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# Investigating Elementary School Teachers' Approaches to Addressing Gender and Sexual Diversity in the Education System

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study seeks to investigate elementary school teachers' approaches to addressing gender and sexual diversity through their pedagogical decision-making in the Ontario Education system. Its aim is to provide further knowledge about how the needs of LGBTQ students are being understood and addressed in elementary schools specifically, and how teachers are ensuring a more democratized social and pedagogical space for all children and youth. This study draws on empirical data from semi-structured interviews with ten elementary school teachers, which helped to develop a deeper understanding of their commitment to addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classroom and school. A queer and gender complex theoretical approach is employed to examine the extent to which teachers' reflections speak to effectively addressing heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the school system. By gaining insight into how teachers make sense of their own experiences relating to gender and sexual diversity, and the relevance of this experience to their pedagogical practices, this research raises important questions about how to better support LGBTQ students in the education system.

**KEYWORDS:** LGBTQ, gender nonconforming, gender diversity, sexual diversity, queer pedagogy

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

### Statement of Problem

Discrimination, intolerance, and abuse of LGBTQ students, or those with atypical gender<sup>1</sup>, are prominent in most elementary school contexts (Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2008). The issue remains that teachers often do not recognize heterosexist patterns, and if confronted with these patterns, express fearfulness or unpreparedness to challenge instances of homophobic and transphobic discrimination (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). This avoidance or resistance regularly derives from fear of scrutiny from parents and administrators, insufficient professional training, as well as the attitudes and belief systems of educators about gender and sexual diversity (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). This evasion allows heteronormative culture to prevail in schools, thereby perpetuating the domination of one group over another and cultivating behaviours that support this domination. In addition, children who deviate from traditional gender behaviours, or assume non-normative sexual identities, often are made to feel deficient in schools and are victim to horrendous prejudice, discrimination, and oppression in their daily schooling experience (Forrest, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009; Sherer, Baum, Ehrensaft, & Rosenthal, 2015; Wyss, 2004).

Canada is a global leader in advancing legal rights and recognition for the LGBTQ community. The Canadian Human Rights Commission initially recommended that sexual orientation be made a prohibited ground of discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Act in 1979. Correspondingly, the equality rights provision in section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* reads:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (sec. 15, 1)

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<sup>1</sup> Transgender refers to persons that identify in a manner that falls external of cultural norms for people of their assigned sex. Gender non-conforming denotes an individual who is or is perceived to have characteristics and/or behaviours that do not align with traditional or societal expectations. Gender expression is the way in which a person deploys their appearance and/or behaviour to express a certain gender whether it be feminine, masculine or androgynous. An individual's gender identity is often determined by others as based on one's gender expression-appearance/mannerism.

In August of 1992, through *Haig v. Canada*, the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that the absence of sexual orientation from the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination in section 3 of the Canadian Human Rights Act violated section 15 of the Charter. Subsequently, in 1996, Parliament enacted Bill C-33, an Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act, to include sexual orientation among the proscribed grounds of discrimination. As well, federal recognition of same-sex marriage rights in the enactment of Federal Bill C-38, the *Civil Marriage Act* in 2005, indicates to the world that Canada is a nation that respects gender and sexual diversity. Although oppressive schooling conditions continue to persist, there has been some positive movement with schools in Canada toward positively recognizing gender and sexual diversity amongst students. This supports the reason as to why I wish to conduct this study for the purpose of generating further knowledge about how teachers are addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms and schools in order to curtail the harsh and inequitable educational outcomes of these students (Durham District School Board, 2012; Omercajic, 2015; TDSB, 2011).

Recognizing the tensions and complexities of schooling conditions in Canada and beyond for LGBTQ students, this study aims to locate the experiences of teachers due to their important role