGuire (2008) and Schneider and Dimito (2008) argued that the enactment of inclusive, enumerated anti-harassment policies is one of the most crucial first steps to challenging gender and sexuality norms and to promoting safe school climates. Schneider and Dimito's study demonstrated that having such policies is associated with greater feelings of support and comfort for students who are or are perceived to be LGBTQ in school.

Recent legislation has helped many LGBTQ persons lead much more fulfilling and productive lives (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). Several cases of discrimination and harassment against gays and lesbians have been taken to court and have had success using current federal policies. For example, in the 1996 case of *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (1996), the United States Supreme Court declared that schools have a constitutional obligation to recognize and deal with abuse of lesbian and gay students as seriously as any other student abuse. Despite these social justice victories, Biegel and Kuehl (2010) argued that the problems facing LGBTQ youth in America's public schools are still substantial.

Hannah (2011) agreed that legislatures have worked to legally address bullying, harassment, and intimidation but that they still fall short in protecting gay, lesbian, and

transgender students. She contended that there has been little progress in terms of discussing

policies that protect students based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (actual or

perceived), and little has been done to consider this group as a protected class. According to

Hannah, legislators have severely limited and framed policies, turning a blind eye to the

research that points to the discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ youth in schools.

One of the crucial issues in this debate is whether anti-bullying policies should be

addressed through federal or state mandates. States have a constitutional right to oversee

public schools (Hannah, 2011). Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) explained that while the

U.S. founding fathers and authors of the Constitution wanted to give states the power for

educational policy, they did not imagine the many challenges facing education today. The

Constitution does explicitly state "equality for all." Meyer (2010) argued that federal

legislation implicitly protects sexual minorities, but the lack of explicit protection allows for

differing interpretations and application of the laws at the state level.

One consequence of state-controlled schools is that there are no current federal laws

that protect LGBTQ students from harassment and discrimination (Meyer, 2010). Although

forty-six states have developed policies addressing bullying in school, Hannah (2011)

explains that this state-level legislation results in fragmented definitions of bullying.

Protections against bullying, as well as the interpretation of existing protections on the basis

of identity, depend on geographic location. These various interpretations can lead to "policy

slippage or mutation" of current policies to prevent bullying (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005,

p.51). Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) explained that the ideal policy uses clear, concise

definitions and information along with well-defined regulations, procedures, appropriate

appointed authority, and agreement at all levels. But they argue this ideal never happens and,

as a result, conflicting goals and assumptions lead to shifting the purpose or the definition of the problem. Consequently, the policy does not deliver the desired results. In addition, Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) explained that when a policy is in conflict with the values and needs of those in power, this law may become legally legitimate, but in actuality it is only a token that gives the illusion that those in power are responding to a demand. Token policy could result in educators and school leaders not taking anti-bullying policies seriously and even ignoring heterosexist harassment within the schools.

Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) contended that the federal government could influence state policies through agenda setting, legislation, and large amounts of spending on certain educational programs. In 2012 the federal bill, the Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA), was proposed to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to address and to prevent bullying and harassment of students. GLSEN (2012) explained that SSIA requires schools that receive Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act funding to implement a comprehensive anti-bullying policy that enumerates protected categories (e.g., race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression). States would also be required to gather and report data on bullying and harassment in their statewide needs assessments reports. Through this federal policy, federal legislators can ensure that all schools are inclusive and safe for all students.

Fighting from the Margin

Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin explained that traditionally many people have focused on the policies made by school boards or legislators—those with legitimate power due to their authority or legal position. Many people unquestioningly accept policies and decisions from legislators and simply ignore the issues of marginalized groups and activist organizations. As

a result, these individuals live on the edge of society with no voice and no resources.

Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin suggested, however, that to meet students' needs, educators can

remember to look at the "Politics from the Margin to Center" model; in other words, they

should pay attention to students and families who are unrepresented and do not fit into the

dominant norms (2005, p. 86). LGBTQ youth and families fit into this category, From the

Margin, as a group that is marginalized by society and considered by some members of

society and educators as a deficient. Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) asserted that these

"disempowered or disenfranchised" individuals needed to create alternate publics and

construct counternarratives to help refocus the concerns of the center (p. 86). Several

alternative organizations, such as GLSEN, Welcoming Schools, and HRC, have formed to

dedicate their efforts to ensuring schools are safe environments for all students. Through

research and resources, these groups provide support for LGBTQ individuals, their families,

and the professionals who work with this community (e.g., teachers). This type of group,

called a *counterpublic* (Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin, 2005), is where people come together to

fight inequalities and "critique harmful hegemonic assumptions" (p. 85). Devoting their

attention to research and policies, counterpublics that support the LGBTQ community have

stayed abreast of the development of anti-bullying laws and their impact on developing safe

schools for all. These agencies provide the ongoing research needed to help school leaders be

aware of and acknowledge this crucial issue.

<center>**Systemic and Cultural Change in Schools**</center>

Experiences from desegregation and exceptional education policies demonstrated that

changing school law does not immediately change culture. Meyer (2010), in *Gender and*

Sexual Diversity in Schools, asserted that it is not enough to legally mandate non-

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discrimination policies; it is vital to take the next step to eliminate oppressive language and policies that discriminate and exclude minority students. She found in her studies that bullying and harassment cannot be changed by policies alone, but rather there needs to be a commitment to a cultural change from all educators, as well as buy-in from all the stakeholders from the school and the community. This declaration of cultural change, Meyer continued, is even more vital when addressing such a controversial and complex issue as homophobia.

According to Pascoe (2007), victimization and school safety have traditionally been conceptualized and empirically studied at the individual student level. She clarified that issues of harassment and discrimination, however, are social constructs within institutions where gender and sexuality norms are created, maintained, or reinforced. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to take steps to alter the school climate to a place of tolerance and acceptance for students who are LGBTQ or who do not conform to gender norms.

Institutional supports can play a significant role in making schools safer for LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2013; Meyer, 2010). Findings demonstrated that positive school cultures can have a substantial impact on the achievement and emotional and psychological health of LGBTQ students (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; GLSEN, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2010). For example, lesbian and gay students in schools with positive climates and who had less teasing were very similar to straight students in terms of depression, feelings of suicide, drug and alcohol usage, and truancy (Birkett et al., 2009). GLSEN (2008), Murdock and Bolch (2005), and Schneider and Dimito (2008) reported that, through comprehensive policies protecting LGBTQ students, discouraging teachers from using negative slurs,

providing LGBTQ-positive curriculum and establishing "safe zones," teachers and school leaders can create a more inclusive and safer atmosphere.

In addition to providing a safe environment, educators and school leaders can go beyond the anti-homophobia and anti-bullying framework and foster a school culture that is safe psychologically and physically. Educators who take the time to reflect on their own beliefs in regards to heterosexist privileging also can support this inclusive culture. Brown (2004) underscored that educators leading for social justice must first examine their beliefs, values, worldviews, and practices. Brown stated that a transformative leadership model allows educators to see themselves and the world in a new way.

Teachers agree that keeping students safe is a priority, but they need support and strategies to create this climate. In a GLSEN 2012 study, researchers found that 83% of elementary school teachers believed they had an obligation to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for students who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Yet less than half of these teachers believed that children with atypical gender behavior would feel comfortable at their school. School staffs are unsure how to support their LGBT students and what best practices are needed to create a climate in which their most vulnerable students feel safe and valued (Teaching Tolerance, 2013).

Kosciw and Diaz (2012) outlined some educational strategies to confront the heteronormative culture of schools and move towards an inclusive and safe environment for all children. They identify five key areas of focus within the school culture: language, safe zones, comprehensive bullying policies and laws, curriculum, and training for staff.

The first of Kosciw and Diaz's recommendations rests on changing homophobic and heterosexist language. Within this recommendation, there are three steps. The first crucial

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step by which educators and school leaders can change is by confronting homophobic language. School staff can intervene consistently when hearing biased language in school. As discussed above, students frequently describe "uncool" things as gay. Teachers can intervene and use this as a teachable moment to explain how equating the term gay with uncool is derogatory and hurtful. If teachers ignore these comments they send a message to students that such language is tolerated.

Second, educators and school leaders can recognize students' and their own heterosexist language. When children share heterosexist comments or questions— such as, "She can't have two dads," or "Why doesn't he dress like a boy?" Teachers can step-in to interrupt and educate children on how these questions can be hurtful to children with same-sex families or to those with atypical gender behaviors. It is especially critical for teachers and school staff to confront oppressive or homophobic language in a situation where LGBTQ children (or those perceived to be) cannot stand up for themselves (Kosciw & Diaz, 2012; Vaccaro et al., 2012). Often young children may be questioning their own identity and not know how to confront these slurs. Other students may choose to be "closeted" for their own feeling of safety and cannot risk stopping this offensive use of language. Additionally, school leaders, support staff, bus drivers, and cafeteria personnel need to intervene with homophobic slurs or incidents.

The third step educators and school leaders can take is to embrace and use appropriate terms rather than avoiding these terms. Dialogue in the classroom must be structured around appropriate and inclusive terminology. Inclusive language needs to become part of teachers' and school leaders' day-to-day conversations. During share time or story time, teachers can recognize various family make-ups (i.e., two moms or two dads) and actively use inclusive

language rather than avoiding the topic and perpetuating the silence. Teachers and staff who incorporate appropriate terminology, such as *gay*, *lesbian*, or *transgender*, into conversations help students understand that these words have acceptable meanings and are not pejoratives.

Greytak, Kosciw, and Jerman (2008) studied the impact on school bullying after educators implemented a "No Name Calling Week." Three hundred and forty-eight survey respondents, representing 305 schools and organizations, participated in the No Name Calling Week in 2007. The majority of institutions participating were at the elementary and middle school level. Of the respondents, almost half of them indicated that No Name Calling Week had a positive impact on the culture of the school and reduced bullying or harassment. GLSEN contended that students' use of anti-LGBTQ remarks, such as "that's so gay," is often unpremeditated and has just become part of youths' casual social language within school. Students can learn to recognize the consequences of using this derogatory language. No Name Calling Week is an explicit way for schools to help students understand the serious ramifications of using anti-gay pejoratives and to proactively finds new ways to address peers.

Kosciw and Diaz's (2012) second recommendation is for teachers, staff, and school leaders to create safe zones within the school. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are clubs that provide a safe space for students. In addition, visual stickers or signs acknowledge that classrooms or areas within the school are "safe zones." GLSEN (2011) found in their survey that GSAs and similar student clubs can provide safe, affirming spaces and critical support for LGBTQ students. GSAs also contribute to creating a more welcoming school environment and reducing the isolation that LGBTQ students' experience. Students with GSAs in their schools reported a greater sense of safety and inclusion. These clubs create a

space for straight and LGBTQ youth to build relationships and learn about issues of

homophobia and other oppressions. With the help of faculty members, students learn how to

be proactive within their school community to confront harassment, discrimination, and

violence. Affiliations with these support groups can also be a source of effective coping

strategies for dealing with familial victimization for students that are LGBTQ or have

atypical gender behavior. In addition, children who identify as LGBTQ and are rejected by

their families can access resources from GSAs (D'Augelli et al., 2002). As Table 6 shows,

schools with GSAs report students feeling safer and more included. GSAs within a school

can provide safe, supportive environments for LGBTQ students fostering a more inclusive

and safer culture.

Table 6
Difference in Homophobic Behavior between Schools with or without GSA Clubs

Behaviors	With a GSA	Without a GSA
Hearing homophobic remarks	Less often	More often
Higher levels of victimization due to sexual orientation	23. 0 %	38.5%
School personnel intervened when hearing homophobic remarks	19.8%	12%
Likely to feel unsafe	54.9%	70.6%
Sense of connectedness	More likely	Less likely

Note. Adapted from GLSEN. (2007). Gay-Straight Alliances: Creating safer schools for LGBT students and their allies. (GLSEN Research Brief). New York: GLSEN (p.2).

Kosciw and Diaz's (2012) third recommendation is a call for comprehensive policies

and laws to protect children who have atypical gender performance or who are LGBTQ.

Schools that embrace an anti-bullying policy and code of conduct are making a public

statement of their commitment to student safety. In the article "Best Practices: Creating an

LGBT-Inclusive School Climate," Teaching Tolerance has some recommendations for

establishing bullying policies. Policies should enumerate specific personal characteristics,

including sexual orientation and gender identity/expression that are protected. In addition,

these policies should include specific language that prohibits any harassment that is based on

nonconformity to gender norms, gender identity, and gender expression. Staff need to be

trained and provided examples of what bullying of individuals who are LGBTQ (or

perceived to be) might look or sound like. School leaders should utilize student and staff

surveys to evaluate the program's effectiveness regularly. School leaders can create a team

that will oversee the training of staff on how to prevent and report any harassment. It is

crucial that there is thorough communication with all the stakeholders (e.g., students, parents,

staff). School staff can also identify bullying hot spots—areas of the school that are not

commonly supervised by adults and consequently more prone to bullying— and find ways to

monitor these areas more closely. With these comprehensive polices, schools found a

reduction in homophobic slurs and an increase in intervention by staff (Table 7).

Table 7
Outcomes for Schools with Comprehensive Policies v Generic Bullying Policies

Behavior	Comprehensive Policies	Generic Bullying Policies
Heard homophobic remarks	73.3%	59.5%
Staff intervened when hearing homophobic remarks	28.3%	12.2%

Note. Adapted from GLSEN & Harris Interactive (2012). *Playgrounds and prejudice: Elementary school climate in the United States, A survey of students and teachers.* New York: GLSEN (p. 105).

The fourth recommendation from Kosciw and Diaz is for educators to help students

have access to accurate information regarding the LGBTQ community through an inclusive

curriculum. Teachers can infuse within the curriculum inclusive literature and topics that

represent the diversity of students. Teachers can begin to incorporate literature with same-sex

families, language, discussions, and positive representation of LGBTQ people in history and

literature (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005). By facilitating discussions around topics that

embrace LGBTQ characters, teachers can begin to address stereotypes (Epstein, 2000). In a classroom that values critical thinking through open dialogue, children are capable of reading about and discussing sensitive social issues (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). LGBTQ youth who can see and hear about LGBTQ heroes or main characters who are accepted and make positive contributions, feel validated and included (Vaccaro et al., 2012). Classroom teachers can also draw on the many resources available (e.g. GLSEN, Teaching Tolerance) to find more inclusive curricula and literature to bring to their lessons.

Schools that have adopted curriculums that are more inclusive of LGBTQ characters and issues found that peers were more accepting of peers who identify as lesbian or gay and that LGBTQ students felt safer and were less likely to miss school. A study by George Washington University (2001) revealed that 20.3% of gay students reported being truant or staying home because of fear for their safety, but this rate fell to 12.2% in schools with training on gay issues ("What the Numbers Say"). Research has documented that students perceive inclusive curriculum schools as safer and report less harassment because of LGBT status or gender nonconformity (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

Table 8
Behavior Differences for Schools with Inclusive v Non-Inclusive Curriculum

Behaviors	Inclusive Curriculum	Non-inclusive Curriculum
LGBT youth feel unsafe	43.4%	67.5%
LGBT youth missed school in past month	17.7%	43.8%
Peers more accepting	67.7%	33.2%
Hearing homophobic remarks	Less likely	More likely

Note. Adapted from O'Shaughnessy, M., Russell, S., Heck, K., Calhoun, C., & Laub, C. (2004). *Safe place to learn: Consequences of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender non-conformity and steps for making schools safer*. California Safe Schools Coalition and 4-H Center for Youth Development (p. 17).

The final recommendation Kosciw and Diaz (2012) made is to train staff to increase support for children who are LGBTQ or have atypical gender behavior. Topics that should be included are helping teachers to understand and identify heterosexism, to confront and stop homophobic language, and to understand and implement laws and policies that protect children who are or perceived to be LGBTQ.

Teachers need to immerse themselves in training and conversations to practice using open and non-oppressive language. Much of the development of school culture is embedded in the context of discourse: in the classroom, amongst educators, and with parents (Baker, 2002; Meyer, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2012). Although a large majority of teachers (85%) have received professional development on diversity or multicultural issues, rarely will this training include topics about LGBTQ families or gender issues. Less than a quarter (23%) of the educators had training on LGBTQ families. Over a third (37%) of the teachers indicated they had received some professional development on gender issues. When asked less than half (48%) of the teachers remarked they would feel comfortable responding to students about LGBTQ people (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

GLSEN, Welcoming Schools, Teaching Tolerance and Learn NC provide online resources for school staff and educators. These sites provide ideas for lesson plans and recommendations for professional development to help build inclusive and safe environments for all children. In addition there are educational documentaries designed for training staff (e.g., *Straightlaced, It's Elementary: Talking about Lesbian and Gay Issues in Schools).*

School staff may want to attend events sponsored by a local LGBTQ advocacy organization. This experience, referred to as a cultural plunge, is a means for people to immerse themselves in another culture to promote self-awareness and cultural sensitivity.

School staff could sponsor the "No Name Calling Week" (Greytak et al., 2008) or "A Day of Silence" (GLSEN, 2012) as school-wide events that promote awareness of bullying and homophobic language used within the schools. These interventions can help promote awareness that leads to staff and students acknowledging and taking action to interrupt heterosexism within their school.

Another strategy that schools can use to combat heteronormativity is to utilize openly gay and lesbian staff effectively in the quest for safe, inclusive, and equitable school environments. LGBTQ staff can act as a resource (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010) in the transformation of the school climate. Many researchers have shown that one of the most effective ways to change homophobic attitudes is through one-to-one interactions with gay men and lesbians (Cramer, Thomas, & Black, 1997; Griffin 1992). As the culture of the school begins to be more tolerant, staff may be more open about their gender identity and sexual orientation. These teachers can become mentors and positive role models for the student body (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). Wald, Rienzo, and Button (2002) suggested that school staff also might consider strategies for creating LGBTQ representation on school boards, opening a path that will promote the development of policies and address issues that will encourage hiring more openly LGBTQ individuals into teaching and administrative positions. More than 20 years ago, Griffin (1992) explained that "Visible lesbian and gay educators provide colleagues, students and families with the opportunity to learn that their fears of and their stereotypes about gay and lesbian teachers are not rooted in reality" (p. 195). She also explained that LGBTQ youth would be able to learn that gay and lesbian adults can live productive and healthy lives. The more LGBTQ staff feels able to be "out" in

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schools, the more misunderstandings or assumptions are clarified and the safer schools become for all students.

According to Meyer (2010), without explicit awareness and teaching about sexuality and gender, adults and children's perceptions are often confused with misperceptions and myths, and school becomes a hostile place for students who are or are perceived to be LGBTQ. Teachers and school leaders can focus on these five areas of the school's climate and policies— language, safe zones, comprehensive bullying policies and laws, curriculum, and training for staff— to begin to take the necessary steps towards systemic change in the school.

Systemic and Transformative Change in Individuals

For transformative change within the school culture, educators need to increase their awareness of and to acknowledge the heteronormative culture of a school. When educators reframe their understanding of the impact of evading or hiding the topic of heterosexism, they can begin to find ways to take action to confront this negative culture. Teachers, with the support of school leaders, can help shift the school's climate to a more welcoming and safe environment for all students.

Awareness

> "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world in a way you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing."
> —Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*

Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe (2010) found empirical evidence suggesting that homophobic beliefs have a direct impact on a teacher's conceptual understanding of gender behaviors and roles, especially in regards to cross-gender interests. According to Connell (2009), issues around gender often are connected to prejudice and myths. Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe's

study found that teachers with more homophobic attitudes had more traditional beliefs about how boys and girls should act.

Bryan (2012) explained that these heteronormative expectations have a strong impact on all elementary children and influence their perceptions of family norms and their own self-identity. School is the first major institution where children begin to negotiate their identity (Bryan, 2012). Children, as early as their primary years of school, understand and engage in the practices of gender regulation and heteronormativity (Renold, 2002). Through value-loaded images and messages from peers, teachers, and the curriculum, gender dissonance can affect many of these young children, resulting in negative feelings as they become more self-aware (Bickmore, 1999). These children are sensitive to and become perplexed by the inconsistencies between what the teacher and their peers are telling them and their own self-identity (Hunt, 2010; Solomon, 2012).

In *Gender and Sexual Diversity in School* (2010), Meyer argued that for children to feel physically and emotionally safe, educators cannot avoid the topics of sexuality and gender as these subjects are already present in the hidden curriculum. Boys and girls who express gender in atypical ways cause disequilibrium in the gender binary system, thereby causing anxiety for educators who fear the unfamiliar (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010, p. 249). According to Boler and Zembylas (2003), it is common for people to fear ambiguity, and gender diversity results in discomfort for those who have accepted the status quo of binary oppositions.

In addition to feelings of discomfort, teachers often do not know how to approach topics connected with sexuality in elementary school. Less than half of the teachers surveyed by GLSEN (2012) indicated that they felt comfortable responding to questions from their

students about gay, lesbian, or bisexual people. In their 2008 study, Schneider and Dimito discovered more barriers to why educators do not respond to LGBTQ issues in their schools. Table 9 indicates teachers' responses, including fear of objections from parents or administrators or fear of job status or job loss and other barriers to confronting heteronormativity within the schools.

Table 9

Teachers' Barriers to Responding to Heteronormativity

Reasons	Percentage
Parents would protest	56%
I need more information about effective strategies	46%
I might be harassed by students	40%
Administrators and trustees do not want to deal with this issue	37%
I might be harassed by colleagues	23%
People might think I was LGBT and shun me	20%
I might be turned down for promotion	17%
I am not sufficiently familiar with LGBT issues	17%
I might lose my job	11%

Note. Adapted from Schneider, M., & Dimito, A. (2008). Educators' beliefs about raising lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in the schools: The experience in Ontario, Canada, *Journal of LGBT Youth (5)* 4, 63.

In addition, educators tend to be oblivious to the fact that children may have families who are LGBTQ. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 2006) indicated that children with LGBTQ parents number in the millions. It is estimated there are 14 million LGBTQ families with children in schools. For teachers who may be aware of LGBTQ parents, many believe that these parents are less than adequate to raise children and are concerned that children of LGBTQ families will become confused about gender identity and sexual orientation (Smolkin & Young, 2011). However, Kosciw and Diaz

(2008) found that gay and lesbian parents are more likely to be involved in their child's education compared to heterosexual families (67% vs. 42%), and an AACAP (2006) longitudinal study of families with lesbian moms suggested that these children were more well-adjusted in high school than their peers with heterosexual parents (Gartrell & Bos, 2010).

Acknowledgement

Toomey, McGuire, and Russell (2012) explained that the heteronormative framework within schools is the origin of violence toward gender nonconforming students. The policing of gender and sexuality guidelines is the dangerous component of heteronormativity that establishes norms and regulates student interactions, which places students who have atypical gender behavior at risk for victimization (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001; Szalacha, 2003). Hardy and Laszloffy (2002) argued that children who do not conform to traditional norms of gender or sexuality are besieged by violence, both interpersonal and socio-cultural. The social acceptance of "gay-bashing" in schools and negative messages in the media about the LGBTQ lifestyle demonstrates this violence. In their essay, "Enraged to Death: A Multi-Contextual Approach to LGBT Teen Suicide" (2002), Hardy and Laszloffy argued that these acts of discrimination and violence would likely have little to no impact on children in isolation. The issue, however, is the cumulative impact of being degraded and being excluded due to one's identity. In addition, these subtle or not so subtle negative reactions perpetuate a culture of intolerance that may lead to overt acts of violence (e.g., gay-bashing). LGBTQ youth who are assaulted by institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism internalize this hatred, which leads to violence against themselves: suicide.

> At ten years of age, Ashlyn Conner was found by her sister, dead, hanging in a closet, an apparent suicide. Recently she had cut her hair into a bob and the other children

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were making fun of her, saying she looked like an ugly boy. She was a fifth grader in elementary school. (Grimm & Schlikerman, 2011)

These tragic events are just the tip of the iceberg and expose the prevalent challenges faced by many LGBTQ persons in K-12 education settings (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010,). The following is an example of the severe abuse that is common in schools.

> Jesse Montgomery, a kindergartener, was teased continuously in school. His classmates called him a girl and referred to him as Jessica and homo, freak, princess, fairy, lesbian, femme boy, queer, pansy and queen. By 6th grade, Jesse was physically abused, kicked, punched and super-glued to his seats. His classmates assaulted him by grabbing his genitals and role-played raping him anally. The school leaders, however, did little to address this issue. (Sham et al., 2009)

This violence is present in schools, and for change to happen the best strategies for teachers and school leaders for confronting hatred of gay and lesbian students in schools are acknowledging the topics of gender and sexuality are already embedded in the school culture and taking steps to support students through action.

Action

Educators can create inclusive environments where children with atypical gender behavior or with LGBT family members feel safe and have a sense of belonging. To create this atmosphere, teachers could include perspectives and experiences in the curriculum that explicitly address topics that incorporate LGBTQ families or gender diversity (Vaccaro et al., 2012). When staff or peers evade these topics, children are not included and validated within schools.

In order for some teachers and school leaders to confront this sensitive and controversial topic, they could begin to examine their own understandings and assumptions. As activists for social justice, the individual often engages his or her own possible preconceived prejudices, myths, and views through transformative learning. Transformative learning, Brown (2008) shared, allows people to reframe how they see the world and

themselves. Through a process of this type of learning, the individual can begin to understand how cultural expectations and assumptions have a direct impact on how the individual interprets experiences. Brown adds that educational activists are allies for their students, seeking out and connecting them with supportive coalitions while teaching them how to work for social justice and advocate for others who are oppressed or excluded.

<div align="center">**Theoretical Framework of this Study**</div>

The researcher drew on a combination of queer and cultural theories to provide a framework to analyze this data. This study was designed to provide a learning experience in which participants' active engagement, conversations, and reflections on dilemmas may be "troubling," providing a catalyst for transformational change. Through a synthesis of these three theories, the researcher used Transformational Queer Cultural Theory (TQCT) to provide a structure for this research.

Cultural Theory

There is a divergent group of philosophers and thinkers who approach cultural theory from numerous perspectives. Sociologists consider Marx and Weber the founders of classical cultural theory (Smith, 2002). These philosophers provided some core concepts that continue to be debated, studied, and referenced in modern day research. Smith and Riley (2011) explained that Marx contributed the ideology that connected the economics of power to culturally established norms. Marx distinguished humans from other animals as being self-conscious producers of their environment (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). To make his point, he shared the analogy of a bee and an architect and their creations. While the bee, by instinct, creates honey, the architect first designs his work in the mind. Correlating this to humans, Marx believed the ruling class (those with economic capital) consciously constructed the

world and the cultural norms to satisfy their needs. Thus, Marx explained, the values of the ruling class became the dominant norms. The economy controlled both societal ideology and individual behavior with "clockwork precision" in Marx's view (Smith & Riley, 2011, p. 9).

Sixty years later Weber articulated an alternate narrative to Marx's economic explanation of cultural. Weber believed that capitalism was the most efficient and rational system for a society. As such, western society could use power in an objective format (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002) to maintain social order (Smith, 2002). As discussed previously, Weber believed religion is the core feature of culture. He explained that people could force others to take action through different ways of exercising power (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002).

Many present day theorists use Marx and Weber's perspectives in their research to study the cultural impact of bureaucracy and alienation on modern life (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). Cultural theory gives researchers a language to look at the macro levels of institutions and social systems and to consider the impacts of human agency. Some theorists point to the constraints of culture, while others argue its ability to motivate action (Smith, 2002).

In addition to Marx and Weber's economic views, researchers study culture and its impact on society and social norms. According to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001), culture is the context of shared values, beliefs, customs, behaviors, and symbols that foster a sense of identity, comfort, and community among group members. Lindsey, Robins and Terrell (2003) added to this definition by claiming that culture is all the shared characteristics of human existence, which include age, gender, geography, ancestry, language, history, sexual orientation, and physical ability, as well as occupation and affiliations. Schools are the microcosm of these diverse characteristics and are powerful instruments of normalization. Culture exists through these diverse components and, through norming, while groups or

individuals claim a stance of power or hegemony (Arias, 2009). "Culture is an abstraction, yet the forces that are created in social and organizational situations that derive from culture, are powerful" (Arias, 2009, p. 3). Although the culture of schools is abstract, Schein (2004) clarified that it is a powerful source that results in victimization for those who do not conform to the language and behavior of the dominant culture. This power is dominance, with repercussions of racism, sexism, heterosexism, genderism, ableism, classism, religious oppression, and many other forms of oppression, leading to the marginalization of people and perpetuation of social injustices (Arias, 2009). For gender-nonconforming youth or those questioning their gender or sexual orientation, a culture of heteronormativity can be harmful and evenly deadly.

Queer Theory

Sociologists have traditionally categorized sex, gender, and sexuality into separate variables that have distinct binary definitions (Ward & Schneider, 2009). According to "experts," everyone is born with a male or female body, and one's disposition in terms of gender and behavior is either masculine or feminine, and sexuality falls into either a heterosexual or a homosexual classification (Valocchi, 2005). Sociologists who are not reflective fuse these binaries, thereby biasing their research by using socially constructed sexuality and gender discourse. According to Butler (1993) and Foucault (1990), many sociologists admit that these binaries are socially constructed rather than biological dispositions (Valocchi, 2005). Constructed categories assume power over those who do not fit neatly into said groupings. In contrast, queer theory uses counternarratives to deconstruct contrived binaries (Valocchi, 2005).

The term *queer* itself has evolved throughout history with various meanings. Previously within American culture, the term *queer* was a homophobic slur to shame those who did not fit social norms around gender and sexuality (Butler, 1993). Gay and lesbian studies in the '70s and '80s focused on the political and social struggle for basic personal freedom (Abelove, Barale, & Halperin, 1993). At this time the gay community strived to assimilate and "fit into" the established norms of society, advocating for the rights afforded to heterosexuals. Those who felt marginalized by mainstream visions of sexuality reclaimed the word *queer* to use as a self-affirming umbrella term (Morris, 2000). In the '90s, *queer* was embraced as a term to be more inclusive of a variety of identities and those who felt assimilation in to society was not desirable or necessary.

Some of the earlier researchers relied on feminist and social theory as the foundation of gay studies. According to Rubin (1993), researchers used feminist theory to detect and analyze gender-based inequalities and the oppression of women. She explained, however, that feminist theory alone was inadequate to help Americans think about diverse sexual behavior or the regulatory powers governing sexuality. In addition, Western feminism used binary oppositions in its language. Gay and lesbian researchers were dissatisfied with the typical explanations feminists used to describe certain kinds of sexual behaviors (Butler, 1990/2006). According to Rubin (1993) and later Morris (2000), writers such as Foucault, Sedgwick, Butler, and Weeks chose to analyze how power defined, limited, and sanctioned sexuality, rather than dissecting "individual" psychology or orientation. These authors demonstrated that sex, pleasure, and alternate sexual orientations challenged the normative paradigms that legitimated the "proper" form of sexuality (i.e., a man and woman in marriage), thereby creating disequilibrium in culturally accepted norms.

Butler (1990), whose theory was the basis for one branch of queer studies, explained the concept of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble*. Butler argued that feminism had erred by reinforcing the binary view of gender relations and mutually exclusive categories of "man" and "woman." The reality of being a woman is not an empirical fact, Butler declared, but rather performative. Butler asserted that gender is not something that one *is* but rather something one *does*. She explained that from the beginning everyone is within a social climate that regulates how each person acts or performs his or her gender (Salih, 2007). Butler clarified, "for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman" (Butler, 2011, para. 3). Butler prefers to view the idea of identity as free and flexible and gender as a performance, rather than a determined fact. She maintains that there are a number of exaggerated representations of masculinity and femininity which cause "gender trouble." For example, Butler explained that drag is one way to dramatize and ridicule how society norms and regulates gender expression. Drag discloses the social coercion at the root of the performative nature of gender identity (Butler, 1990/2006).

Queer theory emerged from this new performative account of sexuality and identity that Butler and Rubin (1994) presented. According to Jagose (1996), queer theory's most noteworthy contribution is its account of "how gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality and, furthermore, how the deconstruction of normative models of gender legitimates lesbian and gay subject-positions" (p. 83). Queer theoretical insights challenge one to question the binary systems of gender and sexuality that are socially constructed (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). Butler (1990/2006), Sedgwick (1993), and other researchers in the field asserted that identities can be multiple, contradictory,

fragmented, unstable, and fluid, rather than the established societal norms which assume everyone fits into the two categories of male or female and heterosexual. Queer theory embraces any kind of sexual activity or identity on the continuum, from normative to deviant categories.

Queer theory has emerged as a valid paradigm for qualitative research to examine, analyze, and refute the traditional portrayal of sexual binaries (Blasius, 2001; Vallochi, 2005). Queer theorists challenge researchers to rethink the traditional ways of looking at gender and sexuality just as post-structuralism seeks to confront conventional studies in human sciences. Post-structuralism challenges the notion of human culture that reproduces traditional beliefs (Belsey, 2002). Butler, Rubin and Jagose would argue that (almost) *all* language contains and shapes normative gender roles including expectations of how females and males should speak and behave to fit into traditional binary categories. "With its post-structural roots and keen eye for deconstruction, queer theory can be described as a critical standpoint for tearing apart dominant ways of knowing about sex, gender, and sexualities" (Willis, 2007, p. 183). Through queer theory, researchers interrupt the cycle of taking for granted the existing norms of gender and sexuality from previous generations. Queer theory clarifies that identity is a cultural construction that is fluid and multi-dimensional (Levy & Johnson, 2011).

Anzaldúa (2007) describes her own experiences with cultural parameters as she struggles to find her identity as a *mestiza* in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* According to Merriam-Webster, a mestiza is a woman of mixed European and American Indian ancestry. Anzaldúa describes her sense of living on the border of two binary cultures and trying to negotiate and confront the dominant white culture. Anzaldúa insists that *queering* seeks to disrupt and confront the established modes of thinking about gender

and sexuality by taking a stand on the "borderlines" that have been delineated by the dominant heterosexual culture. Such a stance allows the researcher to dismantle and more effectively examine these constructs.

A queer theory perspective could provide school leaders with a way to begin to re-examine their policies and curriculum. Loutzenheiser and Macintosh (2004) suggested a need to "queer" the educational setting. A queering approach would allow for the presence of complex identities (e.g., queer gender, queer sexuality), leading to a paradigm shift that would address issues within schools' overt and hidden curriculum policies and practices. These changes would address the culture of the school and help all children feel included. With queering practices in school, LGBTQ students and those perceived to be LGBTQ would feel safer and more connected to school (Greytak et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2008; and Russell & McGuire, 2008). Queer theory can also support teachers in a new understanding of gender and sexuality by fostering a climate where there is an expectation for teachers to intervene and challenge gendered assumptions. Teachers can learn about the complexities of identities from queer theory and that labels have a damaging impact on children that is felt well into their adulthood (Morris, 2000).

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformational learning theory, proposed by Mezirow (1997) and Freire (1973) and developed further by other theorists, is about changing the way one views the world through self-reflection. In transformational learning, the individual mediates and makes sense of personal experience through his/her own values, beliefs, and assumptions. When this meaning system is inadequate to accommodate some life experiences, transformational learning enables the individual to acquire new perspectives (Merriam, 2004, p. 61). Mezirow

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and Taylor (2009) explained there are three dimensions to transformative learning: 1) changes in the individual's own views, 2) changing of people's beliefs and 3) changes in the individual's actions.

Learning is transformational if it results in a deep and lasting change, possibly a worldview shift. According to Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock (2012), the combination of interactive learning and close relationships in a supportive and safe environment can provide a disorientation or "troubling knowledge" that can lead to the deep learning outcomes that are the foundation of the transformative learning process (Kumashiro, 2002). The first phase of that process, Stevens-Long et al., (2012) clarified, is critical reflection through "disorienting" issues and critical questioning of assumptions along with the requirement for application of theory to practice (p.184). A key element of transformative learning is for individuals to examine their existing beliefs, critically reflect on their assumptions and beliefs, and then consciously make and implement plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds (Mezirow, 1997).

Transformative Queer Cultural Theory (TQCT)

Reflecting on binary social constructs, the influence of social norms, and the need for transformational knowledge, this research drew on queer, cultural, and transformational learning theories. The framework characteristics are as follows: *queer theory* challenges researchers to rethink their ways of defining sex, gender, and sexuality (Blasius, 2001; Valocchi, 2005), and *cultural theory* argues that ongoing social interactions construct cultural norms (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Queer theory questions the social construction of identities (Anzaluda, 2007; Butler, 1990), while cultural theory posits that all members of a common society are constantly involved in producing and constructing culture. Cultural and queer

theories appear to be oppositional, but these concepts are not exactly incompatible. Cultural theory provides the language to recognize and understand the historical and existing power of invisible regulations that form society's customs. Using this perspective, cultural theory helps researchers form the questions needed to understand these rigid structures or customs within society. Transformational learning is a way for the researcher to raise this consciousness and provide adults with an opportunity to see critical issues of cultural regulation with a new lens (Freire, 1973; Mezirow, 1997). Through this new awareness, people begin to question constructed norms of gender while finding ways to be more fluid and inclusive within their thinking. Transformative learning can provide a vehicle for participants to have a new understanding of how cultural theory regulates children's behavior, while queer theory opens up possibilities for change through questioning these standards.

The researcher used a synthesis of these three theoretical frames, *transformative queer and cultural theory* (TQCT), to design her study. TQCT is a theoretical lens aligned appropriately with the young age of an elementary child. In their early years children are still trying to find their own identity and attractions. Teachers and children reinforce and discourage "performances" of gender to fit cultural norms within the classrooms. In a queering approach, identity is not fixed and stable but inherently fluid, and it permits the presence of multi-dimensional gender identities and performances in environments that customarily have only tolerated "normal" identities and traditional behaviors (Levy & Johnson, 2011; Oswald et al., 2005). Children explore their own selves through interactions and relationships with peers and adults. This is a significant time period for learning about gender through social norms constructed within the schools' cultures (Connell, 2009; Renold,

2002; Solomon, 2012). Children learn, interact with, and actively construct gender, and their behavior is guided by perceptions about the popularity of a behavior and what is explicitly and implicitly reinforced in these social exchanges (Blaise, 2005; Connell, 2009; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Using queer theory to teach educators that children's identities are interrelated performances will allow teachers to transform the school culture into an accepting inclusive environment while confronting and interrupting heteronormative discourse and patterns (Loutzenheiser & Macintosh, 2004; Meyer, 2010).

Lindsey et al., (2003) further suggested that understanding culture, pedagogy, hegemony, and power individually and in interactions with others is essential to developing a culturally responsive climate in schools. TQC theory can provide the framework for considering pedagogies that promote equity and social justice within all classrooms, thereby transforming the culture of the classroom. This new pedagogy is not about teaching sex or same-sex relationships but, rather, challenging the accepted norms and practices of heterosexist patterns and discourse (Lindsey et al., 2003). Sears (1999) asserts that, most critically, teaching queerly explores and then disrupts assumptions about identities, sex, and gender.

Teachers who embrace a queer curriculum can establish an inclusive culture where young people are validated as they explore their own gender identities. Schools are major organizational structures responsible for fostering a culture that confronts and eliminates discriminatory behavior of individuals within the school (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Meyer, 2009). From a social justice perspective, educators and researchers can strive to identify and confront the ways that dehumanizing normative gender and sexuality

expectations are enacted and supported through school policy (Kim, Sheridan, & Holcomb, 2009; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008).

For some educators to begin a journey of restructuring the heteronormative curriculum and practices of the school, they need an opportunity to engage in transformative learning. This type of learning allows them to reframe their thinking and see issues of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation through a new lens. Fostering transformative learning offers a uniquely adult, abstract, and idealized way to learn and communicate (Mezirow & Taylor 2009; Stevens-Long et al., 2012).

According to Marshall and Oliva (2006), school cultures are changing rapidly, and demographic and cultural shifts pose challenges to educators and policy makers. Shifts in student population are forcing teachers with a status quo perspective to self-reflect in order to learn how to service diverse populations and new issues. Schein (2004) argued that, traditionally, culture was the stabilizer—a strong constant that is difficult to change. Instead, educators can view this constant as dysfunctional and encourage the development of a culture that is learning oriented, adaptive, and flexible. Rather than normalizing LGBTQ youth, adults, and families, a transformative approach challenges processes of "privileging and othering'' based on conformity to normative gender and sexuality expectations (Kumashiro, 2000; Talburt & Steinberg, 2000). Alhadeff-Jones and Kokkos (2011) asserted educators must "call into question our taken for granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (p. 7).

From a Freirean perspective, learning can and should be transformative (Torres, 2007). Freire (1970/2000) asserted that *banking*—a system of pouring knowledge into

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receptacles [students]—is actually a system for controlling and regulating children. Instead,

he asserted, educators can use education to liberate students by engaging them in critical

thinking and problem solving through transformative learning:

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of
> the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about
> conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and
> women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in
> the transformation of their world. (Freire, 1970/2000, p.34)

Educators can provide an environment where students feel comfortable with challenging

established norms while learning about others' views and perspectives and in turn creating an

inclusive school climate.

Conclusion

Addressing sexual orientation and nonconforming gender behavior in society, in

schools, and as individuals is challenging but crucial (Meyer, 2010). The formal and hidden

curriculum leads to intolerance, ignorance, and violence. Shields (2004) asserted that

challenging heteronormative practices begins with the "need for overcoming our pathologies

(a process of treating differences as deficits) of silence" (p.117). LGBTQ families, staff, and

children with diverse gender performance in elementary classrooms and schools have been

excluded and marginalized (Johnson, 2002).

At the macro level, homophobia has been manifested throughout the history of

Western culture. Because of this constructed prejudice of homophobia, society stigmatizes

LGBTQ community members who are out, while those who chose to be invisible endure

isolation and oppression (Herek, 2007). Within major institutions, including schools, a

heterosexist culture prevails through society's norms, explicitly and implicitly reinforced by

adults and children. Children, families, and staff who are LGBTQ or who display atypical

gender performance are marginalized, resulting in a negative impact on their emotional, social, and physical well-being.

To begin to address these issues of oppression, at the macro-level, teachers and school leaders can reach out to coalitions (e.g., community organizations, Gay Straight Alliances), and legislators can work to enact federal and state comprehensive bullying polices, and individuals can begin to confront the heterosexist culture of the schools. Schools play a fundamental role in children's personal, social, and academic skills, and primary schools are the "key arena for the production of and regulation of sexual practices and identities" (Renold, 2002, p. 416). Schools can begin to disrupt heteronormativity through a commitment to cultural change in which all children, families, and staff feel safe and welcomed. At the micro-levels, transformational individual change can be a fundamental piece to addressing any misinterpretations and underlying feelings of discomfort or even homophobic feelings.

The entire student body and school staff has something to gain from providing a safe and welcoming space for all students. Adults and children experience success in and productivity in a positive, safe, inclusive school climate. In a society committed to social justice, teachers, counselors, school leaders, and students are the stakeholders who can begin to challenge the institutional homophobia that dismisses the legitimacy of these children.

Utilizing a synthesis of cultural, queer, and transformative (TQCT) theories, the researcher hoped to provide a study design that enabled educators to broaden and reframe their perceptions and views in a quest for social justice. First, cultural theory provided a language for educators to understand the invisible power of cultural norms within classrooms and school, while queer theory offered a framework that challenges these educators to

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question these norms and practices. And finally, transformative learning is a framework to provide educators time for reflection and co-construction of these worldviews in regards to heterosexism and which could possibly lead to confronting heteronormativity with the elementary setting.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Rationale of Research Design

For this study, the researcher employed primarily qualitative research method with descriptive statistics to triangulate the data. The structure and foundations of a book club promoted reflection and discussion among a group of elementary teachers about the sensitive issues of LGBTQ individuals, children with atypical gender behavior, and the heteronormative culture of schools. Questionnaires generated statistics about the participants' attitudes and knowledge before and after the book club about the LGBTQ community. Questionnaires, transcripts from the book club discussions, field notes, and artifacts from the participants' journals comprise the bulk of the data. This research utilized a synthesis of theories, transformative queer cultural theory (TQCT), as a framework for conducting critical ethnography.

Qualitative research, explained Marshall and Rossman (2011), has become an important field of inquiry in education to help find the best way to educate children in the twenty-first century. Qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experience of people (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p.2). One type of qualitative research is critical ethnography. According to Noblit (2004), "one of the central ideas guiding critical ethnography is the fundamental concept that social life is constructed in contexts of power" (p. 184). Noblit (1999) clarified that the postcritical ethnographer is attentive to historical and social productions of power while reflecting on lived experiences with a goal of conveying hope for social justice. In postcritical discourse, researchers focus on multiple identities and

how they have an impact on individuals' constructions of meaning (Zaytoun, 2003).

According to Thomas (1993),

> If critical ethnography is about anything, it is about freedom from social repression and a vision of a better society. Research helps identify what oppresses and how it can be altered. It requires that we understand our subjects, our culture, and above all ourselves as a way of dispelling myths and misconceptions that format social structures and behaviors. (p.71)

The researcher hoped that this critical ethnography incorporates reflexive inquiry while reflecting on the lived experiences of participants within its methodology.

Rogers, Delaney, and Babinski (2004) noted that educational researchers typically use teachers as participants or subjects rather than writing with the educators as the audience. As a result, the participants' thoughts and voices are "subject" to the researcher's analysis, silencing teachers' knowledge (p. 264). In this study, the researcher planned to disrupt the status quo by using the theoretical framework of Transformative Cultural and Queer Theory to engage the multiple voices from teachers to learn from and gather insight into their attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about LGBTQ families, students, and colleagues. Using these voices and understandings, she hoped to share her findings with an audience of educators and, ideally, to inspire more of them to promote social justice and equity within schools.

Research Design

Groves (2003) explained that there is no specified description of how to do postcritical ethnography. Consequently, there are many interpretations on how a postcritical study would be designed and conducted. As a model, this study used Conrad-Cozart's (2004) postcritical study, using a book club format. Conrad-Cozart was a participant observer in her study so she could learn more about her own culture along with her colleagues. As an

educator and a Black woman, she formed a book club with other Black teachers for her research. Noblit, Flores, and Murillo (2004) contend that Conrad-Cozart used an essential element of postcritical ethnography: "the critique of self" (p. 40). With this narrative format for the study, Conrad-Cozart (2004) found that this design helped get teachers involved with discussions about their profession while critiquing themselves.

Book clubs can provide a venue that supports conversations that are more fluid and open. The conversations often begin with discussions of the themes of the book and move to participants making their own personal, professional, or global connections, thereby establishing a more intimate setting (Roberts, 2003). This environment fosters an expectation that the readers are responsible for interpretation of the data. A focus on the individuals to determine how they define reality and experience events is an emic perspective and seeks to describe culture as its members see it (Noblit, 2013). The book club can foster an environment where participants engage in thoughtful discussion and may actually influence one another (Kleiber, 2004). Kleiber (2004) explained that U.S. society tends to be too hectic and isolated and, consequently, people find few opportunities to discuss important issues. Through the book club format, participants can build on one another's input and ideas to formulate new perspectives. As participants share their own truths and listen to others' lived experiences, they take the time to reflect and build upon their worldviews. This new knowledge can lead to creative transformations in the classroom, thereby improving understanding and practices (Roberts, 2003).

To design this study, the researcher also relied on the advice and format used in focus groups, as they parallel this research methodology. The focus group is a carefully planned gathering with participants who share their views and perceptions without the goal of

reaching consensus (Krueger, 2009). Belzille and Öberg (2012) explained that participants in a focus group bring their own original views and "truths" to interactions with others. Krueger (2009) explains that a focus group is people with similar characteristics attentive to a particular topic of interest that can provide qualitative data. Within this setting, the researcher has the opportunity to interact directly with the respondents and can probe for clarification through follow-up questions about the topic.

In order to provide a climate of balance and comfort within the book club, this researcher tried to recruit participants who had shared with her a range of perspectives regarding the topic of heterosexism and attitudes towards the LGBTQ community. Group members may expound upon ideas or possibly be inhibited by the group dynamics, which may encourage agreement or suppress individual viewpoints (Belzille & Öberg, 2012). Therefore, there needed to be some equilibrium between the ideologies. For example, some participants were open to the idea of confronting heteronormative issues within their classrooms, while others might have been fearful or disagreed with introducing such topics in an elementary setting.

The book club met six times over a period of two months. Participants completed the questionnaires at the beginning of the first book club meeting. The researcher, as the facilitator, provided questions to guide the discussions (see Appendices C and D). The researcher developed questions using the TCQT framework.

During the fifth gathering, the book club members were able to Skype with John Schwartz, the author of *Oddly Normal* (2012). The participants asked the author questions regarding the book and topics that arose in previous meetings. For the last gathering, the participants watched the movie, *Valentine Road* (2013), an HBO Documentary Film directed

and produced by Marta Cunningham. This is an account of the death of Lawrence King, a 15-year-old boy killed by a male classmate whom King had asked to be his "Valentine." The film raises tough questions about bias and violence directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender-nonconforming youth in K-12 schools; about the power of gender norms and the ways they are enforced; about the ability of schools to respond to the full complexity of students' lives, providing support to enable their success; and about the ways that schools and adults must support students in crisis before tragedy strikes (GLSEN, 2013). Following the movie, participants engaged in their final discussion (Appendix D).

At the end of the six sessions, the participants completed the questionnaires again (see Appendices A and B). These surveys provided some empirical data on changes in the participants' attitudes about and knowledge of the LGBT community.

Role of the Researcher

In this study the researcher was an "insider-outsider." As an elementary teacher she participated in the learning with a group of educators, but as a lesbian who was out she was likely an "outsider" to the majority (or even all) of the participants. None of the participants openly identified as LGBTQ. The researcher attempted to be mindful of any assumptions and political stance. For example, she considered the following questions: How does her insider-outsider status affect the outcome of the project? How would it look different if she were straight? The participants' views might have had a direct impact on how the researcher participated and responded due to her positionality (Takacs, 2002).

As the moderator, the researcher was a participant observer in this study. According to Layder (1993), the role of participant observer is the ideal research strategy. By playing down her professional role and becoming a member of the group to be studied, the researcher

can obtain "unique access" to an otherwise "closed world" and can gain the group members'

trust. The participant observer can observe experiences and attitudes from the perspectives

of the people to be studied and describe their world in terms using their language.

The researcher, who identifies as queer, needed to be aware of any preconceptions

due to her own experiences. Bhattacharya (2007) stated that one way researchers can be

sensitive to ensuring participants' views are understood and represented in the data fairly is

through member checks. The researcher began each book club with a summary of members'

understandings and analyses from the previous meeting. This strategy allowed participants

to validate or clarify their perspectives and helped guard against any misinterpretations or

biases from the researcher.

Participants

The focus of this study, sexual orientation and atypical gender behavior, is

controversial and sensitive. Due to the delicate nature of this topic, this researcher recruited a

convenient purposeful sample of teachers who worked at the elementary level. Curtis (2001)

espoused that the way in which a qualitative researcher chooses samples is based on the goals

and various rationale of the study. The qualitative researcher typically uses a smaller sample

for more "insight, data richness and transferability" (p. 32). According to McMillan and

Schumaker (2001), purposeful sampling has several strengths, including a relatively small

budget, convenience of administration, high participation rate, generalization possible to

comparable subjects, and probable receipt of needed data.

For this study, the researcher actively recruited 10 participants. Krueger (2009)

recommends 5 to 10 for the focus group, although 4 to 12 are acceptable. He stated that the

group needed to be small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to speak yet large

enough to provide a diversity of perspectives. Bennett (2010) clarified that these diverse views allow a form of triangulation of individual truths balanced against each other. This "triangulation" supports the validity of the study (Galman, 2013). This purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to develop an in-depth analysis of participants' perspectives.

In order to recruit participants, the researcher relied on personal contacts. The researcher invited friends and friends of friends who worked at the elementary level to participate. The researcher clarified a need for volunteers for the research due to gaps in the literature. Participants who volunteer tend to be motivated for research projects, especially if they have a personal investment in the subject (Kleiber, 2004). The researcher reassured volunteers that their identity and information would remain anonymous to any non-participants. For this study, the researcher was conscious and explicit in her decisions to gather volunteers who represent a range of views yet not have any outliers. Volunteers, in order to be open, needed to feel that there would be others in the group with similar viewpoints. Through personal email and face-to-face conversations, the researcher shared details regarding the meeting time and place and the time commitment required to participate in the project.

The participants in this study were 10 teachers who worked at an elementary level. Enrolled participants reflected diversity in a number of categories, including age, ethnicity, and number of years teaching at various elementary schools, as shown in Table 10. In Table 10, teachers are given pseudonyms to keep their identity anonymous. The teachers ranged in age from 24 to 56 years old. All ten participants identified as female. Six of the participants were White, two were African American, and one was Latina. One volunteer acknowledged that she had two mothers, and another had a sister who was a lesbian. Their teaching

experience ranged from first year to 25 years of experience in the classroom. The teachers

taught preschool to fifth grade at elementary settings.

Table 10

Participants' Gender, Age Range, Race, and Years Teaching

Participants	Gender*	Age range	Race	Years Teaching Experience
Alison	Female	25-30	White	5-10
Becca	Female	20-30	White	0-5
Brie	Female	30-40	White	0-5
Elaine	Female	30-35	African-American	10-15
Irene	Female	50-55	Hispanic	20-25
Alex	Female	20-30	African-American	0-5
Lorraine	Female	40-45	White	10-15
Mika	Female	25-30	White	5-10
Roberta	Female	30-35	White	10-15
Shanna	Female	25-30	White	0-5

*Self-identified

Study Questionnaires

Participants completed questionnaires to measure their attitudes towards LGBTQ

individuals (see Appendix A) before and after the book club. Marshall and Rossman (2010)

explained that a questionnaire could help the researcher obtain a sense of the range of

attitudes and beliefs in the participant pool. After reading a brief description of the study with

the consent form attached to the survey, participants were asked to give their consent to

participate in the research. Upon agreeing to participate, the volunteers completed the two

questionnaires regarding their attitudes towards homosexuals and their knowledge about

homosexuality. The participants completed the instruments in a hardcopy form in about 20

minutes total.

Dunjić-Kostić et al. (2012) created *The Sex Education and Knowledge about Homosexuality Questionnaire* (SEKHQ), using 32 true/false statements drawn from three previous studies (Alderson, Orzek, & McEwen 2009; Harris, Nightengale, & Owen, 1995; Wells & Franken, 1987).   In this questionnaire, participants responded to questions about homosexuality with three possible answers: *right, wrong,* or *I don't know*. The SEKHQ score ranges from 0 to 32, where 32 indicates all correct answers. In the study by Dunjić-Kostić et al. (2012), the internal consistency reliability of SEKHQ indicated a Chronbach's alpha of 0.74, and the overall average score of the questionnaire was 14.42 (standard deviation: 4.98).

The *Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire* (AHQ) was developed from three questionnaires used in earlier studies as well (Dunjić-Kostić et al., 2012; Smith & Mathews 2007; Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Herek 1988). The AHQ consists of 20 statements regarding homosexuals, their lifestyle, and their social position. The possible responses range from 1 (*I agree*) to 5 (*I disagree*) in this Likert type scale. The researcher analyzed the scale by every item, individually and by the total score. The sum total possible score is 100 with a higher score indicating an increased tendency for negative attitudes towards homosexuals. In the study by Dunjić-Kostić et al. (2012), the AHQ showed the internal consistency reliability of Chronbach's alpha =0.92, and the average score achieved on the questionnaire was 62.91(standard deviation: 16.34).

As Conrad-Cozart (2004) and Rogers et al. (2004) proposed, this study design was developed so that the teachers were responsible for interpreting themes surrounding heteronormative culture and co-constructing meaning along with the researcher. As with any subject, there are multiple perspectives to consider, discuss, compare, and learn from. In addition, due to the sensitive and controversial nature of this topic, there were diverse and

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multiple perspectives from the participants, depending on their own lens. This format allowed the team to work collaboratively to interpret the text and share these perspectives.

Establishing Trust

The researcher offered a choice of two books, both written from a parent's perspective. The first, *Oddly Normal* by John Schwartz (2012), focuses on raising a child who displayed atypical gender behavior at a very early age. Schwartz shares the story of his son who is trying to identify his sexuality. Schwartz and his wife try to protect their son from homophobia and help him navigate a school system that continues to marginalize kids who need special understanding. The second book, *Raising My Rainbow: Adventures in Raising a Fabulous Gender Creative Son* by Lori Duron (2013), focuses on raising a child who identifies as gay at a young age and experiences many challenges within the classroom setting. C.J., Duron's son, is a gender nonconforming boy who moves on the gender-variation continuum from masculine on the left to feminine on the right. This family chooses to find the enjoyment in bringing up their son within this rainbow of experiences.

With the choice of which text to read at the onset, the participants had a sense of control and motivation. Research has shown that choice leads to increased levels of intrinsic motivation, greater persistence, better performance, and higher satisfaction (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). The book choice was put to an anonymous vote, and the majority decided on *Oddly Normal* by J. Schwartz. Although they commented that both books were of interest, participants felt *Oddly Normal* provided more of a compelling story, connecting the challenges of a boy and his elementary school experience.

In addition to choice, Kleiber (2004) explained that the quality of the data collected depends on establishing a rapport with participants, and building a connection with

volunteers requires communicating appreciation for their time and their willingness to share opinions and perspectives on the research topic. To create a relaxed and comfortable environment, participants mingled for a few minutes while everyone arrived and before getting settled.

For our initial meeting, the researcher-facilitator took the time to reassure participants that the book club sessions were an opportunity for them to give their opinions and perspectives and to be heard. The object, the researcher emphasized, would not be to reach a consensus but to share a diversity of beliefs. At this time the researcher explained that her role as the moderator was to provide questions and prompts to keep the conversation on track, but she encouraged participants to ask questions and respond freely within the topics. Kleiber (2004) explained, "Group facilitation skills are extremely useful in ensuring that all participants have a voice that is respected and heard. If the researcher moderates the group, she or he must guard against any reflection of bias in the questions, responses, and nonverbal language" (p. 93). As a moderator, this researcher also tried to ensure that the participants followed ground rules they developed as a group. Establishing trust is essential for these conversations to be open (Groves, 2003). Kleiber (2004) asserted, "An atmosphere that is structured to be nonjudgmental and to promote candid expression allows for a range of opinions to surface" (p. 92). One norm the group established was that no opinion or perspective is unacceptable. The researcher explained that a wide range of perspectives on this subject should be anticipated, and the group agreed these views would be appreciated and respected. In addition, the group vowed to keep these conversations private and within this setting. To begin, this researcher let participants know that they were not expected to self-disclose beyond their comfort level. She explained the purpose of the research and how

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she would ensure confidentiality to safeguard a more open and constructive discussion. Groves (2003) suggested opening with short introductions so everyone can have the instant experience of being an active participant. Also, Groves recommended that, in order to "lubricate the conversation," the moderator could ask a general question that everyone can answer to give all a "voice." The moderator may be successful by visualizing herself as a "conductor of an orchestra" (Grooves, 2003, p. 100). In this metaphor, this idea of giving voice is to the orchestra tuning their instruments. Grooves clarified that the orchestra metaphor is useful because it focuses on hearing the individual voices and tones before the discussion.

In addition to these discussions, participants were encouraged to keep a journal. They were given a choice of using a journal (provided by researcher) and/or using Livejournal, a private blog. The researcher provided questions for journaling designed to promote critical reflection about their insights or reactions to the book as they read independently. Flood and Lapp (1994) recommended journal writing in response to the text and book club discussion, giving participants an opportunity to reflect as they are reading and to instantly share their perspectives. Through Livejournal, immediate feedback from fellow participants allowed the discussion to reach possible deeper insights between meetings. Journals provided a format for the members' thoughts, feelings, and reflections that could be shared or kept private. These individual journal entries enabled the researcher to extract individual attitudes and views without the impact of the group dynamics. Also, blogs, according to Richardson (2003), offer opportunities through an easy format for educators to "deepen their discussions and bring new voices and experiences into their classroom" (p. 61). Anonymous blogging

allows people to be more honest than they might be in the group setting. The private blog gives participants a bit of breathing space to write more openly.

Data Collection

The TQCT framework structured this qualitative research design. This research study examined the perspectives of elementary teachers as they read and discussed *Oddly Normal*. Multiple data sources included observation, field notes, pre- and post-book club questionnaires, transcripts of the book club discussions, and journal entries. These various data points allowed for triangulation of the data, thereby enhancing the credibility of the study (Gay & Airasian, 2003).

As a participant observer for this qualitative data collection, this researcher used several tools to capture the discourse through conversations, reactions, and body language. Audiotaping and note-taking are essential in the data collection process (Fraenkel, Hyn, & Wallen, 2012). Utilizing Audacity, an audio editor for recording, slicing, and mixing audio, the researcher recorded the discussions. In addition to these recordings, the researcher kept a small notebook of field notes. This audiotaping allowed the researcher to document changes to the book club questions (see Appendices C and D), enhancing her ability to probe, as well as document, any behaviors or reactions of the participants.

Table 11
Data Sources for the Study

Data Source	Format
Researcher's field notes	Hand-written notes
Pre- and post- book club questionnaires	Paper survey
Six book club meetings	Transcripts of each meeting
Participants' journal entries	Blog or hand written journal

With this data collection method, the researcher formulated guiding questions for the book club discussions. These questions provided a foundation to begin discussions surrounding the book and the topic of heteronormativity.

Ethics

All of the participants received a copy of the consent form explaining the book club meeting dates and times and their rights as research participants. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw from the book club at any point. The tapes from the book club sessions, transcriptions, field notes, and other documents were kept in a locked file cabinet, along with consent forms and a list of real names and designated pseudonyms. All the data collected and analyzed by the researcher were kept in a secure, password-protected computer, and hard copies are stored in a locked filing cabinet on the University of North Carolina campus. With this emotionally charged subject, the researcher tried to be mindful of these precautions to keep all the material secure and the information anonymous.

Data Analysis

Noblit (2013) explained that the ethnographer's goal is to generalize from the specific. These participants' stories, connections, and beliefs are not created in a vacuum; rather, the group setting of the book club and all their lived experiences encouraged, restrained, or even policed their views. The researcher captured the participants' audio and written discourse to share a story of this cultural influence.

After each book club session, the researcher transcribed the audiotapes of discussions within 24 hours. The researcher coded data by hand using coding schemes (see Table 13 below) to explore themes within the participants' answers. Possible themes were drawn from

queer and cultural theory (Table 12), teachers' perceptions (i.e., morality and social justice) or their actions (i.e., open dialogues, mindful of parent information) in relation to the heteronormative culture of their school and reactions to the book and documentary. The researcher utilized collective pseudonyms to organize the themes within three distinct groups of teachers.

Table 12

Elements of Cultural Theory Combined with Queer Theory

	Cultural Theory (Arias, 2009; Foucault, 1982; Kincaid, 2004; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Lindsey et al., 2003; Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002; Smith, 2002; Talburt & Steinberg, 2000; Ward & Schneider, 2009)	Queer Theory (Anzaldúa, 2007; Blasius, 2001; Butler 1993 & 1990; Jagose, 1996; Kumashiro, 2002; Levy & Johnson, 2011; Loutzenheiser & Macintosh, 2004; Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Meyer, 2010; Sears, 1999; Willis, 2007; Valocchi, 2005).
Processes	Social construction of norms	Deconstruction of socially constructed norms
Processes	More fixed and confined than fluid	More fluid and multidimensional than fixed
Processes	More covert and implicit than overt	More overt and explicit than covert
Processes	More exclusive than inclusive	More inclusive than exclusive
Processes	Hierarchical structure in the classroom (e.g., all-knowing teacher)	Critical thinking is valued to question status quo
Outcomes	Produces context of shared values, beliefs, and behaviors	Questions context of shared values, beliefs, and behaviors
Outcomes	Fosters acceptable sense of identity, comfort, and community	Contradicts assumptions of identity, comfort, and community
Outcomes	Claims stance of power and control, affirms dominant culture	Challenges current notions of heterosexism
Outcomes	Defines binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality; oversimplifies identity into discrete categories	Disrupts binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality; allows *queer* to represent the myriad of identities that an individual embodies
Outcomes	Promotes assimilation in order to gain access and citizenship; privileges heterosexuality	Avows individuals the freedom to name themselves as a crucial component of agency and citizenship
Outcomes	Sets parameters for curriculum standards	Disrupts current paradigms and frameworks in educational setting

For this type of data analysis, Noblit (2013) suggested that through observations, quotes and artifacts (journals and blogs) the researcher can begin to identify themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of beliefs. Gallman (2013) clarified that by using a code system, in this instance based on the TQCT, the researcher is making sense of the data. Coding is an essential piece of qualitative research and necessitates the researcher's ability to make connections. Each transcription and journal entry was read and re-read to identify emergent themes. With the framework of TQCT, the researcher looked for codes that aligned with this ideology (see Table 12). Cultural theorists explain that most people, including teachers, are socialized into heteronormativity, while queer theory disrupts norms and confronts processes of "privileging and othering." Using the transcripts, journals, and blog, the researcher looked for quotes that support these themes and assisted with the interpretive work.

Study Limitations

There were specific limitations inherent in the topic and design of this research study. These limitations included 1) sensitivity to the topic, 2) participant limitations (e.g., reluctance, fear, time constraints), 3) the researcher's relationships with the participants and being a participant observer, and 4) the methods used within the study (book club format, questionnaires). These limitations might have had an impact on the trustworthiness of these findings.

Within the United States the majority of the population considers the topic of heteronormativity controversial. The topic of heteronormativity, therefore, is likely not commonly discussed or presented to school educators and therefore may be considered off-limits, adding a sense of caution to participants' interactions. Some teachers may not have

wanted to participate because of fear of disagreement or differences between the perceived beliefs of the researcher and the participant. Additionally, friends of the researcher or fellow volunteers may not have volunteered to participate because of fear of the stigma associated with discussing a topic considered taboo or discomfort with addressing this issue.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of homosexuality, the quantitative instrument for this study, two questionnaires, may have limitations. These questionnaires asked participants about their knowledge of and attitudes towards homosexuality. The trustworthiness of the participants' responses and whether they are honest at the time of completion may pose a limitation to this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2010*)*. These questionnaires were somewhat dated and included questions primarily focused on gay men and consequently not balanced. In addition, given the size and nature of the sample, the results from the questionnaires should be interpreted cautiously.

The representation of a restricted number of teachers who participated in this study limited the scope of this research. The volunteers all taught in a similar geographic area in the southern United States. Including participants from other locations may provide more insight and perspectives. The results of the study would not be generalizable to the entire population because of the purposive random sample that was used in the study.

This study was additionally limited by the fact that the respondents were self-selected and voluntarily came forward to participate. It is possible that because the participants were willing volunteers their response might have offered similar perspectives on the topic and they may have been more open to this topic then the general public. There might have been a larger percentage of volunteers, compared to the overall population, who favor the disruption of heteronormativity in schools.

Some of the personal relationships between the participants or with the researcher may have inhibited candid dialogue and self-disclosure within this book club. Also, as a participant observer who had already formed friendly relationships with many of the volunteers, the researcher was bound to influence participants (Thomas, 1993). These relationships may be a limitation due to the fact some volunteers may have been eager to please the researcher. Groves (2003) stated that everything researchers say or do will affect others and consequently will put limitations on the study. The researcher's identity and history were present in this study. The researcher's contributions could be considered either a strength or limitation within this research.

Additionally, participants needed to be educators who would be able to participate over a two-month period. For teachers this commitment of time can be challenging with a job that demands so much during instructional time and "after hours" for planning. It may be possible that some teachers were unable to volunteer due to work and family obligations.

As an educator and a lesbian, this researcher tried to be aware of how her positionality might have affected choices she made when dealing with the interaction of participants. It was essential that the researcher used her reflexivity and was aware of her positionality but at the same time acknowledged her prior experiences and assumptions, which potentially affected the relationships with the teachers. To minimize these impacts, the researcher used member checking: taking the themes and analysis back to the group at the onset of each session, the researcher was able to confirm contributions from the previous meeting with the participants. By using member checking, the researcher provided an opportunity for the volunteers to react to the data and added credibility to the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The book club is similar to a focus group design that provides limitations due to the interactive nature. According to Belzille and Öberg (2012), using a group design could possibly contaminate the views of individual members and limit individual truths to be shared. Some participants may have felt constrained or limited about what stories or views they were willing to share due to judgment by fellow volunteers. The study depended on an intimacy that may not be compatible with certain topics or with certain researchers. This intimacy and vigilance took time and energy throughout the research process. It may not be effective for a larger sample size.

This researcher believes that all stakeholders play a positive role in encouraging awareness and helping to disrupt heteronormativity in an elementary school. These stakeholders represent a much wider range of roles, including students, parents, community members, teachers, district principals, superintendents, and trustees. Including these stakeholders would greatly enhance the study by providing a wider breadth of perspectives. A future study that encompasses a full range of roles within the participant pool would be ideal.

Researcher's Stance

Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of our own perspective—to be able to identify assumptions that we take as universal truths, but that instead have been crafted by our own unique identity and experiences in the world. We live much of our lives in our own heads, in a reconfirming dialogue with ourselves.
   —Takacs, "Positionality, Epistemology, and Social Justice in the Classroom"

As a lesbian educator, this researcher is committed to disrupting the heteronormative culture of schools. Within her own elementary classroom, she created an environment where students were encouraged to be critical thinkers and use self-reflection to grow emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Children could speak openly about many topics that were considered

controversial by the majority of people in U.S. culture. Children spoke about LGBTQ family members and fathers who broke gender roles (e.g., by painting their nails), and they asked freely about transgender people they knew or heard about from friends or family. In this safe context, the students shared and listened to various perceptions. The goal of the researcher's curriculum, pedagogy, and themes was to emphasize social justice in the classroom and include topics regarding racial, religious, and gender equity issues. She knew she needed to strive to be this transformative leader in the school to help all students and educators appreciate and value each other's unique desires, ideas, and experiences.

As a mother of three daughters, the researcher is committed to raising her children in this same paradigm, as advocates and leaders of social justice. She hopes her girls will become women who approach new ideas, situations, and cultures with open dialogue, women who are willing to ask questions, be curious, and ready to take risks that might challenge status quo that oppress, marginalize, or ostracize any human.

When her girls were in preschool, she was unaware of the gender stereotyping and the hidden curriculum that they experienced. But early in her eldest daughter Kiah's first year of kindergarten, she was reminded of the heterosexist attitudes of this society. Kiah came home one day to report incredulously that her kindergarten teacher told her that she could not marry another girl that she admired. The teacher continued to explain that, in fact, women could not marry women and men could not marry men because it was wrong. This researcher could only imagine how confusing and frustrating the teacher's comment must have seemed to this 5 year old with two mothers. The teacher she adored and respected had informed her that her world—her family—was deviant and not part of the accepted culture and that her own feelings towards her classmate were abnormal and needed to be "fixed."

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Through her own children, the researcher viewed a world she had previously ignored, but she soon realized her need to be vigilant in her commitment to confront and disrupt this heteronormative culture. Now Kiah has grown up and fallen in love with a woman whom she plans to marry (in a state where it is legal) and start her own family.

The researcher's middle daughter, Emma, is now grown and is presently in her first year of teaching at an elementary school. As a social justice leader herself, Emma chose "activism" as a theme for the year in her fourth grade class. For Open House, she displayed the quote "Hope is never silent," by Harvey Milk. Two experienced teachers in the building approached her after reading the quote and warned her that she may encounter some negative backlash from parents and probably should reconsider displaying this quote. Emma stood her ground and kept it displayed. Her vigilance was rewarded when a parent thanked her that night for using this quote.

The researcher's youngest daughter, Leah, had a different way of coping with the negative stigma of having two mothers. Leah chose not to disclose that she lived with lesbian mothers. When her peers visited her home, she censured what she shared and, if questioned about her family, explained that one of her mothers was an aunt. Leah kept this secret until she reached college age when she was more able to deal with the social shame of her parents' same-sex relationship.

These experiences as a mother, an educator, and a lesbian propelled this researcher to continue to fight for social justice. Maher and Tetreault (2001) asserted it is crucial for those who teach for social justice to understand their positionality as they negotiate relationships that can be analyzed and changed, an essential skill for social change agents. Through examining her own positionality, the researcher begins to open her "heart and mind to the

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perspectives of others" (Takacs, 2002, p. 109). According to Takacs (2002), connecting her positionality to the study simultaneously empowers and disempowers the researcher. In this study, this researcher was mindful that she might be empowered through her unique understanding of living as a lesbian in the LGBTQ community. As a mother, she watched the pain her children often suppressed when friends refused to spend the night at the house with "two moms." As an educator, she knows the discomfort and internal conflict of deciding when to remain invisible as a lesbian and when she can freely share her identity.

Alternatively, because of experiences she has not had, she will be constrained and disempowered in this study. As a white woman who is privileged in terms of economic stability and race, her lens has its own limitations. She tried to remain cognizant of this positionality throughout her research and was mindful of her own reactions, verbal or nonverbal, that might have indicated judgment or disagreement. Moser (2008) explained in her research she was aware that her personality, the way she responded to individuals and interactions, and her emotional reactions were all part of how she was judged by others and impacted her ability to gather information. These factors influence who will share stories or their views with the researcher.

Chapter Summary

With the TQCT as a framework, this study used a book club format to gather data from teachers who were willing to share their perspectives and views in regards to the LGBTQ community, children with gender variant behavior, and the heteronormative culture of elementary schools. The questionnaires provided the study with pre- and post-book club empirical data regarding attitudinal changes towards the LGBTQ community and/or increased knowledge and understanding of that population.

This research design was contingent on the truth of the participants (Noblit, 2013) and the ability of this researcher to be cognizant of her positionality and the lens she brought to the data. This research would have greatly benefited from the voices and perspectives of people who were too fearful to participate. These perspectives would help in uncovering the reasons why some people may be hesitant or opposed to the disruption of heteronormativity in schools, as well as valuable ways that educators can encourage and work with others of differing viewpoints. This researcher tried to be attentive to detail and be clear about her purpose to ensure this study was valid and reliable.

To address some of these natural limitations, the researcher began each book club session by "checking in" with the participants. She shared themes she identified that appeared to be emerging from the data collected and through journal entries. This periodic checking allowed the researcher to process her understandings and enabled participants to validate or clarify any misperceptions. This periodic member checking helped the researcher address natural limitations of possible misinterpretations (Daiute, 2014).

The book club format allowed participants to share their knowledge and expertise and to provide insights in ways that transcend members' individual responses. These findings were valuable for documenting changes in beliefs, which led to teacher learning and the development of new views and perspectives about children with atypical gender behavior and families or colleagues who identify as LGBTQ, as well as the heteronormative culture of elementary school. Through this research design, teachers used their own voices and knowledge to reach an audience of their peers to initiate transformative change through the social culture of the book club and the Transformative Cultural Queer Theory framework.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' awareness of heteronormative culture within their elementary school settings. Participants shared their perspectives, beliefs and attitudes regarding a variety of topics dealing with heterosexism and cultural norms in a book club/focus group setting.

As explained in the previous chapter, this researcher used a Transformative Queer Cultural Theory (TQCT) for this study's framework. Cultural theory offered the researcher a lens that aligns with the classroom environment that routinely reproduces society's cultural norms. Children who do not conform to the patterns of expected gender behaviors stipulated by these norms are often labeled as "Other." Queering challenges individuals to question the binary systems of gender and sexuality that are socially constructed (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). To create an inclusive and safe environment in schools for children, staff, and families with atypical gender behavior and/or sexual orientation, educators and school leaders will need to embrace a queering approach to adopting curriculum, developing policies, and implementing practices of schools (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning provides educators a way to see these critical issues through a new lens that may lead them to confront the heteronormative culture within the schools. This research drew on a combination of queer, cultural, and transformative theory (TQCT) that allowed the researcher to use lenses that align appropriately.

The researcher used primarily to collect qualitative data and some quantitative data was collected for a descriptive statistics. These methods included pre- and post-book club

questionnaires, participants' journals, and book club discussions for data collection. The use of more than one method was valuable because it was a means to confirm results, to get a deeper understanding of perspectives based upon specific explanations, and to allow a fuller snapshot of the teachers' perceptions of schools' heteronormative climate.

The researcher collected qualitative data using a non-random and purposive sample of participants in a book club over a two-month period. These educators had the opportunity to reflect, share, and ideally broaden their own understandings in order to acquire new perspectives in regard to these topics. The inclusion of gay issues and topics of atypical gender behavior in the classroom remains a very controversial and stigmatized issue in American education, especially at the elementary level. Through this research methodology, participants were able to share their narratives and their experiences from their own lives and from student interactions in their schools. Teacher interactions with students, colleagues, and families provided opportunities for critical reflection on their own narratives while making connections to fellow participants' stories. "The power of narrative is not so much that it is about life but that it interacts in life" (Daiute, 2014, p. 2). This co-participation of the book club members fostered a climate of co-constructing new understandings and of reframing perspectives of participants collectively.

In this study, the researcher used questionnaires to gather quantitative data before the first book club session and again at the last meeting. The data documented participants' changes in knowledge about and attitudes towards the LGBTQ community. This chapter presents the results of the statistical procedures used to analyze the questionnaire responses and the analysis of the qualitative data gathered from conversations, journals, and field notes.

Research Questions and Context

This researcher presents and analyzes data in order to answer the following three research questions guiding and framing this study to better understand heteronormativity at the elementary school level:

1) To what extent are teachers aware of a heteronormative culture in the elementary school level?

    A. What are some indicators of heteronormativity that teachers are aware of in the elementary school level?

    B. How do teachers view consequences of heteronormativity in the elementary school level?

2) How, if at all, can educators grow in their understanding of heteronormativity in the elementary school level?

3) To what extent can educators help to disrupt heteronormativity in the elementary level?

Research Question 1

To what extent are teachers aware of a heteronormative culture at the elementary school level?

    A. What are some indicators of heteronormativity that teachers are aware of in the elementary school level?

    B. How do teachers view consequences of heteronormativity in the elementary school level?

Utilizing the book *Oddly Normal* (2013) by Schwartz as a stimulus for discussions, teachers in this study began to identify examples of heterosexism within this nonfiction story, within their own life experiences, and within their own school settings. None of the

participants were familiar with the term heteronormativity, but within the first session, they

began to share their awareness of indicators and consequences of this concept. One of the

teachers, Elaine, shared her thoughts about the main character in the book, Joseph, who

struggles with questioning his identity and orientation: "I never thought of these issues [that

Joseph encounters in elementary school] as a problem. Although sexuality is not necessarily

a problem, it clearly can cause problems in your life." Irene chimed in on the first book club

session: "Yes, this couple [Joseph's parents] was wonderful and supportive, but in our

society we don't talk about these things. It reminds me of when I was little … in my

neighborhood there was a friend who came out as gay. His parents kicked him out of the

house when he was only 13 years old." Within the first two book club meetings, it was clear

that the majority of the teachers began to develop an enhanced awareness of the

heteronormative culture within an elementary setting.

Throughout the sessions, all of the teachers acknowledged situations they had

overheard or encountered where they identified explicit heterosexism. For example, teachers

recognized how children want to classify peers in terms of gender—male or female. One

teacher, Shanna, remarked,

> There was a student in my school last year who I didn't really know, and one of my
> students asked me, "Is that kid a boy or girl?" I didn't know and I was worried I
> would make him or her sad if I asked. But I was aware that other students were
> always asking the same question about this student. It turns out she is a girl named
> Sophie, but she dresses in a typically masculine way. It was really interesting,
> though, at her 5th grade graduation she came wearing a dress and she announced, "I
> am not Sophie today."

The teachers were engaged in reflecting on situations they had encountered or overheard with

their students. Their awareness of the heteronormative culture within their schools was

amplified with their connections.

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As participants shared their stories, others made connections to their own experiences. The majority recognized that, through the book club, they were more conscious of comments, policies, and interactions that resulted in either overt heterosexism or policing of this topic. One teacher, Elaine, shared how she became aware of what she said to her own children:

> Kelsey, my daughter, asked me, "What is a tomboy? Is that when a girl acts like a boy?" I asked her where she had heard that, and she replied, "I remember hearing you say that, Mommy, when I was playing in the dirt." I realized I often say these things to my two daughters; Kelsey is my tomboy because she doesn't care about clothes, and Melissa is my Miss Prissy Girl.

The teacher laughed, apparently at herself, for using these heterosexist terms. Others commented that they had previously not been as cognizant of the heterosexist comments within their daily activities of the classroom and, when they did take note, were not always confident in addressing what was said.

Generally speaking, most of the participants began to identify the relationship of heteronormativity and harassment within their schools. Brie explained her new understanding:

> School is a social setting, a place to teach people how to socialize. I think the bullying comes from the things we don't talk about that we should. So if some kids ask why their classmate has two moms, it's very uncomfortable, but I guess that's the whole point, is dealing with the uncomfortable. We want to talk to kids about bullying and stop it, but it brings it back full circle, to how do we address these issues with kids and when is it okay?

She added even more fresh reflections after engaging in conversations in book club:

> You know people who are homophobic are allowed to speak out and we feel like we can't. When you [the researcher] asked, "Who sets the limits on what we can talk about?" I felt free. I said to myself, I could break these limitations. So I say, "Thank you" to you [the researcher].

Participants were making connections about how evading these topics of atypical gender behavior or homosexuality perpetuate harassment and bullying.

Within everyone's culture, people are shaped from the onset by social power. Actions and words are often constructed by these social influences without individuals even being aware. Foucault would agree: he clarified that norms are so embedded in society that they are beyond most people's perception, causing adults and children to police each other without any intentional coercion from others (do Mar Castro Varela et al., 2011). One teacher, Alex, remarked,

> I was thinking, we are so careful about policing these things and making it [sexuality] sanitary and shutting it down. I wish I were better at addressing it when this topic comes up. No one wants to deal with these taboo topics. For example look at that story about the boy in Raleigh that tried to commit suicide because everyone was teasing him for liking *My Little Pony*. And how did other schools handle this issue? They just wanted to blame the victim and hide the issue, like in Buncombe County where they told the boy he couldn't wear his backpack to school because it had— *My Little Pony* on it. That's how they want to solve the problem of homophobia by silencing the topic.

The heteronormative culture of schools silences and marginalizes students. Schools help to create and re-create the existing culture—beliefs and practices of the dominant culture that socially reproduce dominance, hegemony, and marginalization (Baker, 2002; Bickmore, 1999; Bristin, 2000: Meyer, 2010). The participants readily recognized examples whereby schools' very structures, procedures, and heteronormative policies are socially reproduced.

Throughout the book club sessions, teachers were able to identify numerous indicators of heteronormativity and their consequences within the elementary settings. Table 13 provides specific insights that participants shared throughout the book discussions, through reflections in their journals, and in reactions to *Oddly Normal* (Schwartz, 2012) and the documentary, *Valentine Road* (Cunningham, 2013).

Table 13

Teachers' Awareness of Indicators and Consequences of Heteronormativity at the Elementary Level

Indicators	Consequences
"In *Oddly Normal*, the parents tell Joseph, 'You can't play with Barbies.'"	"These parents edit his personality, but these feelings will come out in a negative way, and Joseph will learn to hate himself."
"I find myself thinking a lot about gender roles, heteronormativity and language."	"Every day I notice at least once something that divides children."
"I loved that chapter when Joseph talks about a Martian family. He says the Martian family will come and find him and says, 'Then I won't feel so alone.'"	"You know there are those Martian children out there that don't' feel like they belong."
"One of my student cries, 'But I'm not gay.'"	"I worry he is feeling internalized homophobia."
"Kids target and bully other kids like Michael Morones [who was harassed for his fondness of *My Little Pony* and tried to commit suicide]."	"I bet there is a higher rate of depression because these kids are picked on more in school."
"I hear teachers calling boys 'go-getters' and girls 'aggressive.'"	This language reinforces the notion of binary gender roles
"This boy in my class doesn't fit in with the other boys because of what he chooses to play at recess. He likes to play with other girls' hair."	"He is more isolated, and I wonder if he is more lonely and depressed."
Parents assume [that] because we read about bullying and LGBTQ students that we are talking about sex.	The notion that gay = sex is reinforced for students and perpetuates these misconceptions.
Topics dealing with gay themes or atypical gender behavior are not shared and are even avoided in the schools.	Students are excluded or harassed because teachers are afraid to overtly address the issues.
"Parents object to us bringing up topics surrounding the gay community because of their religion."	But teacher and students socially reproduce these norms, further reinforcing the topics as taboo.
"In Mexico, when I lived there, the boys were so cuddly. They would sit on each other's laps. That doesn't happen in our culture."	If boys behaved this way here, they would be teased and bullied.
Teachers stopping students' behavior that may be perceived as atypical gender behavior so they will not be made fun of (i.e., boys holding hands).	Educators send a message that this behavior is taboo and perpetuate heterosexism and homophobia.

Note: Table 13 includes direct quotes from the participants and statements that are a synthesis of conversations.

Participants on a Continuum of Action

According to Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook,* if teachers are to be intentional about social justice education, they need well thought out goals and plans of actions. To address the needs of all children within schools, including those who are traditionally marginalized (e.g., children with atypical gender performance), educators need to be able to confront issues of oppression. Adams, Bell, and Griffin proposed that people range from actively participating in oppression (e.g., using pejoratives) to confronting oppression (e.g., utilizing gay themes in curriculum).

Using Adams, Bell, and Griffin's (2007) scale for this study, the researcher identified three teachers—Roberta, Alex and Becca— as collective pseudonyms representing groups of participants regarding their awareness of and willingness or ability to take action to disrupt heteronormativity within the elementary school setting. The Action Continuum range identifies where people might fall in terms of being extremely oppressive, at the far left, to those who choose to confront oppression, on the far right. The researcher anticipated that, due to heteronormativity being a sensitive topic and the fact that participants were volunteers, few, if any, of the volunteers would fall on the far left, *Actively Participated (in oppression)*, of the continuum.   Through data analysis, the researcher identified and clustered groups of teachers who fit on the three distinct points as seen below, from *Awareness, no action—* Roberta's group—and *Awareness and action—*Alex's group—to outliers on the far end of the continuum, *Initiating and Preventing—*Becca's group. Figure 6 visually represents the relative locations of the representative figures on the continuum.

Action Continuum						
Actively Participating (Oppression)	Denying & Ignoring	Awareness No Action	Awareness & Action	Educating Self	Education & Leading others	Initiating & Preventing
Supporting Oppression						*Confronting Oppression*

Roberta   Alex   Becca
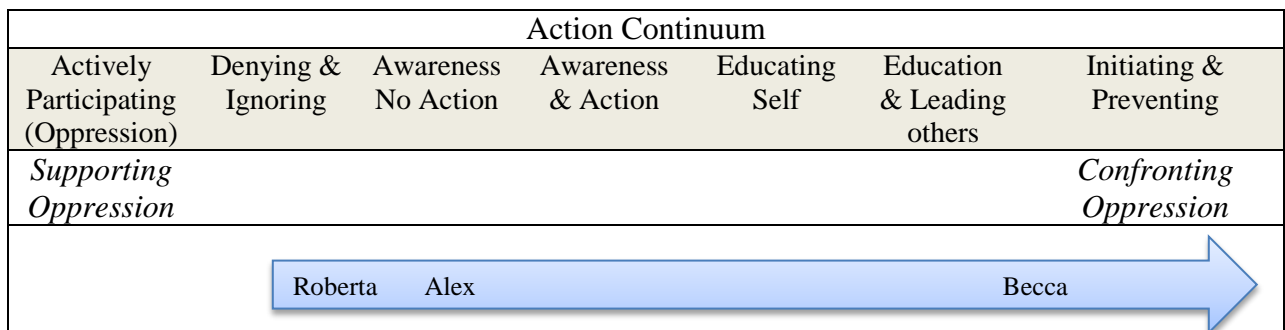
Figure 6. Action Continuum. This figure describes the range of possible responses to social injustice and the representative participants' relative location. Note: Adapted from Adams, M., Bell, L., & Griffin, P. (2007). *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook.* New York: Routledge (pp. 82-107).

Roberta represents 2 of the 10 participants (herself and Mika) who fall within the early stages of the continuum. They have some awareness of heterosexism but face obvious barriers that prevent them from initiating action to disrupt heteronormativity within their schools. Alex symbolizes 6 of the 10 teachers (herself, Elaine, Irene, Shanna, Loraine, and Brie) who are further along the continuum. These six educators' awareness was evident from early in the book club sessions, and they demonstrated significant growth in their understanding of heteronormativity and ideas of how to disrupt it. Several of these teachers either took action steps or were in the midst of planning ways to interrupt heterosexism within their classrooms. Becca represents 2 of the 10 study participants (herself and Alison) who were outliers. These two women were much further along the continuum, beginning at the far right. One had already begun and implemented well thought out plans to confront heteronormativity within her classroom and school setting, and the other was only small steps behind.

Roberta. Roberta represents 2 of the 10 participants (Roberta and Mika) who recognized a few heteronormative practices and dialogue within their school settings but were unsure of its influence. This group of teachers expressed reservations about addressing

this topic at the elementary level. Mika shared how it might be counterproductive to

acknowledge issues dealing with heterosexism:

> I don't think we can talk about these taboo topics in elementary school. Won't it make it worse? I'm not sure we should make a big deal of the issue. I think it is more valuable to address homophobia when it becomes a problem. It might hurt the person at the time, but they overcome it. I see no reason to address the issue beforehand. Maybe that is wrong. For example, I had a boy in my class last year that didn't behave like the other boys. He was free to be himself, and I didn't see any problems.

These two teachers were able to identify some of the indicators of heteronormativity but were

reluctant to acknowledge possible consequences that would warrant a need for them to

confront these sensitive topics.

It was even evident that Roberta felt a need to set parameters regarding other issues of

diversity to promote assimilation. She was unsettled by the idea of allowing students to not

conform to certain societal norms and shared her perception regarding certain religious

beliefs:

> I have a student in my class that doesn't celebrate holidays, but all of the 22 other children do. I think this child needs to know about other holidays, but am I supposed to tiptoe around this issue? I think this is dumb. Everybody celebrates holidays. I feel strongly that she is missing out because her family doesn't celebrate these occasions.

Roberta promoted assimilation and conformity within in her classroom setting. She was

more comfortable with the concept of cultural theory, in which shared beliefs and norms are

promoted and socially reproduced. She could not understand the need for questioning the

boundaries established by the dominant culture. The other teacher in this group, Mika, added:

> I think it is human nature to classify people into categories, male and female, or assume they are like us—heterosexual. We have done this throughout time. It's like a comfort thing. We want to think we are liked-minded. I don't think it is necessarily a judgment thing with everybody, but in your brain you put things into files or categories.

According to Meyer (2010) and Payne and Smith (2012), these set definitions of gender roles into binary constructs are at the root of LGBT student harassment.

Alex. Alex embodied characteristics similar to slightly over half of the teachers (6 of 10: Alex, Elaine, Irene, Shanna, Loraine, and Brie) who had a more heightened awareness of the consequences of the heteronormative cultures within their school settings. Alex was at ease discussing topics from the book and readily identified circumstances at school that were indicators of heteronormativity. It was evident in her questions and participation that she was trying to think through these issues and to learn how she might address them in her classroom or school. She shared:

> Even in kindergarten it starts. I had one little girl come up to me and say, "Zion is skipping, and he's not supposed to skip." I asked her why Zion was not supposed to skip, and she said her mom told her that boys don't skip. I had to laugh and told her clearly it was okay for boys to skip because Zion was doing it very well.

Another participant, Elaine, noted,

> As the kids come into kindergarten, one of our first assessment questions is, "Are you a girl or a boy?" And if they said it wrong, I guess from your perception or information on the child, it is counted as wrong. Is that right? These conversations we are having [in the book club] really make me stop and think.

There was awareness of not knowing how to approach topics presented at school:

> One day my colleague's partner came to school and someone asked me, "Who is this?" and I just said, "Oh well this is Anna." And they asked, "Well, who is she?" And I just replied, "Oh well it's just a friend of a teacher." I didn't know what to say, or how to say it. (Irene)

Alex commented on this teacher's story, "It's not about your reservations, it's about theirs, and you don't know what to do." Elaine agreed, adding:

> Kids don't understand why there is discrimination. All they know is what their parents say. I had a little boy in the beginning of the year that was crying, saying, "But I'm not gay, I'm not gay." And you know he had to have been influenced at home because he was that upset about being called gay.

Other participants in Alex's group also experienced confusion and anxiety about not knowing appropriate, affirming language associated with the concepts of heteronormativity versus cultural norms. One teacher, Brie, wrote in her journal:

> I find myself thinking a lot more about gender roles, heteronormativity and language. Every single day at least once, at school, I notice something that divides children based on perceived gender and reinforces the notion that kids should act a certain way based on the organs on their body. For example:
> *Rosters of classes with an even number of boys and girls
> *Pink and blue folders, names tags, cubbies, pencils
> *Calling boys "go-getters" and girls "aggressive"
> *Saving the bigger slice of pizza or the extra cupcake for a boy
> How does this division make our students feel? Obviously the list goes on.

It was unmistakable that through her reflections she was becoming more aware of the policies, procedures, and language of heterosexism that are ubiquitous within the school's walls. In one of her last entries, Shanna, another member of Alex's group, wrote, "I realize how much of what we do and say impacts children from day one." The teachers in Alex's group made numerous connections between heteronormative practices within the school and influences from outside sources, such as family members.

Loraine shared a personal story of how her increased awareness of heteronormativity, through the conversations in book club, influenced a discussion with her own elementary-age son after school:

> Yesterday we were driving home, and Chas [her son] was telling me about the civil rights movement that they had discussed in class. And I said, "Can you believe that used to be such a big issue?" And he said, "Yeah, it's crazy." And I said, "Think how people one day will look back on our time and think it is so crazy that gay people don't have the same rights as straight people. And he was like, "I just can't." It is so wonderful to see sometimes through eyes that have not been tainted.

This group of six participants recognized many of the heterosexist patterns within their schools. To confront heteronormative culture, educators need to engage in conversations that give them an opportunity to see these critical issues with a new lens through transformational

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learning. Mezirow (1997) explained that through reflection and active engagement with others people needed to question how they know what they know, which leads to change or transformation of perspectives.

Becca. Becca was one of two outliers, with Alison, in this group. Becca had confronted heteronormative practices within her classroom since she started teaching the year before. She described her style of teaching as facilitating a learning environment where students make connections. She embedded social justice concepts throughout the year and in many academic topics:

> You can't just talk about race during Black History Month. There is no such thing as one social justice issue because they are all interconnected. I work to help my students make these connections because they [issues of social justice] all relate. But I don't want to tell them, so I ask questions to help them make these connections themselves. That way, they own it. For example we were listening to the song, "Same Love" (Macklemore & Ryan, 2012), and there is a line in there that says, "We fear what we don't know." The kids were all like, "Yeah, that's just like with Black people and Latino people. White people were scared of them." They were coming up with the connections on their own.

Becca also shared a story of how her students' reactions illustrated the active influence of cultural theory within her room. When she presented *King and King* (de Haan, 2003—a story where a prince falls in love with a male page—she asked the students to make predictions using the title and cover illustration of two men looking at each other. As Becca listened to her students, she could hear how acceptable social norms framed their responses:

> The kids said things like, "The king is going to fight the other king to win the princess." They couldn't even imagine it might be about kings falling in love, which is what happens in this story. They are so preconditioned to the notion that men and women marry and live happily ever after. After we read and discussed the story, the kids were starting to have open dialogue about why being gay was acceptable and even started sharing names of relatives they knew who are gay. But then they quickly added, "But we can't share this story with our [younger] first grader reading buddies. That would be inappropriate."

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Even after these affirming conversations, the students sanctioned what was appropriate to say in school.

Arias (2009) explained that, although culture is abstract, it creates a powerful force shaping how people think, act and behave. This teacher was keenly aware of this impact on her students' perspectives and their decisions to regulate where and with whom these topics could be discussed. In her journal Becca reflected about her students' awareness and perceptions:

> It's amazing that an issue, after putting it in perspective, becomes so simple for children and yet so complicated for adults. One of my students wrote an essay on gay marriage. She put it in such simple terms. *People don't have rights.* How many times do we have to repeat history? How many Matthews [Shepard], Josephs [from *Oddly Normal*] and Michaels [Morones, *My Little Pony*] will suffer before we prioritize these basic rights? Starting with children is the only logical thing for our future. These children need to understand the simplicity of the issue before they are overwhelmed in the details of bigotry. As my student wrote in her essay, "Something must be done*."*

Becca's passion for social justice was distinct within her journal entries and animated participation at book club sessions. There was no doubt she would continue to be a leader on the far right of the Action Continuum to confront oppression.

A social justice leader is defined as a person who underscores moral values, justice, and equity and remains conscious about the impact of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability on schools and students' learning (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Shields (2004) agreed, stating that social justice leaders engage students in moral dialogue challenging existing beliefs and practices. Becca is, in the researcher's view, a social justice leader and undoubtedly has made ripples within her room that continue into the halls and into other classrooms. Transformative learning took place in this elementary classroom.

Alison, also an outlier, began to implement regular lessons introducing gay characters within in her classroom after our first book club session. She had shared the story *Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) in one of her small group lessons in her classroom. This tale is based on a true story about a penguin family living in New York City's Central Park Zoo. The two male penguins cuddle and share a nest like the other "straight" penguin couples, but they want to be parents. A zookeeper helps out by giving them an egg in need of nurturing. She described how kids reacted to the story:

> At first they didn't know how to react. They said things like, "Eww, two boys." But as I talked more and asked them more questions, they became more open to our discussions. One of my students said later, "Before, we really hadn't heard anything about gays and it seemed … well, weird. But now [that] we read these books and talked, it doesn't seem weird."

Alison shared, "I couldn't believe how the kids were so accepting of talking about these issues." As a result, she was becoming more at ease with finding ways to confront heteronormative practices through gay literature.

Through the evasion of topics (e.g., gay characters) and policing of gender behavior (e.g. boys skipping), heteronormative culture prevails in the discourse and policies of schools. From these conversations throughout the book club and the teachers' reactions to the documentary, it is evident that a vast majority of this group of teachers would agree with this statement. Through the design of the study's book club, the teachers interpreted the text and shared their perspectives along with the researcher. The multiple viewpoints to consider, discuss, compare, and learn from provided teachers with an opportunity to increase their understanding of the indicators of heteronormativity and the consequences of this oppressive culture within their elementary school settings.

Research Question 2

How, if at all, can educators grow in their understanding of heteronormativity in the

elementary school level?

The researcher designed this study to provide a learning experience, (i.e., through the book club) in which participants' active engagement might provide a catalyst for transformational change. The book club format established a means for participants to actively engage each other through conversations and reflections about "troubling" day-to-day dilemmas and observations from their classrooms. Being able to articulate their awareness led to growth in understanding and change in behaviors.

Mezirow (1997) explained that a crucial element of transformative learning is for individuals to examine their held beliefs and critically reflect on their assumptions and beliefs and then to consciously make and implement plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds. Transformational learning, according to Freire (1973) and Mezirow (1997), is consciousness raising that provides adults with an opportunity to see critical issues with a new lens. In this study, participants engaged in dialogue surrounding the controversial topic of heteronormativity in an elementary setting and then co-constructed new understandings of this social justice issue.

Through sharing their experiences and becoming more aware of the heteronormative culture within their schools, teachers began to identify and recognize the cultural norms that have an impact on students' choices and behaviors. Alison, from Alex's group, noted in her journal:

> To me, heteronormative conversations are more about talking about what "normal" even means and why we define this as normal, rather than enforcing a "you must think about it my way" perspective that marginalizes students' thought process.

The participants had developed an understanding of cultural theory. They acknowledged that for children who are nonconforming or for those questioning their gender or sexual orientation, a culture of heteronormativity could be harmful.

Time for dialogue and reflection led the teachers to new understandings or reframing of their perceptions and actually "troubling their knowledge" (Kumashiro, 2002). In one of the first book club sessions, Brie, stated, "I get frustrated because we are supposed to teach the kids not to offend, but how can we just say, 'Don't say gay.' And leave it at that? But there are limits on what we can say." In a later session she shared:

> After you [the researcher] asked us, "Who sets the limits on what we can talk about?" I went home and really thought about this question. I talked about it all week with my boyfriend. Who does set these limits? Are we just conditioned to believe there is someone controlling our words and actions? Are we putting the limits on ourselves?

Challenging the status quo is difficult for teachers, but this discomfort or troubling knowledge is what Kumashiro (2002) contended enables transformative change or learning. Mezirow and Taylor (2009) explained there are three dimensions to transformative learning: 1) changes in the individual's own views, 2) changes or reframing those beliefs, and 3) changes in the individual's actions. Building this new schema provided most of the participants the ability to understand and even use queer theory within their daily interactions. The teachers need to understand where they have come from and how their life experiences have shaped their thinking, assumptions, biases, and actions in order to undergo this type of transformative learning.

Through this growth, these individual teachers made connections between cultural and queer theory. This ability to move back and forth allowed them to reframe the cultural norms that they have been conditioned to incorporate into their expectations, dialogues, and actions. This new lens fostered a new way of thinking that challenges the status quo, which

pathologizes those who do not conform to constructed norms. Queering provided a process for understanding heteronormativity and helped teachers accept and include children who do not fit into socially constructed binary definitions of gender (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Cultural theory explains that most people, including teachers, are socialized into heteronormativity, while queer theory disrupts "norms" and confronts processes of "privileging and othering."

Becca shared an experience in her classroom that helped her make a connection to the concept of heterosexism that privileges and empowers those who conform and that isolates and marginalizes those who do not (like people who are not part of the dominant culture of the United States).

> I keep thinking about an article I shared with my class, about undocumented immigrants in the United States. You are going to experience internalized hatred if you are undocumented or gay, and I can't ignore it in my classroom because it is not addressed in schools, and the students are hearing it all the time. They hear: male is good and powerful, white is good and powerful, Christians are good and powerful, being straight is good and powerful. You don't have to say it explicitly because these kids hear and see it all the time. It [cultural norms] is a force that is present everywhere that we must interrupt.

Baby Steps

In Roberta's group, growth, though small, was unmistakable. In the first book club session, Roberta shared that one of her students had two mothers. She explicitly stated that she was concerned about discussing the two mothers, stating that raising this topic (i.e., lesbians) might "make it worse" by making the students aware of their classmate's atypical family. She continued by asserting, "I don't think it's an issue for the girl." By the fourth book club gathering, she began thinking out loud about approaching the topic. She seemed to ask rhetorically, "Which is better, to share or not to share about [the student's] two moms?" By the fifth book club session, Roberta acknowledged that she was considering a potential

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action step to support her student with two moms. She thought maybe she could start by sharing a story about different families in classroom. Roberta asked her fellow participants,

> I think there is part of me that wished my class could have a discussion about her daily life just so they will be exposed to it. I have a lot of questions about her life myself, like what does she do with one mom or the other? Do you [asking fellow participants] have any ideas how I might address this issue? I am not sure how to begin. What would you guys do in your classroom?

Laughing, in a supportive tone, Elaine responded, "It's [having two moms] pretty much the same. She has two parents. She wakes up, eats breakfast with her moms, and goes to school."

Roberta seemed to struggle, however, with this transition from a cultural theory perspective to queer theory. Roberta declared that she believed the defined roles of male and female were important for children and that this idea of allowing gender to be fluid or allowing children to explore their gender performance might take something away from their identity.

> It's like *Frozen* [children's movie, Disney, 2013] where the girls like girl things. I like being a girl and I want to be able to express that freely. What would happen if we take away those labels? Wouldn't that be confusing for the children and take away their identity? Are we doing more harm [to the students] when we use generic terms? How do we embrace who we are?

Roberta did not feel comfortable giving young children autonomy to explore their gender. She feared that if she affirmed and validated children who were nonconforming it would result in more confusion for them.

Marx argued that the ruling class consciously constructed the world and cultural norms to satisfy their needs (Smith & Riley, 2011). Roberta held on to cultural norms, as Marx described, to satisfy her personal needs. This participant did not develop an understanding that gender development is not linear but rather an evolving process that is fluid and multi-faceted. This very fluidity of gender identity is inherent in queer research

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(Levy & Johnson, 2011). Roberta was open and honest with her feelings and did acknowledge the need for addressing these issues of heteronormativity, but she struggled with her own biases and perceptions.

> I was thinking about Joseph from the book. When he "came out" at school, he went home and tried to commit suicide. I wonder if they [his parents] had helped him sooner, if it would have prevented his suicide attempt? But I am not a parent. I don't know what the right answer is, but should we talk about this issue with kids that young?

Roberta and Alison did demonstrate some growth in their understanding of heteronormativity by being open with their own truths and questioning others' views. By the end of the book club sessions, they began to challenge their own potential biases.

Leaps and Bounds

Alex's group seemed to show the most growth in terms of movement on the continuum, from understanding the impact of cultural theory to possibly using queer theory to promote curricular reform. In the first book club meeting, Alex shared many reservations about approaching any topic about the LGBTQ community or atypical gender behavior. She stated that teachers could not talk about these things in the classroom because of parents who believe in the Bible. "It's not like talking about race because that is not in the Bible, but homosexuality is and these parents think it's a sin." But she continued, "What about separation of church and state?" At the next book club session, Alex shared how she felt inspired by the previous conversation at the previous meeting. She had returned to her classroom and intentionally connected a lesson on civil rights movement of the '60s to gay rights movement now.

> Through these discussions I have become more comfortable approaching these conversations in my daily life and at school. I am more open to addressing statements students make in class, like "That sport is too rough for girls." I want to continue to find proactive ways to have these conversations in class.

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Alex was making more connections between book club discussions and how she as an advocate could address issues in her class. She stated, "We have to rise up, that's what we have to do."

Participants reacted to the teachers from *Oddly Normal* who had difficulty with Joseph's atypical gender behavior. Elaine shared, "I feel angry at people in education for not being smarter in their words and actions. It is an embarrassment to everyone in our profession." In her journal, Alex wrote about hopes for systemic change within the school:

> There has to be a paradigm shift in the school system. We have to realize something is wrong. I have become a lot more aware of the gender roles we assume unconsciously because of the heteronormative rules we embrace since early childhood.

Brie shared her newfound insight about addressing and confronting heteronormative practices:

> This book club motivated me more. It made me question my role in addressing this topic. I always felt I was willing to confront all issues, but in regards to this topic I realized it was only in a quiet way. There is an expectation that this topic is "hush." I was brainstorming with a colleague of how I could better address this issue in school, but I realized the strategies we were discussing were all "sugar coated." And I just knew this was wrong. It's like pretending the issue of gender and orientation can fit under a big umbrella of diversity and then we don't have to specify what the topic is. But how do kids know what we are saying if we conceal it this way. No, we have to be overt and specific about dealing with and confronting heterosexism.

Brie described a recent situation with a colleague while discussing another teacher at her school. She wrote about how disappointed she was when one of the teachers asked her, "Is that teacher, uh 'you know'?'' She was implying that he might be gay. Brie stated that her whole view of this teacher changed. She lost the respect for her that she formally possessed. Brie asserted, "I don't want to miss any of these opportunities but rather initiate dialogue that

helps others see their own prejudices." The teachers' statements reflected their own growth in their awareness of heterosexism within the school setting.

The teachers within Alex's group discussed some significant ways they grew in terms of understanding heteronormativity. They talked about ways to address issues of heteronormativity and of feeling freer to take action. These teachers became keenly aware that taking steps to address heterosexism was their social responsibility as educators of children.

Steady Progress

Becca and Alison, the outliers, moved the least due to the fact that they were already at the far end of Adams, Bell, and Griffin's (2007) Action Continuum. But since the book club initiation, they considered more action steps to use queer theory in their approach within the classroom and to address this social justice issue of heterosexism. It was evident they were making ripples throughout their schools through the transformative learning within the classroom that spread from peer to peer (and ideally student to teacher). Becca proudly described:

> My students confront their peers when they say, "that's so gay." They started a petition that hangs outside our room asking other students to pledge not to use these words. I think we are up to over a hundred signatures. I can see how my kids really challenge heterosexist assumptions now while making connections to other historical fights for social justice. I am so proud of them.

The action steps these teachers described demonstrated their commitment to initiating and confronting oppression within their elementary settings.

Becca and Alison had established classroom environments that questioned the status quo and expected their students to be multi-dimensional and fluid in their thinking. Alison asked, "If we are cautious, aren't we just perpetuating the problem? Like when we don't talk

about race, and segregation is the result." After the last book club meeting, Becca reflected in

her journal about ways in which she felt she had grown over the past two months:

> I used to isolate this topic [gay themed topics] previously, but now, since joining this book club, I incorporate it as much as I can. The kids bring it up themselves and make connections to other things we are studying. They compare how Harvey Milk is like Martin Luther King. I push the limits more and more, and even though there were repercussions [parental concerns], the [harmful] consequences [for children] of doing nothing are a worse scenario than this negative attention from administration and families. We must support our children. This book empowered me, and I felt stronger with each meeting. It made me feel better being with other teachers and talking about these issues because I was no longer the only one who acknowledged this problem of silence. Just like any activist, it is harder to stand alone; so being in this group gave me a sense of empowerment. I didn't think about this much before, but I realized that "these limits" come from within us. It's easy to see our children's ignorance and place blame on something or someone else. I had thought previously that I helped my kids learn about this issue because it's important to me. But I decided that it is a teacher's job, whether or not it is important to them personally, to help their students learn about heteronormativity and the negative impact it has on our culture.

The researcher in her initial analysis of data had questioned how much the group Becca

represented had grown in terms of confronting heteronormativity, considering that these

teachers began on the far left of the Action Continuum. Becca's journal entry, however,

revealed her own transformation through this book club experience.

> Alison also had some final thoughts in her journal after the book club sessions:

> When I was reflecting, something that stuck out for me is the significance of understanding more about vertical or horizontal identity that we discussed in book club. Many (if not all) our students who question their gender or orientation do not have this (vertical) connection/identity with their parents. Likely most, if not all, of these kids have straight parents. They don't have the support they need as opposed to other minorities. For example African American children likely have parents that identify with them because they are the same race. This made me realize how isolated these children [who do not fit conventional gender roles] can feel even from something as simple as a gender specific word. This pushed me to reach out to my kids who do not conform to society's norms and make sure they always have my support.

Becca and Alison both demonstrated through their reflections and to a lesser extent on the

questionnaires that they had grown in their understanding of heteronormativity through this

experience. Even though both had been on the far right end of the Action Continuum, they continued to reflect and learn from the other participants.

In Figure 7, the movement from left to right that these participants made on the Action Continuum is represented by Roberta, Alex and Becca. The comments are indicative of statements made at earlier book sessions and statements at later meetings. The arrows represent the researcher's analysis of the amount of growth each group made in terms of awareness of heteronormative indicators and consequences and action steps discussed or achieved in the two months.

Continuum						
Actively Participating (Oppression)	Denying Ignoring	Awareness No Action	Awareness & Action	Educating Self	Education & Leading Others	Initiating & Preventing
Supporting Oppression						*Confronting Oppression*

Roberta →

Becca →

Yeah, I just wonder if I should bring it up [her student had 2 moms]. Will this make it more of a problem?

I need suggestions on how I can start these conversations about different families with my class. I am uncomfortable with this topic.

Some of the students are researching gay rights leaders have made petitions to stop saying, "that's so gay."

Alex →

Yeah, but you can't talk about "it."

After last week, I felt empowered, so I had a class discussion on gay rights.
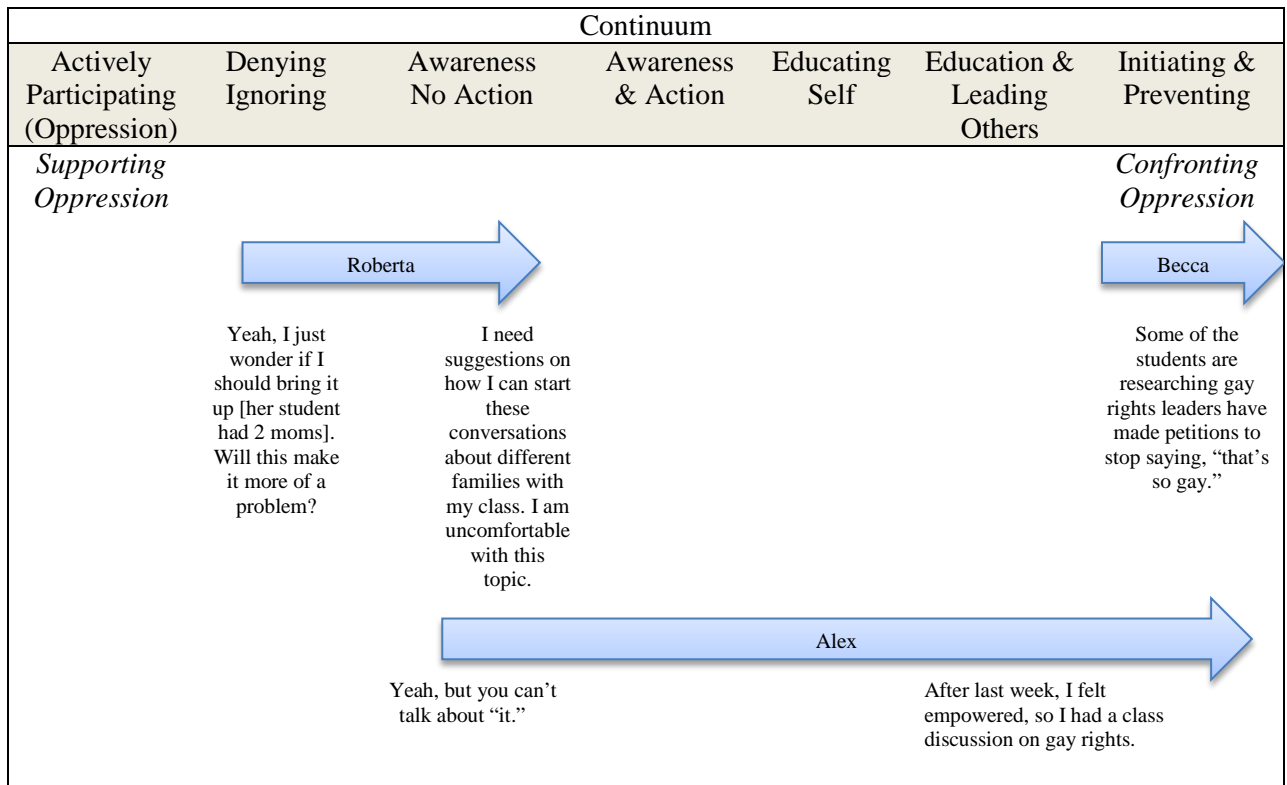
Figure 7. Movement on the Action Continuum. Participants' movement on the continuum indicates growth in regards to addressing heteronormativity. Note: Adapted from Adams, M., Bell, L., & Griffin, P. (2007). *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook.* New York: Routledge (pp. 82-107).

Quantitative Data

The quantitative findings are in agreement with the analysis of the qualitative data. Positive changes in teachers' attitudes were found in all the teachers. In addition, this data indicated an increase in the participants' knowledge of the LGBTQ community.

The first questionnaire, *Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire* (AHQ), consisted of 20 statements regarding homosexuals, their lifestyle, and their social position. The questionnaire responses ranged from 1 (*I agree*) to 5 (*I disagree*) in a Likert-type scale. The researcher analyzed each item individually and by the total score on this scale. The total possible score is 100, with a lower score indicating a more positive attitude and a higher score equating to more negative feelings. A score of 20 indicates the most positive attitude toward homosexuals.
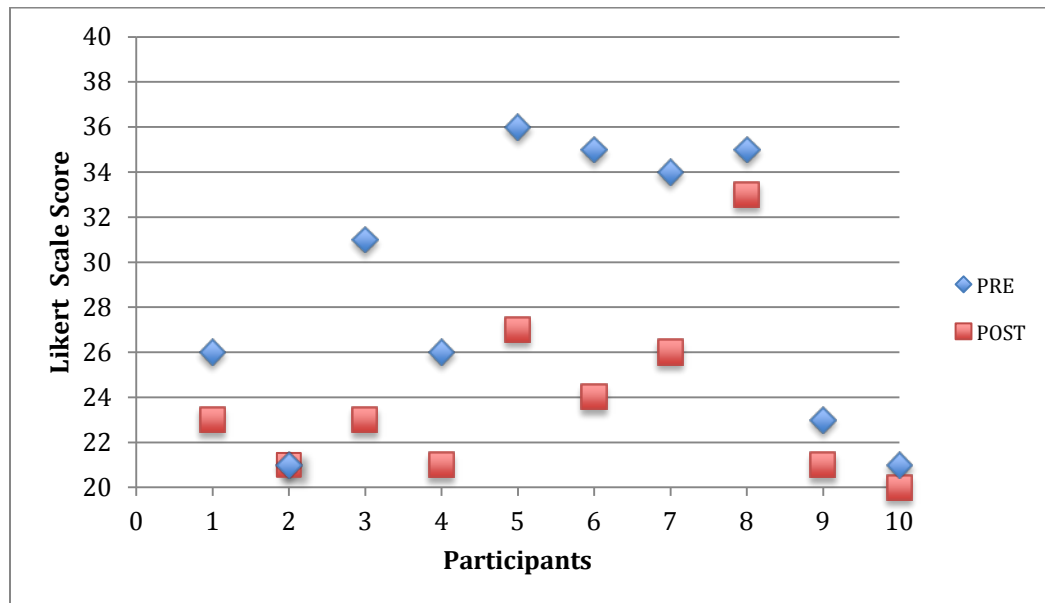

Figure 8. Participant Results from *Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire*. This figure shows pre and post book club results.

Figure 8 presents the descriptive statistics for the participants' scores on the *Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire* and the change results. The average score on the questionnaire pre-book club was 28.8 and post-book club was 23.9. The change result

was 4.9. For the overall score, the average change result for participants was -5.3. Ninety

percent of the participants (all but participant # 2 who remained the same) scored lower on

this questionnaire, indicating a more positive attitude post-book club towards the LGBTQ

community. Findings presented in Table 14 give details of individuals' pre- and post- scores

on the *Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire* and the change results.

Table 14 indicates the change in attitudes of participants towards homosexuals before

and after the book club sessions.

Table 14
Change Difference for Participants in Attitudes towards Homosexuals

Participant	Pre	Post	Change
1) Shanna	26	23	-3
2) Alison	21	21	0
3) Irene	43	31	-12
4) Elaine	26	21	-5
5) Roberta	36	27	-9
6) Alex	35	24	-11
7) Loraine	34	26	-8
8) Mika	35	33	-2
9) Brie	23	21	-2
10) Becca	21	20	-1
Average	28.8	23.9	-5.3

Roberta and Mika, although they began the Action Continuum at relatively the same spot,

showed a big difference in their attitudes towards homosexuals. Where Mika was below the

average change, at -2, Roberta's change was -9, demonstrating a more positive attitude.

On the second questionnaire, however, Mika showed a dramatic change. On this

questionnaire, *The Sex Education and Knowledge about Homosexuality Questionnaire*

(SEKHQ), book club participants expressed their opinion on the validity of various

statements. The questionnaire contained options for "right," "wrong," and "I don't know," in

order to achieve a more precise evaluation of knowledge and to avoid the possibility of false

correct/incorrect answers. The SEKHQ score ranged from 0-32, where 32 represented the score with all correct answers. In this study's statistical analysis, the researcher calculated only the number of correct answers and she scored the "I don't know" responses as wrong.
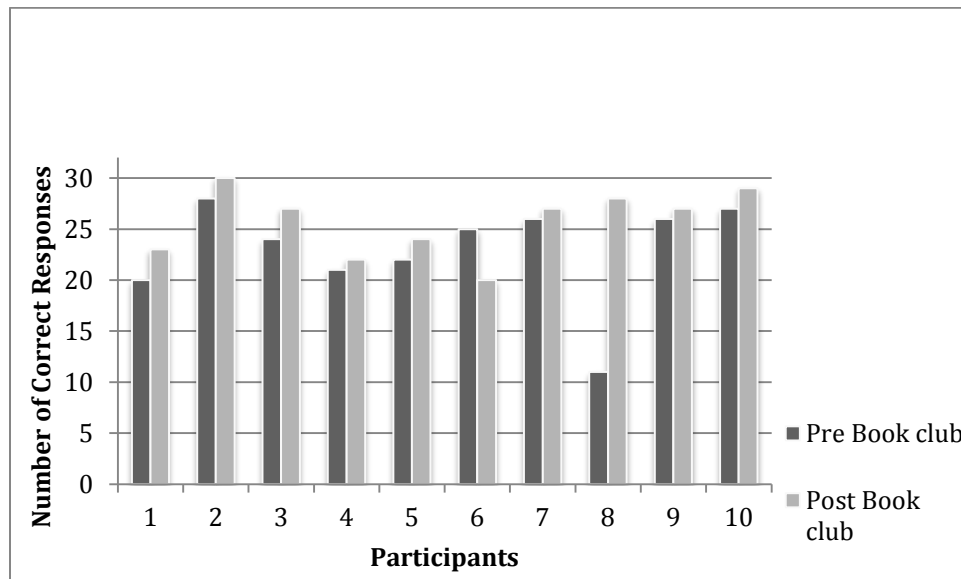
Figure 9. Participant Scores on *The Sex Education and Knowledge about Homosexuality Questionnaire*. This figure reveals the change in participants' knowledge about homosexuality after the book club.

As Figure 9 indicates, the teachers' scores on *The Sex Education and Knowledge about Homosexuality Questionnaire* indicate an increased knowledge about homosexuality after the book club. The average correct score for the group pre-book club was 21, or 65.6 %. After the book club concluded, the average correct score was 25.7 or 80%, with a change result of 4.7. On average, participants increased their knowledge about homosexuality 15%. Ninety percent of the participants scored higher on this questionnaire, indicating that post-book club participants gained more knowledge about the LGBTQ community.

Table 15 indicates the change difference pre- and post- book club sessions for each participant and the average change for the group in terms of their knowledge about homosexuality. All but one of the teachers within this study demonstrated growth on their understanding of heteronormativity. From the stories they shared and through their own

personal encounters, all but one acknowledged a deeper sensitivity to how cultural norms influence humans' perceptions of what is considered acceptable or taboo. The quantitative data reinforced this finding, showing a range of changes in attitudes and knowledge toward homosexuality.

Table 15
Change Difference for Participants' Knowledge about Homosexuals

Participant	Pre	Post	Change
1) Shanna	20	23	+3
2) Alison	28	30	+2
3) Irene	24	27	+3
4) Elaine	21	22	+1
5) Roberta	22	24	+2
6) Alex	25	20	-5
7) Loraine	26	27	+1
8) Mika	11	28	+17
9) Brie	26	27	+1
10) Becca	27	29	+2
Average	21	25.7	+2.7

The one exception to the growth in terms of knowledge about the homosexual community, as demonstrated by the questionnaire, was Alex. She moved from a score of 25 to a 20 indicating less knowledge about homosexuality. The researcher can only speculate as to why this participant actually had a lower score. Could questioning her own beliefs and judgments have led her to this lower score? Could the significant change in her score be an indication that, after further introspection, the participant felt unsure of her original answers or that she had only guessed at answers on the original questionnaire?

Mika had the most significant increase of knowledge, with a change of +17 points. Mika indicated on her first questionnaire that she did not know the answers to many of the questions, where other participants may have guessed true or false. Mika's increase in knowledge ideally led her to a better understanding of this community and a greater sense of acceptance.

Mika shared early on in one of the book clubs sessions,

> One of the best things we can do as teachers is teach our kids that different is not bad. I picked that up from somewhere, maybe my parents or friends. But many people think different is bad, and as humans we seem to be afraid of the unknown. Learning about others is a key to helping our kids become more accepting.

Advocating dialogue regarding differences, rather than imposing some set of shared norms, allows a culture that not only embraces LGBTQ families, staff, and children but also supports a climate of inclusiveness to a myriad of identities. Queer theoretical insights challenge researchers to question the socially constructed norms of sexuality and gender (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). Through these kinds of conversations, the participants increased their knowledge and understanding of the LGBTQ community, which enabled them to view sex and gender norms with a new lens. These educators have begun this journey through new awareness, and transformative change reframed their beliefs, attitudes, and understandings. In addition, they made connections between queer theory and cultural theory and formulated ideas of how they can best address possible action steps within their schools.

The teachers described through their stories how children also needed support in helping change attitudes and acquire new understandings. One of the teachers, Alison, commented,

> When I opened up our conversation about civil rights, the kids were shocked when I used the word "gay." I realized that I needed to help them with becoming acclimated to these terms that have always been considered taboo.

Loraine added her views regarding a balance between the dominant norms of society, described by cultural theory, and interrupting heteronormativity within the classroom:

> Parents have their own viewpoints too, whether it is because that is the way they were raised or their belief in the Bible. We have to respect that, even if it is wrong or you think it's wrong. It works both ways. If I don't respect them, how do I expect them to respect me?

These teachers demonstrated an understanding of the need to remain fluid as children and families address these issues of heteronormativity. As educators began to confront heterosexism within their classrooms and school, it was evident they were utilizing their new understanding of how cultural theory constructs norms while queer theory deconstructs and questions those norms created by the dominant culture. It was unmistakable that the teachers were trying to learn how to move between queer and cultural theory to support their students while finding ways to respect and not antagonize families.

Queer theory challenges researchers to rethink their ways of defining sex, gender, and sexuality (Blasius, 2001; Valocchi, 2005), and cultural theory is based in the belief that cultural norms are constructed through our ongoing social interactions (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). The majority of these teachers were beginning to or had already fully embraced this notion that there need to be changes within their classrooms and their schools to fully include all the children within their school settings. These participants, through transformative learning, had become aware of how society's norms had restricted their own views as well as their students' perspectives. The teachers were acknowledging that, by deconstructing these norms and allowing a more fluid way of thinking, the classroom environments could be more inclusive.

In Table 16, the researcher shares teachers' views and stories, illustrating their awareness of the power of cultural theory and how queer theory can reframe their perspectives.

Table 16

Cultural and Queer Theory, Processes and Outcomes

	Cultural Theory	Participant's Awareness	Queer Theory	Participant's Awareness
Process	Social construction of norms	*"I struggle in my kindergarten class. The boys like the boys, and the girls like the girls. They want to hold each other's hands. But I don't know what to do, so I just say 'no one can hold anyone's hand.'"*	Deconstruction of socially constructed norms	*"I explained to my kindergarteners [that] boys can and do skip."*
Process	More fixed and confined than fluid	*"My 5th graders say to me, 'Help me find a girl book' or 'Girls can't play rough sports.'"*	More fluid and multidimensional than fixed	*"I look at gender on a continuum, a spectrum. I liked to climb the trees with my brothers."*
Process	More covert and implicit than overt	*"We love covering up uncomfortable situations. But do you think it causes more of an issue to bring it [gay issues] up?"*	More overt and explicit than covert	*"Maybe when we bring up these issues [i.e., two moms] in our classroom, we create familiarity and comfort. Like when you go to a new country and see McDonalds."*
Process	More exclusive than inclusive	*"But don't the boys need that bond to say 'ewww, girls'?"*	More inclusive than exclusive	*My student said, "I think it's so crazy that gay people don't have the same right as straight people." I was like, "yeah!"*
Process	Hierarchical structure in the classroom (the teacher all knowing)	*"But it might make it worse—to not label kids boys and girls? I think as a teacher I would deny them their identity."*	Critical thinking is valued to question status quo	*"People say they don't see color, but who does that benefit when we don't celebrate differences but try to ignore them?"*

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Outcome	Produces context of shared values, beliefs, behaviors	*"I think we create categories and classify people. We have always done this throughout time, people are more comfortable with those like-minded."*	Questions context of shared values, beliefs, behaviors	*"It reminds me of the single sex classes. The research makes sense, but now being in this book club it makes me question this concept of gender. Are we assigning gender or allowing people to choose?"*
Outcome	Fosters acceptable sense of identity, comfort, community	*"Like when you are younger, you are not thinking in sexuality terms."*	Contradicts assumptions of identity, comfort, community	*"I find myself complaining after the fact [of hearing homophobic comments]. I want to change and be part of the dialogue—not the silence surrounding these 'uncomfortable' topics."*
Outcome	Claims stance of power and control, dominant culture	*When my family [2 moms] went through customs and filed a 'family card,' the woman stopped us and asked, "How are you a family?" I wanted to cry. She directed, 'No, redo it.'*	Challenges current notions of heterosexism	*"I felt empowered after our last book club, and I told the kids that gay people are now fighting for their rights."*
Outcome	Defines binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality; oversimplifies identity into discrete categories	*"This sounds naïve, but I love being woman. I was raised to be proud to be a woman. Tons of little girls want to do girlie things."*	Disrupts binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality; allows the term *queer* to represent the range of identities	*"After reading an article on using the terms 'boys and girls,' I say to my students, 'Whoever needs the girl bathroom, go.' They seemed confused, but I'm trying."*

Outcome	Promotes assimilation, which enables individuals to gain access and citizenship and privileges heterosexuality	*"In the documentary, Lawrence is blamed, stating he shouldn't have worn make-up to school. 'He brought it [killing] on himself.' This is like blaming the rape victim. Where are Lawrence's rights?"*	Avows individuals the freedom to name themselves as a crucial component of agency and citizenship	*Wouldn't it be great if just like the Mexican tradition of* Quinceañera, *you had a day as a gay person to just come out and announce you are gay?"*
Outcome	Sets parameters for curriculum standards	*"I have a student with 2 moms. I wonder if I should bring it up in class, or is it better not to share?"*	Disrupts current paradigms and frameworks in educational settings	*"I read* The King and King, *and the kids started writing their own books:* The Prince and Prince. *Yep, two princes falling in love."*

These participants moved from little to no awareness of heteronormativity to acknowledging, questioning, challenging, and confronting these constructed norms. By using queering practices within the school, teachers enable children who have atypical gender performance or are LGBTQ (or are perceived to be) to feel included and safe within their school environment (Greytak et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2008; Russell & McGuire, 2008). Queer theory can support teachers in questioning norms constructed by the dominant culture that place students who violate gender norms at risk for victimization. With this understanding, teachers will be able to develop a culture within their classrooms where it is an expectation to intervene and confront heterosexism and challenge anyone who makes assumptions about gender roles. The first step in transformative learning is for educators to become aware of how cultural theory plays a powerful role in how society sanctions what is good and what is taboo. By maintaining these norms, teachers put children who do not conform to those norms at risk of being harassed, oppressed, and marginalized within the

classroom. Educators can learn about the complexities of identities from queer theory and that labels have a damaging impact on children that continues well into their adulthood (Morris, 2000).

Research Question 3

To what extent can educators help to disrupt heteronormativity in the elementary level?

Sound of Silence

Roberta seemed to be working through her own biases and misconceptions. It was evident, however, that she was very uncomfortable with approaching the topic of same-sex parents in her classroom. She shared that she had known a colleague who had gotten in trouble for speaking about a political issue. She stated, "We just have to be careful what we say." When she shared that she was aware that one of her students had two moms, she was adamant this was not an issue for the girl in her class. She did not believe any of the student's classmates were aware of the two moms. Instead, this teacher believed that because the girl was adopted she might feel excluded at times in the classroom. Roberta did not seem to consider that, because of her avoidance of the topic, her student was taking cues from her not to acknowledge the fact in class.

By the fourth book club session, however, Roberta had a new perspective. She shared:

> I think it would be good for kids to be exposed to books about healthy blended families. I think there are hurdles for children when there is adoption or homosexuality involved. Just if one kid asked Joseph [from *Oddly Normal*] about why he had his party at Build-a-Bear, it might have changed their prejudices. How do you know when to address things that could draw attention to the child?

Roberta and Mika did not appear to be ready to take action. Roberta still questioned if bringing up the topic and disrupting the "silence" would be more of an issue—"draw

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attention" and have a negative result. She asked, "Would this make it worse?" One of her final statements in book club, however, was, "I think people are allowed to have their personal beliefs, but regardless you have a social responsibility. You have chosen a profession where all kids need love and attention, and we have to accept anyone who comes in the building." Roberta and Mika talked through ideas of how to disrupt heteronormativity but were still hindered by their own internal conflicts and fears of confronting the status quo.

Teetering on the Brink of Action

Some participants shared how they were ready to take steps to confront and disrupt the heteronormative environment at their schools. This movement and reframing of teachers' views demonstrated transformative learning as they made a paradigm shift in their understanding of how cultural theory can at times be confining and queer theory can be fluid and inclusive. One of the teachers, Alex, shared,

> After we met last time, I felt empowered. In my class we had been reading *The Green Book*. It's a story about the travel guide used during the Jim Crow era that listed lodgings, restaurants, gas stations, and other businesses that welcomed African American clients. I decided I would tell the kids, "You know there are still issues of civil rights for people who are gay. They can't get married." The kids were stunned. They were not used to hearing the word "gay."   But it was interesting to see some of the students' reactions. Previously I had wondered about one girl in my class. She prefers to hang out with the boys in our class, and I thought she might be questioning her orientation. But during this class discussion she seemed enthralled and really perked up when we began to discuss gay marriage.

Alex had the courage to introduce the issue of gay rights in her classroom and seemed delighted to see a student make a positive connection. Brie also shared how she planned to return to her school and initiate more conversations about heteronormativity with her colleagues.

> I am the kind of person who always tries to challenge myself to see the other side of an argument or viewpoint. But in this situation, being hush hush on this topic [heterosexism], I can't see the other side. I want to help others understand this now. I

know I can't go in yelling and screaming my mission. There is a difference to being aggressive and being assertive in your approach. These conversations I need to have with co-workers are terrifying especially when you are not in a position of power. I know these exchanges make some people uncomfortable and often we don't want to cross that line. But this is what we ask of our kids; "Be brave, try" and we need to ask it of ourselves in order to promote equity for all our students.

Brie was ready to address her colleagues to help end this silence regarding issues of gender, sexuality and heterosexism.

Shanna described holistic approaches to creating safer classrooms. In general she described how she hoped to continue to foster an environment where topics came up organically and provided an open door for teachers to address. Shanna commented at one of the last book club sessions, "I want things to change. I want adults to be different in 10 to 15 years. The only way I can do this is to start with these children." Another teacher, Alex, wrote in her journal:

I believe that our job as teachers is to teach children how to think. In my classroom, this is often me presenting an alternative view to the "normal" view expressed by my students. This allows the students to learn about differences and diversity. Isn't that our job? I believe that we are obligated to empower students.

Alex was ready to disrupt more issues within her classroom and school. She asked the other participants for ideas of lessons or materials that she could use in her room. She was ready to introduce books with gay characters and to learn how to queer her curriculum.

Three of these six teachers were either taking initial action steps within their schools while the other three were discussing strategies they hoped to employ to disrupt the heteronormative culture. They were moving along the Action Continuum, steps behind Becca and Alison.

Ripple Effect

Becca and Alison, the outliers, used a cycle of transformative thinking and learning within their classrooms. Not only did the students in Becca's fourth grade learn to share their views and to reflect and discuss openly this controversial topic, but this "questioning" made waves throughout the school. Students were standing up to other students who used the pejorative "that's so gay."

One of the teachers most to the right on the continuum, Becca, shared that she had encountered only one situation where she had negative feedback from families. One family had approached the principal directly regarding their son in the class and expressed concern about the topics surrounding gender and harassment of LGBTQ students. They stated, "We have just helped him [their son] get his gender straightened out." She had shown these books to parents at conferences, but no one had protested. She bragged about her students who were addressing peers from other classes who made homophobic comments. She overheard them share with peers their own newly formed views that "There's nothing wrong with being gay." Becca was pleased and proud; believing the power of peers sharing these views would spread and expand her *ripple*.

Alison explained that she too had begun to really think about her choice of words in the classroom. She shared that she had one student in her class who was definitely questioning her gender:

> In terms of gender, I used to call my students, *ladies* and *gentlemen*. Then we discussed that article from *Teaching Tolerance* that someone shared in one of the initial book club meetings, and I tried calling them *people*. I felt this new word usage was especially important since a girl in my class changes her identity daily. One day she's a girl, the next a boy—that's what she tells me. I, also, have started calling them *penguins*. They loved the book *And Tango Makes Three* so much, and they wanted to be called penguins.

The visual representation in Figure 10 of Becca and Alison's teaching style is a

transformative model of teaching. The image of a cycle is natural, as each step they chose

provided a flow. They shared these holistic steps to facilitating a classroom of

transformative learning. Building a classroom that is inclusive and safe provides children

with a culture where a teacher can introduce "troubling knowledge." These teachers set up

the expectation that children question the status quo, which leads them to transformation and

acceptance of diverse perspectives and cultures.
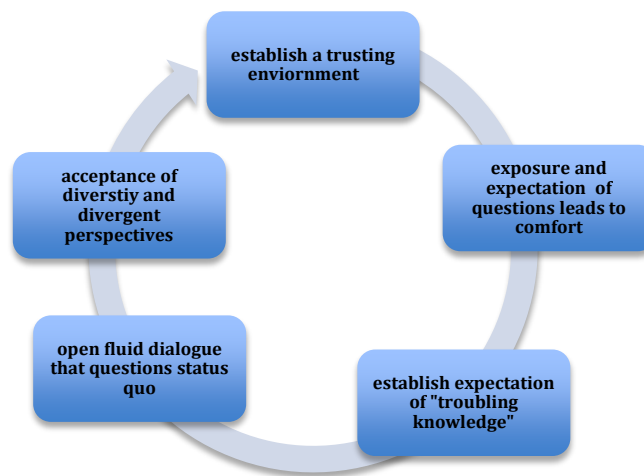
Figure 10. Transformative Learning Model in the Classroom. Teachers created a culture of transformative learning in their classroom.

Becca and Alison were on the far right of the Action Continuum. They were initiating and

preventing oppression within their schools. These educators were social justice leaders,

disrupting heteronormativity within their classrooms. Their students' transformative learning

fostered a climate of acceptance and new ways of thinking, which led these students to begin

confronting their peers in the halls of their schools. These two teacher leaders were breaking

the silence on LBGTQ issues and were leading for systemic change.

Action Steps

Teachers' provided several suggestions and ideas of how to begin to disrupt

heteronormativity at the elementary classroom as seen in Table 17.

Table 17
Teachers' Suggestions to Disrupt Heteronormativity

Teachers' Ideas	Processes	Outcomes
In this profession, [teachers] are socially responsible to accept everyone that comes into our schools.	More inclusive	Sharing literature about diverse families, including two moms or two dads; helping students to contradict assumptions
We need to address statements such as "The pink milk is for girls." We can't be silent or ignore when kids say these things. It sends a message when we are silent.	Deconstruction of socially constructed norms	Challenges current notions of heterosexism by confronting heteronormative language
We need the media center and school leaders to purchase more books with gay characters.	More inclusive than exclusive	Reading queer literature, books with gay characters; affirms students sense of belonging
If our school leaders and parents could support us within the classroom to allow discussions on gay rights, I believe our students would be open to these topics.	Critical thinking that challenges status quo	Allowing "uncomfortable" conversations to grow within the classroom, creating troubling knowledge that questions status quo
We need to look within our own schools and see how we can advocate for change. In my school the forms we send home ask [about] "mother & father."	More fluid and multidimensional than fixed	Identify forms within schools that have binary gender categories and seek ways to disrupt current school policies that foster heterosexism
If we model for kids how to talk openly, it [fluid gender performance] wouldn't seem like such a mystery. If just one kid had asked Joseph [in Oddly Normal*], why he had a "Build-a-Bear" party, it might have changed the results.*	Deconstruction of socially constructed norms	Models questioning status quo and builds empathy and understanding in children
You have to talk with the kids about how different is not weird. Like Dia de los Muertos*: they say, "That's weird," and I say, "No, it's not; it is celebrating death in a different way."*	Critical thinking the challenges status quo	Multicultural competence, building classroom environments of acceptance and appreciation for diversity rather than "othering"

Six of the ten teachers shared action steps they had taken or planned to take in their classrooms to begin to disrupt heteronormativity. These actions ranged from responding to heteronormative comments to leading research projects with their students about gay rights. Two participants introduced conversations about gay rights in their classrooms, and one teacher was planning a discussion about diverse families (i.e., two moms or two dads). Although these educators shared their concerns and fears, they had clear ideas of how others can and should take action to address these issues of heterosexism with the elementary setting

Although these participants were at different points along the Action Continuum and not all immediately ready to initiate action, each of them expressed the desire to disrupt the heteronormative culture within their elementary settings. The majority of the participants reflected an enhanced sense of themselves as change agents as they shared ideas of what processes needed to be in place to begin and to continue to disrupt the heteronormative culture.

Barriers

Moving beyond the atmosphere within a specific school, participants addressed a common theme: the need for a supportive school culture. The majority of the group voiced at one time or another their desire to take action to confront heteronormativity and antigay harassment, but they felt there were many barriers. The data collected for this study indicates parental concerns, personal beliefs, and a lack of training and resources. The existing heterosexist school climate, lack of training on LGBT issues, personal discomfort, and fear of parental and community opposition to displays of support are also obstacles to confronting heteronormative issues.

The teachers expressed feeling constrained by lack of outside (i.e., principals', colleagues') support. This feeling of being alone became an internal barrier of apprehension. One participant commented, "You do need an organization or a group behind you, feeling like they have your back. We can provide a safe environment and challenge others to grow in this understanding of heteronormativity." This fear immobilized and had previously prevented the majority of the teachers from taking action steps. They assumed there would be backlash from their leaders, parents and community members if they overtly addressed these topics of gay rights, gay parents, or books with LGBTQ characters. Because topics surrounding gender and sexuality are taboo, the teachers were hesitant and worried others would judge them.

One teacher, Lorraine, shared how people outside the classroom influence students' behaviors and reinforce societal norms:

> We have a dress up center in our room, and one day when a dad saw his son in this area dressed in a feminine way, he commanded, "Take those clothes off right now!" Even if we provide our students with opportunities to explore their identities, the influence of their families has an impact.

Shanna had another example of how the children have learned to sanction each other based on perceived gender roles:

> So, it's like when people are shushing kids about asking about gender topics because then it gives it a negative connotation. For example, when I am in the lunchroom, all the boys are getting the "blue milk" and the girls get the "pink milk," and if a girl picks up the blue one then the kids are all shout, "Ewww, put it down." There are certain things you can't say, and if you cross the line … well.

The literature review shares extensively on the impacts of the panopticon of fear and silence on school cultures (Foucault, 1975). Foucault explained that this fear is the result of scrutiny by colleagues and school leaders, ensuring that everyone follows societal norms that establish the expectation of silence regarding LGBTQ issues.

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Becca experienced this sanctioning by a school leader as a result of one of her class discussions. The principal, in response to a parent complaint, reprimanded Becca for her bold actions that challenged heteronormativity. Becca shared an article with her students about harassment of LGBT or LGBT-perceived students. The parent protested about the term, "LGBT" in the passage, stating that she was not comfortable talking about this "issue" with her son. The parent objected, stating that "sex education" was taught in fifth grade and her son was only a fourth grader. Becca explained to the group:

> I'm not upset about being in trouble. But I wish the principal had stood up to this parent or let me explain that the article was not about sex. It was about children who are bullied in schools every day. It doesn't matter if the parent even disagrees with the gay lifestyle; children are harassed for being perceived to be gay. This is about social justice and oppression, not about one's beliefs.

She was infuriated because this parent was socially reproducing the culturally constructed belief that LGBT = sex.

Other teachers mentioned religious and personal beliefs as reasons for not being able to address heterosexism within the elementary setting. Lorraine shared her concerns regarding external barriers:

> The thing about all this is the location of where we are in the United States. We are in the Bible Belt, which is controlled by the Baptists. You have to be cautious because you can get in a situation with some of these parents who are hellfire and brimstone, because they take the Bible literally. You have to be cautious, especially with elementary age children. Some parents think you are trying to shape their children. I just think we have to be cautious. Even MLK preached caution.

It was apparent that Loraine felt constrained due to family or community members' religious beliefs.

Teachers also articulated their feelings of frustration regarding a lack of knowledge about how to begin to address these topics of heteronormativity:

I don't always know what to do. One day a boy in my class put in some hair extensions for wacky tacky day and asked me if he should use the girls' bathroom. It might have been a good conversation starter, but I didn't know what to say. I just didn't feel prepared to address this topic. (Alex)

Resources for the teachers are scarce or nonexistence. Alison, after finding only one book in the library that had gay characters, *And Tango Makes Three*, had gone out and bought her own literature. Other teachers acknowledged that resources were scarce and that they did not know where to access lessons or strategies to address these controversial topics.

> We are trying to shape them as humans who are accepting of other people and understanding that everyone is different and diversity is okay. But it's frustrating because they go home, and their parents say, "No, diversity is not okay and you are White so you are going to date White people, and you are a girl so you will date a boy." The kids hear a lot of arguments about it, and I think back on my own schooling. I don't remember teachers or anyone talking about these tricky topics, interracial couples or homosexual relationships. I don't have anything to pull from. I don't have the necessary schema [LGBTQ issues]. (Alex)

Brie added an additional need for staff training on diversity that specifically addresses the topic concerning the LGBT community.

> In some of my teacher professional development on diversity, we talk about different races, different religions and people with various socioeconomic statuses. But on this topic, all that was said was "Don't let kids call each other gay." But if we are not explaining to kids why we don't use the term in a negative way, we are giving being gay a stigma. This seems backwards. Kids are curious by nature and explaining such a point would be a simple conversation we could have with them.

These barriers, both internal and external, possibly discouraged and inhibited full transformation within some of the participants (i.e., Roberta's group). Beyond the need for their own introspection, educators need support from school leaders, colleagues, and the community. These barriers challenge movement along the Action Continuum where steps towards disrupting the heteronormative culture can begin to ensure all students, families, and staff feel included and valued within the school's walls.

The analysis of data from the qualitative study indicates that the majority, 90% of the participants, experienced transformative learning. Quantitative data affirmed that positive changes in the participants' attitudes, and increased knowledge about the LGBTQ community demonstrated growth in awareness and acceptance. By providing an opportunity to co-construct new knowledge surrounding the power of cultural norms and the freedom of queer theory, the participants can continue to challenge their own misconceptions and the status quo within their schools. With continued opportunities to reflect and grow as professionals, all these educators can become the Beccas and Alisons of their school, making ripples with the walls of their heterosexist institutions.

Summary

The syntheses of the findings are as follows: prevalent heteronormative practices and language exist within schools starting as soon as students enter the building. Transformative learning can effectively help educators to acknowledge and confront heterosexism and homophobia. Due to real and perceived barriers from administrators, parents, and community members, the majority of these teachers experience discomfort addressing LGBTQ issues. The literature review reflects the themes in this study (see chapter 2).

The researcher used Transformative Queer Cultural Theory (TQCT) as a framework to analyze the qualitative data. The researcher wanted to determine teachers' awareness and acknowledgement of heteronormative culture within their school and the consequences that result from this type of environment as well as any action teachers had taken or were considering taking to confront this issue.

The book club allowed these educators to collectively discuss the issues of heteronormativity through various lenses. From session to session, participants became more

comfortable and open with each other and sharing their truths. They intermingled stories of children in their classrooms with their own upbringing at home and at school as they tried to construct together their understanding of heteronormativity and its impact on the climate at the elementary school level. According to Stevens-Long et al. (2012), the combination of interactive learning and close relationships in a supportive and safe environment can provide a disorientation or "troubling knowledge" that can lead to deep learning outcomes that are the foundation of the transformative learning process (Kumashiro, 2002). Through the participants' discussions, it was evident that the teachers became more conscious of cultural norms and how these norms had shaped their own views and behaviors as well as the students' actions and discourse. Teachers acknowledged that heterosexism was alive and well within their schools through stories and actions of their students

Throughout these conversations, it was evident that these teachers were open to discussing how gender and sexual diversity are socially reproduced in schools while exploring options of how to better support children with atypical gender performance or queer students. According to Taylor (2008), there is an unconscious drive among all individuals to make meaning of their daily lives. By addressing their own misperceptions or lack of awareness, these teachers co-constructed new understandings of how norms and values play a role in their expectations and choices within their classrooms and schools.

Based on this quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher asserted that these participants engaged in transformative learning, using the book club as a platform to build new knowledge collectively. A key element of transformative learning is for individuals to examine their held beliefs and critically reflect on their assumptions and beliefs and then consciously make and implement plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds

(Mezirow, 1997). The participatory research model was a beneficial methodology in supporting this change as participants shared dialogue, and it empowered them to be open to a new understanding of inclusivity and the multi-dimensional aspects of gender development. This type of learning allowed them to reframe their thinking and see the issues of sexuality and sexual orientation through a new lens. Through these teachers' awareness, acknowledgement, and actions, this study identified key shifts in their perspectives in addition to action taken by participants to begin to confront heteronormative language, interactions, and even policy within their elementary setting.

Noblit (2008) contended that qualitative research in education is often concerned with transformative promise through sense making, identifying inequalities, and attending to those who hold institutional power. Teachers have a direct and indirect influence on the development and maintenance of heteronormative and heterosexist worldviews of their students when topics are evaded or policed (Meyer, 2010). Although this researcher would contend there is a need for further research regarding teachers' and school leaders' awareness and attitudes, this study indicated there is purpose in using these voices and understandings to inspire and support more educators to promote social justice and equity within schools.

Nolen and Talbert (2011) shared,

> Qualitative research is not conclusion oriented as it is directed at capturing life as it is lived. With the passing of time and changes within or among the informants themselves, there is no assumption that a study's findings would not change as well. Qualitative researchers embrace the temporal nature of a "truth" that is context dependent and therefore do not claim that findings can close an argument; findings simply begin a new conversation. Reflecting the situational nature of findings, researchers make assertions rather than conclusions. (p. 69)

In this study, the researcher asserted she "disrupted the status quo" by using the theoretical framework of Transformative Cultural and Queer Theory to engage the various "voices"

from teachers and to learn from and gather insight into their attitudes, beliefs and knowledge

about LGBTQ families, students and colleagues. Using these voices and understandings, she

hopes these teachers will continue these conversations within other school settings and

levels.

CHAPTER 5: SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

Heterosexism and genderism creates obstacles to cultural proficiency in schools. Little attention has focused on the importance of teachers in combating bias, especially in the elementary setting. Kosciw and Diaz (2008) argued that the problem is that many teachers often do not recognize many of the heterosexist patterns within schools and, if confronted with these issues, are too fearful or ill equipped to face matters. The findings of this study validated that there is a need for comprehensive, long-term strategies to change heteronormative schools into inclusive and accepting environments for all children and families. Some teachers are willing and open to take the steps necessary to begin this transformative process, but they need support, tools, and leadership.

This chapter connects the major findings of this study with the application of school practices and policies as well as to the literature reviewed. The researcher shares recommendations regarding future research. Concluding Chapter 5 is the assessment of the growth and impact this study has had on this researcher personally and professionally. Additionally, the researcher includes goals and commitment for her future steps that can disrupt heteronormative cultures of elementary schools.

This study began by introducing, identifying, and describing what the literature cites in terms of the manifestations of homophobia and the need for systemic change at the micro-, meso-, and macro- levels of society in the United States and globally. The literature provides an overview of the perspectives of elementary teachers in regards to their awareness, acknowledgement, and any actions they have considered or have utilized in regards to

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disrupting heteronormativity at the elementary level. The book club format provided a space for teachers to share stories of encountering atypical gender behavior and heteronormative practices within the school. These meetings provided a safe place to discuss ways to approach queer issues which no professional development has. Each of the participants brought her own life experiences and perspectives for others to listen to and reflect upon in relation to their personal views. This critical reflection and collective agency provided a means for synthesizing the various perspectives and judging their merit. As a group, participants shared how common stereotypes or heteronormative practices have affected children in their classrooms and the impact it may have on everyday lives. This study sought to bring out the teachers' voices and perspectives.

Vaught and Castagno (2008) stated that, in order for teachers to be effective with diverse students, it is crucial that they first recognize and understand their own worldviews; only then will they be able to understand the worldviews of their students in order to address racism and oppression. These researchers discovered that teachers' awareness alone did not lead to empathy but rather a reinvention of meaning in which understanding culturally constructed norms can lead to oppression. Within this study, the researcher asserted that transformative learning enabled the majority of these teachers to move from heightened awareness to understanding and then to action steps that confronted heteronormative oppression.

The educators who participated in this study affirmed the literature because homophobic harassment is still prevalent within school walls, and educators are fearful of addressing these issues due to repercussions from leaders and/or families. In addition to this

fear, they feel ill-equipped in terms of the processes and resources needed to begin to address this issue, as well as lacking support from fellow colleagues and administration.

Findings

There is a gap in the research on how to make elementary schools safe for children who do not conform to traditional gender expression and/or have LGBTQ family members. This area of equity is under-investigated and must be addressed to ensure students and families feel safe and welcome. This study was an attempt to continue that work and to fill the gap of the research needed to confront heterosexism and the culture that privileges heterosexuality, which ignores or even intentionally silences those who do not conform.

There is a significant amount of research focused on secondary schools in terms of sexual orientation and identity or school climates for LGBTQ students. Researchers, however, have given limited attention to society's norms in regards to gender conformity that reinforce heteronormativity. The elementary level is a significant time period for student learning regarding gender and the social norms constructed within schools' cultures (Connell, 2009; Renold, 2002; Solomon, 2012). Elementary children interact with and actively construct gender by mimicking gender performances that they perceive to be popular and reinforced in their daily social exchanges at school (Blaise, 2005; Connell, 2009; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

Also, there is a preponderance of research focused on bullying and harassment of LGBTQ youth at the high school and middle school level. Elementary school, however, is the initial place where the regulation of sexual discourses, practices and identities is enforced implicitly or explicitly within the culture. Moreover, Meyer (2009) and Solomon (2012) asserted that bullying behaviors are acts of gender policing. Consequently, children in

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elementary school who do not conform to society's expectations suffer from gay pejoratives, intimidation and isolation.

This study focused on the neglected area of heteronormative practices and attitudes of educators in the elementary school. In addition, the study sought to see if a transformative learning experience would enhance teachers' willingness or ability to confront these heteronormative practices to prevent preadolescents from experiencing sexual harassment and oppression. The results affirmed that through opportunities for transformative learning, some teachers are willing to confront heteronormative practices within an elementary setting.

"We should but we can't …": Default Silence

All of the teachers within this study were clear, through their stories and conversations, that a culture of homophobia and heterosexism was unacceptable and potentially harmful for students, colleagues, and families. The teachers voiced their concerns and expressed a desire to protect their students. As one teacher stated, "Bob Marley always says, 'Love the life you live. Live the life you love.' It is true, we need to help everybody [students with atypical gender performance] be happy." This statement and the research aligns with GLSEN's 2012 study, *Playgrounds and Prejudice: Elementary School Climate in the United States,* that found a majority (83%) of elementary school teachers believed they were obligated to ensure a safe learning environment for gender nonconforming students and those with LGBTQ parents. Yet only one of the participants in this study, previous to the book club sessions, had begun to address this social injustice within her elementary school. The other participants acknowledged that homophobia, as an abstract concept, is wrong, yet the majority of them had fallen into society's expectation of policing topics of non-normative gender behavior or sexuality. As one of the kindergarten teachers shared,

I struggle in my kindergarten class. The boys like the boys, and the girls like the girls. They want to hold each other's hands. But I don't know what to do, so I just say, "No one can hold anyone's hand."

Their avoidance of this sensitive topic, the teachers shared, stemmed from fear of criticism from parents and administrators and from lack of professional training. Consequently these teachers were subconsciously reproducing social inequities. As one participant shared succinctly, "People just aren't comfortable with us bringing it [gender, sexuality] up."

"Want to but…": Attitudes and Barriers

Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe (2010) found empirical evidence suggesting that homophobic beliefs have a direct impact on a teacher's conceptual understanding of gender behaviors and roles, especially in regards to cross-gender interests. Hermann-Wilmarth (2007) and Meyer (2010) noted that many teachers could not conceive that subjects of gender and LGBTQ issues were appropriate for elementary-age children and thereby silenced these topics. Research from this study, however, holds evidence that attitudes toward the LGBTQ community can change through professional development that provides an opportunity for participants to learn from each other and to develop a new understanding of how cultural norms control how people behave, respond and interact (i.e. cultural theory). The *Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire* indicated that 90% of these teachers were more positive about their attitudes towards the LGBTQ community after the book club sessions. The other 10% (one teacher) scored the same pre- and post- book club, and she already had the most positive attitude towards homosexuals and the lowest score. Through a queer theory framework, teachers with support and an opportunity for transformative learning experiences can challenge and disrupt current practices of heterosexism. One teacher shared with

enthusiasm, "My kids began confronting others kids in the halls, telling them you can't say 'that's so gay.'"

The majority of the teachers indicated a desire to confront heteronormative issues within their elementary school setting. One participant wondered aloud when reflecting on the matter of evading these topics, "Do our students have to sacrifice who they are within the schools because of this [silence]?" But because of barriers identified by participants, only 6 of the 10 were ready to take the next step to confront heteronormativity by the end of this study. By the last book club session, the vast majority of participants (80%) indicated a newfound sense of ease when discussing LGBTQ issues, when before it was a taboo topic that was avoided and policed, even by the teachers. One participant remarked, "I never felt like I could bring it [gay issues] up or even discuss the topic if a student brought it up." Importantly, all of the teachers indicated that this book club experience helped them become more aware of heterosexism. However, the participants shared that to effectively confront heteronormativity in their own classrooms, school leaders need to address these barriers. One teacher remarked, "I am not in a position of power. I need administration to back me up with this area [discussing LGBTQ topics]."

"Maybe we can…": Transformative Learning

Based on the multitude of positive remarks offered by those who participated in this study, this researcher is confident that providing a forum for teachers to reflect on issues of gender and sexual identity can support an opportunity to co-construct new understanding. Using transformative queer cultural theory for this study was effective and valuable for addressing this contentious but critical topic. This transformative learning opportunity allowed the participants to reframe their beliefs and perceptions and to move from the

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abstract notion of homophobia to understanding the reification of existing, culturally constructed heterosexism. Through a new lens, teachers deconstructed cultural norms and began to understand the flexibility and fluidity of queer practices. Ideally, with more opportunities for co-constructing understanding and knowledge while school leaders address real and perceived barriers, more teachers could step into the role of social justice leaders who challenge and disrupt current practices of heterosexism.

"What about gay issues?": Diversity Training

This study made a strong case for the value of professional development training for confronting issues of heteronormativity. The GLSEN study (2012) reported that most elementary teachers believe they have a responsibility to create a culture where children with atypical gender performance feel safe and included but they are unprepared to address issues relating to gender expression and LGBT families at the elementary level. Within the book club discussions, teachers affirmed what was found in the literature review: lack of resources and information caused frustrations and ultimately barriers to confronting heteronormativity. One teacher eagerly asked, "Where do I start? I have grown up in a heteronormative culture. I don't know how to address it in my classroom and make it more open." Meyer (2010) shared that many teachers feel inadequate in terms of the skills necessary to deal with antigay violence and harassment. In this study, the majority (90%) of the teachers indicated a lack of knowledge regarding how to address this topic but a willingness to learn. This finding aligns with Kosciw et al.'s (2012) study in which they found fewer than 10% of school staff indicated a high level of competence to address LGBTQ issues but almost 90% of teachers stated they would like more training. One participant commented, "We had diversity training where we talked about race and religion. When do we talk about gay issues?"

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The educators' questions tended to be about process, rather than information or lessons per se. They wanted to develop ways to support students' receptivity to these issues and a process to acquire support from administrators and respond to parents who express concerns. Teachers encountered students who struggled with their parents' perceptions of and negative attitudes towards the LGBT community and classroom discussions. One teacher commented that a boy in her class expressed feelings of frustrations when discussing *King and King* (de Haan, 2003). He shared with the teacher that when he went home his mom told him that boys dating boys was bad, but then when he was at school it felt "ok" to talk about gay issues. The teacher felt that it was important to help this student learn how people can respect others even when they disagree with their views. She expressed, however, the challenge in dealing with this "hot" topic for this boy's family. Teachers need guidance on how to respond to students, families, and community members if and when these topics regarding gender and sexuality are addressed in the classroom.

Lack of training produces ambiguity on how to effectively handle sexual minority harassment. The literature reviewed acknowledged that school training on LGBTQ issues has been shown to create a more welcoming school climate for LGBTQ parents and their children and for all students (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Wolfe (2006) contended that universities must start with teacher education programs to help teachers begin to have the tool necessary to be advocates and allies for all students. This help is particularly critical for children who potentially do not have supportive families. Without training, the multidimensional aspects of sexuality and gender presented by LGBTQ students create a sense of fear, and often backlash, in the traditional school space. Professional development

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on gender identity and LGBTQ issues in the elementary school setting should be available to all teachers.

"When do we start?": Never Too Early

> "It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength."
>
> —Maya Angelou, n.d.

Lai (2006) and Solomon (2004) asserted that it is never too early to start teaching tolerance of sexual orientation and sex. When teachers provide an environment where children feel safe to participate in discussions, they help to dispel misinformation, confusion, and stereotypes, which leads to a better understanding of the diverse culture of gays and lesbians. Wolfe (2006) explained that the goal of teaching about issues regarding gender is not to influence children's preferences on how they perform gender or their interests; rather, these lessons are critical to educate and generate tolerance. With tolerance and acceptance, educators can facilitate an environment that is free of persecution, homophobia, and oppression. If educators create this type of climate, children will be better equipped to live in the diverse, multicultural society that will exist throughout their adult lives.

Becca and Alison, the two outlier participants in the study, created this culture in their classrooms. They facilitated a community in which children felt safe and included. In a cycle of transformative learning (Figure 10), these teachers established an expectation that children would question the status quo, implementing a queer theoretical approach, which enabled the students to accept diverse perspectives and cultures. Transformational learning is a cultural change teachers can infuse within a classroom to prepare students for this globalized world. These teachers addressed issues of equity, such as gender nonconformity and LGBTQ issues,

and established expectations that injustices should be challenged within their schools. Mezirow and Taylor (2009) agreed that school communities where students feel safe and respected facilitate an environment where students learn about worldviews and become more tolerant. These teachers demonstrated that starting at the elementary level is not too early.

Children are aware of sexuality when they enter school. Research revealed that children are aware of their gender as young as 3 or 4 years of age and by the age of 9 or 10 become cognizant of their sexual orientation (Bryan, 2012; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002; Hunt, 2010; Solomon, 2012). Elementary students can easily learn to accept the continuum of diversity within these topics of gender and the interests and issues surrounding the LGBTQ community (Tolerance, 2005; Women's Educational Media, 2006). All of the teachers in this study shared a story or situation in which their students were asking, commenting on, or even judging an issue dealing with gender or sexual identity. As early as preschool, students were making observations that demonstrated their awareness of cultural norms as they developed an understanding of what peers and adults deemed acceptable and unacceptable gender roles. For example, the researcher's preschool kids would say, "Eww, pink milk is for girls. Boys can't skip."

Conclusion

Although this study relied on a small sample of elementary teachers, the researcher argued that these participants are indicative of a growing population of educators who are willing to address the topic of heteronormativity but face many obstacles to taking the next step. The researcher provided both qualitative and quantitative data, which demonstrate that, given an opportunity to experience transformative learning, some educators could begin to tear down these barriers, and was willing to consider or even take the action steps necessary

to confront heteronormativity. The majority of the teachers (6 of 10) who felt empowered by the discussions, the newly formed knowledge, transformative learning, and the support of fellow participants took steps in confronting heteronormativity within their classrooms. This researcher asserted that with more barriers broken down, the other 40% of the participants would follow in their footsteps to take action. The brave choices some of these teachers made despite the many barriers they faced began a ripple effect within their classrooms and schools. Anthropologist Mead believed cultural patterns were learned and that members of society could change these customs. She declared, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" (2006). Their practices used queer theory to help children in their classes deconstruct social norms through literature and troubling knowledge.

The book club experience provided an opportunity for transformative learning for these elementary school teachers. According to Mezirow and Taylor (2009), to experience transformative learning individuals must change their views, beliefs, and actions. All of the teachers acknowledged changes in perception and awareness of heterosexism, and the majority (60%) took or were planning to take action. The researcher contended that this reframing was a catalyst for the majority of these educators to disrupt the heteronormative culture of a classroom. Parker (2005), in his book *212°, The Extra Degree,* shared that water does not boil at 211°F; the water is hot. At 212°F, however, it boils and boiling water produces steam. Steam, he asserted, can power a train. With just one degree of extra effort from school leaders and the community, 100% of these teachers could become true social justice leaders.

In June 2011, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National

Education Association (NEA) represented more than 3.6 million teachers and joined in an

appeal to the Department of Education to protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered

students from human rights abuses. The findings of this study offer implications for

individuals and schools interested in answering this call for action and wanting to combat the

negative effects of school-based heterosexism. This quantitative and qualitative study helped

uncover and provided a clearer understanding of teachers' awareness and ability to grow in

terms of confronting heteronormativity at the elementary level. While different themes

emerged for and against the notion of confronting heteronormativity, the fundamental

conclusion is that more teachers were willing to either consider or take necessary steps to

help all children feel included and safe. Educational leaders will need to support teachers in

order to counter obstacles or backlash from community members or parents.

Implications for Future Research

There are many unanswered questions when it comes to issues of the heteronormative

culture of schools and other systems of marginalization and oppression that continue to

confront children with atypical gender behavior and/or LGBTQ teachers, students, and their

families. Future research should build on the findings of the current study and work to clarify

some of the questions that remain. Some possible questions for further research are

elaborated below.

First, how can leaders in education support teachers willing to confront

heteronormativity? And, how does fear impact school leaders' ability to provide needed

support for teachers to confront heteronormativity? Although this study only examined

teachers' awareness and ability or willingness to confront heterosexism, it would be of

interest to conduct the same study with school leaders and central office support staff. The study would easily lend itself to being replicated with such groups if the schools were open to the training. This study revealed that teachers have a sense of the heteronormative culture within the elementary setting and that there can be some movement toward introducing this topic within their classroom settings if it arises organically. There is a need, however, to examine further the fears and frustrations of school staff and leaders in regards to LGBTQ topics and gender nonconforming children. LGBTQ topics are still considered taboo and avoided by the majority of staff. As a result, staff is unable to reach out to gay youth because of fear of reprisal by district leaders and parents. This fear was substantiated by the rejection of this research topic within the school system and the research had to be conducted in a private home. Homophobia—the fear, prejudice, bigotry, and intolerant hatred of gay people—has continued to increase the anxiety level of school leaders and staff (Blumenfeld, 1992),

Second, what are the effects of organized religion upon public education in terms of policies that result in marginalization of other cultures that do not align with these views? How do we engage religious groups or community members in dialogue and possibly reframe the issue for productive conversations? In this study the barriers noted by participants in the book club painted a picture of resistance to change from both the dominant culture and members of cultures who have been victims of discrimination and bias. A few of the teachers referenced the Bible, stating that parents' and staff's beliefs can create a challenge to moving forward with open dialogue on this issue. For transformative change to take place, all the viewpoints must be brought to the table in conversation over beliefs,

values, and assumptions, in order to move toward cultural competence. How can we begin these crucial conversations between school staff and all the stakeholders?

Third, what is the impact of transformative learning within the classroom setting? Taylor (2008) contended that this type of learning with students needed further research in relation to its impact on student achievement and classroom interactions. Taylor explained that this type of teaching is not easy and that it would take a lot of energy and courage and therefore teachers would need outside support.

Fourth, when should teachers begin to introduce students to topics of gender diversity and issues in regards to the LGBTQ community (e.g. same-sex parents)? These topics could provide a classroom culture that fosters and encourages these conversations by queering the curriculum. Is high school too late? The participants suggested these issues of civil rights and heterosexism need to be addressed at a much younger age before students are exposed to misconceptions or even silenced on these topics that lead to bigotry and homophobia. Do educators need to begin in elementary and even the preschool settings? Longitudinal studies need to be conducted to assess the usefulness of incorporating topics that address heteronormativity (e.g., the Welcoming Schools Curriculum) at the elementary level. This type of study could provide results regarding the impact of queering the curriculum on the overall school climate. The interruption and/or proactive inclusion of LGBTQ topics would potentially decrease bullying at its peak (i.e., later elementary school years and middle school).

Finally the questionnaires utilized for descriptive statistics were dated. The majority of the questions were focused on gay males. New research could use contemporary questionnaires with balanced questions regarding women, men, and queer individuals could

provide more current data. In addition the voices of male participants might provide new insights and perspectives.

Initial Recommendations

The issues of bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation (identified or perceived) and gender identity are rarely addressed at the elementary school level because of limited resources, little training, low incidences of such reported events, and a heteronormative culture that silences them. This silencing was a reality the researcher faced when she proposed this study within her school district. The school system's research department pushed back. When she submitted this study for approval to work with teachers after school hours within an elementary setting, the school system denied her access and approval for this study.

Given the findings that emerged from this study and the rejection of the proposal within the schools, the researcher presents several recommendations for elementary school educators, school leaders and policy makers. In order to create safe learning environments for all students who are, or are perceived to be, LGBTQ, increasing awareness and acknowledgement of the heteronormative culture of schools is essential.

Recommendation 1: Education Policy

Perception of a safe school climate has important implications for academic achievement and other psychosocial welfare issues of children (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The terrain in terms of the LGBTQ community's legal rights is shifting rapidly, yet homophobia is alive and well even within progressive schools systems.

Heterosexuality is interwoven through many policies and standard daily operational procedures within the schools. School-based initiatives and reforms must refocus on

systemic change principles that address the larger interdependent nature of systems of injustice and oppression. With the 2013 Supreme Court ruling regarding DOMA, it is evident that the policy window is opening and now is the time for public school leaders and educators committed to social justice to ensure policies are in place and enforced to protect all children. The legal responsibilities of educators to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in America's public schools are the same as those owed to any student (Biegle & Khel, 2010). Russell and McGuire (2008) and Schneider and Dimito (2008) argued that the enactment of inclusive, enumerated anti-harassment policies is one of the most crucial first steps to challenge gender and sexuality norms and to promote safe school climates. Schools can only be inclusive to all students when the students feel safe. A strong policy protects all students, but many schools need explicit guidance on safeguarding LGBTQ students (Teaching Tolerance, 2013). By creating and implementing anti-bullying policies, schools are publicly acknowledging their commitment to student safety. *Teasing to Torment,* a 2007 GLSEN study, found that students from schools with anti-bullying policies that specifically address sexual identity and gender expression feel safer at school.

According to the U.S. government (2011), forty-six states have developed policies addressing anti-bullying in schools. This report illustrates the prevalence of state efforts to combat bullying over the last several years. Since 1999, more than 120 bills were adopted by state legislatures to either introduce or amend statutes that address bullying in schools (U.S. Education Department, 2011). U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan affirmed that every state should have bullying prevention policies in place to protect children inside and outside of school. Meyer (2009) clarified, however, that there are no current federal laws that explicitly protect LGBTQ students from harassment and discrimination in the US. She

argued that federal legislation "implicitly" protects sexual minorities, but with the lack of explicit protection there will be differing interpretations and applications of the laws.

Although there is no specific federal legislation to protect LGBTQ students from discrimination, Title IX does protect all students, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, from sex discrimination. Title IX includes an entire section on gender-based harassment. Title IX prohibits gender-based harassment, which may include acts of verbal, nonverbal, or physical violence; coercion; or aggression based on sex or sex-stereotyping. Therefore, it would be considered sex discrimination if a student is harassed because of atypical gender behavior. Title IX covers all students, regardless of the actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. In 1990 the Monroe School District was sued for not protecting a 5th grader that claimed she had suffered sexual harassment at the hands of a classmate. The plaintiff's mother claimed that the school had created an abusive environment that deprived her daughter of educational benefits promised her under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. The Supreme Court upheld that a school system can and should be held responsible to secure equal access of students to educational benefits and opportunities and that Monroe's School system acted with deliberate indifference to this student. The legal consequences for school that do not address issues of sexual harassment are connected with loss of federal funds and are open to law suits if the leaders do no adhere to Title IX policies—protection from sexual discrimination and persecution.

Russlynn Ali (2010), Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, issued a letter from the United States Department of Education regarding policies concerning bullying within the schools. Ali states, "Bullying fosters a climate of fear and disrespect that can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of its victims and create conditions that negatively

affect learning, thereby undermining the ability of students to achieve their full potential" (p. 1). The school district would be in violation of civil rights statutes, including Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, if they ignore a hostile environment that tolerates harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability.

The school has an obligation to take immediate and effective action to eliminate the hostile environment and put policies in place. With the federal protection of Title IX and clearly enumerated anti-bullying policies, staffs not only have a clear procedures but an obligation to confront issues of heterosexism that create harassment and unsafe environments for students. "Violations of the principle of equal protection before the law, local, state, and federal legislators have condoned intentional and de facto discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. As a result, another generation of youth is learning that respect for human rights is selective and that discrimination and persecution are acceptable" (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 204).

Recommendation 2: Social Capital

According to Quinlivan (2002), heterosexuality (or being able to "pass" as heterosexual) is a form social capital and is of value within a school setting. This social capital is an asset for children in their social interactions. LGBTQ students who chose to share their identity or children who do not conform to traditional gender roles do not have this capital and consequently become a challenge or an "Other" to their teachers and classmates. Homophobic stigma is actually constructed and reproduced within the school setting. Through the policing of discourse and what is "outright" communicated (Kehily, 2002), staffs reinforce heterosexual social capital. According to Freire (1985), "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the

powerful, not to be neutral" (p. 122). The presumption of heterosexuality in most schools paves the way for "widespread homophobia" or fear of same-sex attraction as heterosexuality's opposite, "with homophobic practices often treated as routine everyday activities" (Kehily, 2002, p. 57).

To counter this heterosexist culture, educators can provide safe spaces and allies to support children with atypical gender performance and/or LGBTQ students. Helping students build social capital is one way to confront heteronormative practices. Lin (2002) explained that social capital is the "investment in social relations with expected returns in the market place" (p. 19). This market can yield economic, labor, political, or community profits. Lin added that social capital consists of resources within relationships and organizations that can promote an individual's success. There needs to be an investment by the U.S. government, schools, and educators in building relationships and organizations. Meyer (2010) urged schools to identify key allies in their schools and community that can provide experience, insight, and professional knowledge in relation to this sensitive topic. If a single teacher chooses to forge alone in this endeavor, she will likely become drained and isolated.

Adding to this feeling of isolation, Meyer (2010) explained that administrators feel ill-equipped to deal with issues of sexual orientation and gender expression and, as a result, are often resistant to such major cultural shifts. But Meyer maintains that in order to truly support equality for all youth, schools, school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, support staff, parents, and students need to coordinate efforts to eradicate this discrimination. Positive social supports in the lives of LGBTQ youth can mitigate minority stress and decrease the isolating effects of heterosexist environments (Meyer, 2010).

These social supports can come through links between school and families or community agencies (e.g., GLSEN). According to Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005), teachers need to move beyond the assumptions that the goal of education is to build only human capital in order to produce skilled workers. Rather, educators must understand that social capital can strengthened student support systems and lead to positive relations.

Recommendation 3: Inclusive Curriculum, or Queering the Curriculum

Despite what seem like enormous societal shifts in attitudes toward homosexuality in recent years, stories in the media painfully illuminate just how much antigay harassment is still prevalent. Schools need to be a place where everyone addresses this homophobia by ensuring the curriculum is inclusive of gay issues. According to Corson (1998), "Like any social institution that has a long history, education is intolerant of any form of diversity that it has never recognized" (p. 7). By queering the curriculum, teachers could both address this topic of gender diversity and help students deconstruct social norms that have this negative impact on society's negative attitudes.

Educators of color have asserted for years that educators need to move beyond "heroes and holidays" to an integration of the history and lives of people of color within the curriculum for true multicultural education. This is true for the issues in the LGBTQ community. Some GSAs sponsor a Day of Silence, but rather than isolate these concepts, schools must heed the advice from educators of color. Topics and concepts about LGBTQ families and gender nonconformity need to be folded into issues of family and discrimination (Au et al., 2014). In a study by Flores (2009), over half of the educators surveyed approved of utilizing literature with gay characters and/or themes in their elementary classrooms. Yet

over 80% of the teacher participants in this study demonstrated a lack of training in gay themes for the multicultural education classroom.

Programs such as the *Welcoming Schools Guide,* developed by the Human Rights Campaign, and researchers such as Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Safe School Coalition have developed and recommended the inclusion of LGBTQ curriculum in elementary schools as one way to decrease bullying/name calling and gender stereotyping and to increase respect for all families, including LGBTQ families. Through positive representation of LGBTQ people in history and literature and facilitating discussions around topics that include LGBTQ characters, teachers can begin to address stereotypes (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Epstien, 2000). Elementary school is the foundational arena for the construction and regulation of sexual discourses, practices and identities. Therefore, Schall and Kauffmann (2003) recommended that these topics needed to be addressed throughout the school years, beginning with the elementary level.

Inclusive language in both verbal and printed materials, such as school registration forms and literature in library and classroom collections, is essential for LGBTQ families, staff, and children to be fully included within the school community. According to Fischer's (2011) research, students, whose teachers included LGBTQ topics in the curriculum reported feeling more positive about school and had a greater sense of belonging and felt more at ease talking to teachers and staff about LGBT issues.

Recommendation 4: Ongoing Staff Development and Support for Staff

Alex shared in the book club,

We want to talk to kids about bullying and stop it, but it brings it back full circle, to how do we address these issues with kids and when is it okay? I don't always know what to do. I just didn't feel prepared to address this topic.

The lack of information and misconceptions regarding the LGBTQ community and atypical gender performance fuels homophobia within society and schools (Jeltova & Fish, 2011). According to Maher (2007), attending professional development training would help improve educators' negative attitudes and dispel misconceptions about the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual community. Furthermore, teachers do not know what to do. Although a large majority of teachers (85%) have received professional development on diversity or multicultural issues, rarely will this training include topics about LGBTQ families or gender issues. Less than a quarter (23%) of the educators had training on LGBTQ families. Over a third (37%) of the teachers indicated they had received some professional development on gender issues. When asked, less than half (48%) of the teachers remarked they would feel comfortable responding to students about LGBT people (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Teachers often react ineffectively, if at all, to harassment of LGBTQ students or those with atypical gender behavior, and they are known to even blame victims for these experiences (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Kosciw et al., 2008). Teachers should be aware of the issues that confront these children within the school setting (e.g., as victims of violence, and as at-risk for depression, school drop-out, and suicide) in order to provide necessary support. If not, these students are likely to continue to be underserved and ignored by the staff. Kosciw et al. (2008) found that LGBTQ youth who have several supportive teachers and staff feel safer and miss fewer days of school.

Although the negative impact of heteronormativity is reality, in light of the researcher's experience with the school district's rejection of this topic for study, social justice leaders may need to approach heteronormativity in a less controversial manner. As reviewed in the literature and shared within this study, society still polices and silences topics

surrounding gender and sexuality and many school leaders are unwilling or unable to address homophobia openly. To access the school and reach the key players (i.e., teachers and school leaders) it might be beneficial to approach this topic of heteronormativity through anti-bullying workshops. By establishing anti-bullying professional development, schools will be better equipped to comply with federal regulations and to uphold the safety of students. Within this training, leaders can provide explicit messages regarding the prevalence of violence against children with atypical gender behavior and students who are, or are perceived to be, LGBTQ.

School leaders need to continue to provide platforms for teachers to have safe dialogue regarding this topic of heteronormativity. To support cultural competency, school leaders need to engage teachers and staff with varying viewpoints in constructive cultural proficiency, inquiry, and dialogue in order to shape, change, and encourage transformative learning. Mezirow (1997) suggested that deep-level transformative change results in a broad; more differentiated perspective, increased personal autonomy and personal efficacy, and better decision-making. To reach academic excellence for all children, Shields (2004) asserted that transforming practices within schools is key to challenging socially constructed understandings and creating inclusive school cultures.

Counterpublics such as GLSEN, Welcoming Schools, and Teaching Tolerance provide resources for staff training that focus on awareness and acknowledgement by exploring the wide range of biases and experiences LGBTQ students face. The next essential step for educators is taking action to provide a safe school environment, a fundamental priority in schools. Through this awareness, acknowledgement, and actions, school staff can create a positive and inclusive school climate for all students. Staff must be aware of LGBTQ

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victimization, and school personnel need to acquire skills to directly and effectively deal with incidents of LGBTQ victimization.

Recommendation 5: Social Justice Leaders in Education

Kothlow and Chamberlain (2012), in *Disrupting Heteronormativity in Schools*, argued "it is educators' professional responsibility to provide a school experience for students where they can 'thrive socially, emotionally and academically'" (p. 8). Educators need to become activists within the school by taking a stand on issues of homophobia and the social reproduction of heteronormative culture. Meyer (2010) asserted that educators needed to find a new pedagogy and ways of teaching that challenge hegemonic, heteronormative gender roles through examining and confronting the structural roadblocks. School can only be inclusive to all students when they all feel safe. To address emotional well-being, educators need to provide children with an environment where they feel a sense of belonging (Charney, 2002). Educators and leaders of social justice must begin with awareness and acknowledgement of the marginalization and oppression affecting LGBTQ families, students, and staff. The issue of school safety for gender nonconforming and LGBTQ students is directly related to educators' attitudes and the strategies used to promote a culture of inclusion and equity. If leaders ignore this responsibility, they become ineffective and harmful in terms of social justice within and outside of the school environment. Ignoring issues of oppression is unacceptable for professionals committed to education (McCabe, Rubinson, & Dragowski, 2013; Zaco-Smith & Smith, 2010).

According to Schein (2004), the dominant culture leads resistance to change and continues to benefit from a sense of privilege and entitlement, which perpetuates a system of oppression. If leaders continue to have cultural blindness and apathy, LGBTQ families, and

staff will be isolated and forced to live invisible lives, which in turn marginalizes children who perform atypical gender behaviors. Leaders need courage to lead schools toward cultural proficiency through a transformative change, guiding educators to embrace the values of inclusivity and equity. As Schein (2004) pointed out, "We basically do not know what the world of tomorrow will really be like except that it will be different. That means that organizations and their leaders will have to become perpetual learners" (p. 393).

In a 2003 study, Czopp and Monteith showed that confronting racist remarks could be effective in initial steps to disrupt oppression. In an online conversation, the researchers found that Whites confronted over racist statements felt regret and, as a result, had fewer subsequent biased responses. When offenders are confronted, they are left to reflect on their behaviors and change how they treat traditionally marginalized groups. Czopp and Monteith also assert that confronting the perpetrator has the added benefit of reinforcing to bystanders the notion that expressing a bias is not acceptable. Social justice leaders must model this confrontation that can have sweeping effects in helping people recognize and acknowledge behavior that is oppressive. Becca and Alison, as social justice leaders, demonstrated the influence of empowering their students who themselves confronted peers in the halls.

To begin to prepare social justice leaders, schools of education, counseling and social worker departments at the University level must be committed to addressing these topics of heteronormativity, gender and sexuality.

Social justice allies have been vital to social change movements throughout history, and educators can serve as advocates for children who are silenced, marginalized, and victimized by harassment. Teachers and school leaders can have an impact on changing school policies and practices and thus making the culture more welcoming and inclusive for

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all students. For students to succeed in school, their basic needs of safety and belonging must be fulfilled (Glew et al., 2005; Osterman, 2000). Grant and Sleeter (2007) explained that social justice leaders could have a direct impact on the "broader cultural and political relationships" by building a culture that accepts and celebrates diversity within the classrooms and the school. "A culturally diverse and just world does not simply happen: it is painstakingly built, and must be constantly guarded" (p. 220).

Conclusion

In January 2014, an 11-year-old boy attempted suicide, which resulted in severe and permanent brain damage. Schoolmates reportedly teased Michael Morones incessantly for his love of *My Little Pony*. His stepfather reported that kids called him gay for liking a girls' TV show (Nicholas, 2014). "I am so tired of people at school calling me gay because I like *My Little Pony*," he told his mother (Nicholas, 2014). A few months later, another school district in the same state made a decision to evade the issue of homophobia by banning a 9 year-old boy from wearing his *My Little Pony* backpack. The school district leaders stated that this backpack created a disruption in the classroom. After a protest from the community, however, the school district rescinded their decision.

By avoiding the topic of heteronormativity, schools and society continue to treat topics of gender diversity and sexual identity as distasteful, which consequently promotes homophobic policy by institutions and individuals. As a society, if people continue to evade these topics and consequently make the topics taboo, children with nontraditional gender performance and LGBTQ families, staff, and students will continue to experience harassment within the schools, feeling excluded and marginalized. Schools that acknowledge the presence of gender nonconforming and LGBTQ students and that create and apply policies

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and practices designed to provide a safe place for them will disrupt heteronormative culture and create a queering school. In such schools, students who challenge gender and sexuality norms may experience less harassment. Schools are an important venue for children and adults to begin to understand heteronormativity and its ramifications in the lives of young people (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012).

In the short time since Michael's life-altering decision in January 2014 and his journey home from the hospital in April 2014, an estimated 5,200 U.S. children ages 10-14 also attempted suicide according to data from the Centers for Disease Control (2014). These tragedies could have been prevented if this nation's schools were safe for all students, not just heterosexuals. There is an urgent need for action to create safer and more inclusive schools for all students. Despite what seem like enormous societal shifts in attitudes toward homosexuality in recent years, Michael's story and many others painfully illuminate just how far school leaders and educators have yet to go to provide the appropriate response and environmental conditions to save kids from the gauntlet he had to navigate before attempting to end his life.

Heteronormative culture is dominant within U.S. society and schools, and it thereby becomes an obstacle to those who do not fit the expected molds of how *girls* and *boys* should act. As a result of socially reproduced heterosexism, adults and children silence dissenting voices. Teachers must recognize that schools reflect and reinforce mainstream norms and beliefs through the intentional and unintentional curriculum (Khayatt, 2006). In addition, self-reflection about their own beliefs and attitudes around issues of diversity is essential for all school employees. Meyer (2010) clarified that much of what occurs in school, as early as elementary, is gendered or sexualized; therefore, it is critical for teachers to develop an

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understanding of how systems of sex, gender, and sexuality operate in the K-12 setting. Only through explicitly addressing the myths surrounding gender and sexual orientation can school personnel disrupt the heteronormative equilibrium. Until the root causes of bias towards the LGBTQ community and children who are gender diverse are addressed, hate will lead to harassment and bullying, and schools will not be able to claim that they provide "equity for all."

Bickmore (1999) explained that the classroom is a microcosm of society, and it feels inclusive when all members interact with diverse individuals and unfamiliar ideas with respect. Dewey, father of Modern Experimental Education, upheld that schools should reflect society. According to Dewey's (1897) legendary declaration, *My Pedagogic Creed*, "the school must represent present life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground" (p. 79). School cultures have been based on the premise that human nature is basically good—as long as *good* is defined as being heterosexual. Children are not submissive bystanders when considering the processes of socialization; rather, they are full participants in actively constructing, mediating, and policing social interactions and realities and therefore worthy of study in their own right (Renold, 2002). In order to fight against oppressive education, teachers must help students learn about the groups that are marginalized and oppressed (Kumashiro, 2002). Through this work, schools can move towards equity and excellence in education by ensuring all children feel included and are safe within the school walls.

According to Meyer (2010), supporting children who feel marginalized is a matter of life or death. When will the tipping point be reached that there is too much violence and bullying in terms of gender harassment? School staff and teachers have tolerated for too long

the exclusion of LGBTQ youth, families, and staff as well as children with atypical gender performance. Schools are at least partially responsible for defining what is considered normal. If school leaders and educators do not address these issues of hegemony, they are allowing the continuation of oppression and marginalization of children with LGBT families and friends as well as those who do not fit the socially constructed norms for gender roles. School leaders and educators can take steps to disrupt the heteronormative equilibrium and challenge the institutional homophobia that dismisses the legitimacy of these children.

Personal Reflection

Whose responsibility is it to help troubled gay youth? Leaders for social justice must not be afraid to confront the hegemonic notions of the cultural past for this challenge is the nature of each individual's own personal journey. I reflected upon the tragedy of Michael Morones, not only because I grieved for the pain and suffering he encountered in his desire to belong, but because of my own challenging journey as an educator and a mother who identifies as queer. In each social situation and professional opportunity, I make choices daily about what I must conceal and when it is safe to be open without fear of repercussions for my family or myself. My sexual identity might negatively influence my legitimacy as a leader in a social climate that assumes public school administrators are heterosexual. Yet I know that choosing to be silent reinforces societal expectations and continues to empower the dominant culture of heterosexuality.

My own mother was herself a social justice leader. Until her life-ending illness, she worked tirelessly as a trailblazer in children services. Unfortunately she died in the midst of my studies, but the impact of my mother's teachings remains in my compassion and drive to work for social justice. Below is one of the poems my mother found inspirational:

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First they came for the communists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.
Then they came for the socialists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a socialist.
Then they came for the unionists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak out because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak out because I was not a Catholic.
Then they came for me,
and there was no one left to speak for me.
                    ─Martin Niemöller (1937).

Ripples

Social justice leaders need to speak for their students. According to Hargreaves and

Fink (2006), if educational leaders want to be socially just they need to create cultures within

their schools that will sustain an inclusive climate for all children for the years to come.

School leaders need to be accountable for their actions; understanding that each decision

made or any issue avoided has an impact on the school culture. "Their actions reverberate

throughout the system like ripples in a pond" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p.16). Brown

(2007) in his book, *Dangerous Undertaking: The Search for Transformation*, reflected on

leadership and its impact on others, and he shared this pond metaphor from a NASA

engineer:

> The engineer was sitting by a pond, contemplating. He saw a frog jump into the pond
> and noticed how the ripples spread right across the pond. He watched intently,
> noticing other sources of movement on the surface of the pond. Insects or a breeze
> would occasionally touch the water, causing tiny ripples. All these ripples interacted
> and caused complex patterns on the surface of the water. The engineer noted each
> event was writing its unique pattern on the water and the ripples lasted long after the
> event happened. He recognized that the whole world was the same way and these
> ripples create the future every moment. Then he considered how he was watching this
> as an outsider, not in the pond but in society there is no bank to sit on. He was right in
> the "pond" where the ripples were affecting him, and where he was causing ripples
> too. This was the insight that had a profound effect on the engineer, getting him to

turn off his autopilot. Seeing himself as a part of the pond, not as some external observer. (p.56)

Like the NASA engineer, I know each choice I make, each opportunity I embrace to confront heteronormativity, as an educator and a leader within a school system, can create a ripple. As the participants in this book club struggled with the question of who sets the limits of what educators can and cannot address, others demonstrated tangible examples of the ripple effect that began in her classroom and expanded throughout the building. The entire school community has something to gain from an inclusive culture that promotes acceptance and celebration of all children with diverse interests. Without stepping up to this challenge, schools will not be equitable or excellent for all. I end this dissertation by reaffirming my commitment to modeling the attributes of a social justice leader within the schools and in the community, to speak up for those who are silenced and to help break down barriers for teachers ready to confront heteronormativity at the elementary level.

Appendix A: Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire

Directions: In the following questions, rank your answers according to the scale shown here.
Strongly Disagree (5)   Disagree (4)   Neutral (3)   Agree (2)   Strongly Agree (1)

1.   Many gay men use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges.

2.   Gay men do not have all the rights they need.

3.   Celebrations such as "Gay Pride Day" are ridiculous because they assume that an individual's sexual orientation should constitute a source of pride.

4.   Gay men still need to protest for equal rights.

5.   If gay men want to be treated like everyone else, then they need to stop making such a fuss about their sexuality/culture.

6.   Gay men who are "out of the closet" should be admired for their courage.

7.   In today's tough economic times, tax money shouldn't be used to support gay men's organizations.

8.   Gay men have become far too confrontational in their demand for equal rights.

9.   It would be beneficial to society to recognize homosexuality as normal.

10.   Homosexuals should not be allowed to work with children.

11.   The homosexuals should have equal opportunity of employment.

12.   Homosexuals should be allowed to marry.

13.   Homosexuals should be given social equality.

14.   I think male homosexuals are disgusting.

15. If a man has homosexual feelings, he should do everything he can do to overcome them.

16.   I would not be too upset if I learned that my son was homosexual.

17.   Homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children just like heterosexual couples.

18.   Homosexuals are sick.

19.   Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in humans.

20.   Homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned.

Questions and Answers

Directions: Indicate *true, false* or *I don't know* for each question.

1. (F) Approximately 25-30% of adolescent boys have a homosexual experience during their teenage years.

2. (F) A majority of homosexuals were seduced in adolescence by a person of the same sex, usually several years older.

3. (T) Approximately 6-11% of adolescent girls have a homosexual experience during their teenage years.

4. (T) Sexual orientation is usually well-established by adolescence.

5. (T) The homosexuals usually disclose their sexual identity to a friend before they tell a parent.

6. (F) A homosexual person's gender identity does not agree with his/her biological sex.

7. (F) If children are raised by openly homosexual parents, the likelihood that they themselves will develop a homosexual orientation is greater than if they were raised by heterosexual parents.

8. (T) Gay men and lesbian women have an increased incidence of anxiety and depression compared to heterosexual men and women.

9. (F) Homosexuals place more importance on the physical attractiveness of their dating partners than do heterosexuals.

10. (T) The experience of love is similar for all people regardless of sexual orientation.

11. (T) Gay male couples are likely to have the most permissive attitudes about sexual activity outside of a committed relationship compared to lesbian couples and heterosexual couples.

12. (T) In some cultures, it is normal practice for boys to have sex with their same-gender during adolescence.

13. (F) In the world as a whole, the most common mode of transmission of the HIV virus is through gay male sex.

14. (T) Testosterone is the hormone responsible for the growth of pubic hair on girls.

15. (T) Boys' breasts typically grow during puberty.

16. (F) Research supports the notion that sex education offered in schools increases the amount of sexual activity amongst adolescents.

17. (F) In the last 25 years there has been an increase in homosexuality.

18. (F) Most homosexual men and women want to be heterosexual.

19. (F) Most homosexuals want to encourage or entice others into a homosexual or gay lifestyle.

20. (T) Heterosexual teachers, more often than homosexual teachers, seduce their students or sexually exploit them.

21. (F) Greece and Rome fell because of homosexuality.

22. (F) Heterosexuals generally have a stronger sex drive than do homosexuals.

23. (T) About one-half of the population of men and more than one-third of women have had a homosexual experience to the point of orgasm at some time in their lives.

24. (T) The homosexual population includes a greater proportion of men than of women.

25. (T) Heterosexual men and women commonly report homosexual fantasies.

26. (F) If the media portrays homosexuality or lesbianism as positive, this could sway youths into becoming homosexual or desiring homosexuality as a way of life.

27. (F) Homosexuals are usually identifiable by their appearance or mannerisms.

28. (F) Homosexuals do not make good role models for children and could do psychological harm to children with whom they interact as well as interfere with the normal sexual development of children.

29. (T) Gay men are more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general public.

30. (F) Homosexuality does not occur among animals (other than human beings).

31. (F) Historically, almost every culture has evidenced widespread intolerance towards homosexuals, viewing them as "sick" or as "sinners."

32. (T) Heterosexual men tend to express more hostile attitudes toward homosexuals than do heterosexual women.

Appendix C: Questions for *Oddly Normal*

Schwartz, J. (2012). *Oddly normal: One family's struggle to help their teenage son come to terms with his sexuality*. New York: Gotham Books.

1. How did the book affect your understanding of the challenges facing gay children and youth?

2. Even as a toddler, Joe liked playing with Barbies and wearing pink shoes. Do you agree with Richard Green's "educated guess … that cross-gender behavior in boys is the age-appropriate expression of underlying homosexuality" (p. 19)?

3. During Joseph's year in kindergarten, Jeanne put away his Barbies so he wouldn't face ridicule from his classmates. Is it better to "edit his personality so early in the game" (p. 28) or let him risk peer rejection?

4. In addition to his budding homosexuality, Joe struggles with learning disabilities that are initially diagnosed as ADHD and his parents are pressured to put him on drugs like Ritalin. Schwartz writes, "a battle is raging over whether or not doctors overdiagnose conditions like ADHD and overprescribe drugs for it…. [But] no study I've found conclusively proves either side is right" (p. 36). What are your experiences with or opinion of psychoactive drugs for children?

5. Joseph's fourth grade year was miserable from the start. When the Schwartzes ask the principal to switch Joseph to another teacher, the principal told them: "there are a number of reasons why I cannot support this" (p.75-76). If a teacher and student don't "click," should the school separate them, or is such a change ultimately not in the child's best interests?

6. When Joseph was in elementary school, his parents realized "that while it's okay for millionaire entertainers to be gay, girly little grade schoolers still have some problems" (p. 25). With the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and movements like Dan Savage's It Gets Better, have things improved for "girly little grade schoolers," or is their situation about the same?

7. Should middle school have gay-straight alliances? What about elementary schools? What share of the responsibility for educating children about sexual orientation lies with the schools? With parents?

8. Tyler Clementi's tragic suicide brought national attention to the prevalence of bullying and cyber-bullying. Is enough being done to curb the problem?

9. John Schwartz shares the results of a Gallup poll showing that people who view homosexuality as a biological fact rather than as a lifestyle choice are more accepting

of gay marriage. Why might a story about gay penguins convince someone about the biological origins of homosexuality when a story about gay humans wouldn't?

10. John Schwartz writes articles about same-sex marriage, but asserts that having Joe doesn't make him biased. "I do have opinions, but all journalists have opinions. The work of a journalist is not to bleach his brain of opinions and life experiences, but to write fairly in light of all available information" (p. 209). Do you agree?

11. Schwartz describes *Oddly Normal* as a "chimera of a book, which is part memoir, part journalistic exploration, and part mess" (p. xiii). Did it satisfy your expectations? Who else might benefit from reading it?

Appendix D: Questions for *Raising My Rainbow*

Duron, Lori. (2013). *Raising my rainbow: Adventures in raising a fabulous, gender creative son*. New York: Broadway Books.

1. How did it affect your understanding of the challenges facing gay children and youth?

2. Do you believe that a child's gender expression and sexuality are more nature or nurture?

3. If you had a female student would you allow her to wear a sports jersey or a tie? What if a male student came to class with a dress, would you allow this? Why or why not?

4. Is it better to edit a child's personality so early in the game or let him risk peer rejection?

5. Do you think it is possible for a LGBTQ child to never have to "come out"— to be just as open about being gay as most kids are about being straight?

6. How does this book affect you in regards to challenges children or families face in school?

7. On the gender spectrum of masculine to feminine, where do you fall? Is it the same every day? Every week, month, year? Have you ever played with gender performance?

8. What role do teachers play in terms of expectations of conformity?

9. What role does religion play in society's enforcement of gender and sexuality?

10. What responsibility do teachers and schools have in terms of children with atypical gender behaviors or children who are questioning their own sexual orientation?

11. What factors influence teachers who intervene or chose not to intervene when remarks such as "that's so gay" are heard?

12. What factors influence teachers regarding providing literature in the classroom with gay or lesbian characters?

Appendix E. Questions for *Valentine Road*

Cunningham, M. (Director). (2013). *Valentine road*: Shapeshifter.

1. *Valentine Road* highlights several educators who knew Larry. What do you think made some educators more supportive than others of how Larry was expressing his gender?

2. In what ways might students like Larry benefit from educators who support and affirm their identities?

3. Several of Larry's friends described him as brave, like one student who said, "I don't think people realize how brave Larry was, like, being out to that many people, like, it must have been, like, extremely difficult."

4. *Valentine Road* explores concepts of identity related to sexual orientation, gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and others. What role did identity play in the story? For Larry and Brandon? For others in the film?

5. What messages might Brandon have received that led him to seem so "offended" and "disgusted" by Larry's asking him to be his Valentine?

6. What messages do your students get about LGBT people?

7. Resilience could be said to be an underlying theme in the film. How did Larry demonstrate resilience?

8. How can educators help students build resilience in the face of adversity?

9. Much was said about Larry's gender expression in the film. Some people called him brave for being himself despite the opposition he faced. Others considered him attention-seeking, threatening, and even dangerous. What can educators do to support and affirm gender nonconforming students while ensuring their safety?

10. Why do you think Brandon resorted to violence?

11. How can you make sure your students see that they have better options?

12. In the beginning of the film, one student says, "We all learned a lot about life through this, and I know people on the outside have learned a lot about themselves through this." What have you learned from watching and discussing *Valentine Road*? What might you do differently now in your classroom, school, or community?

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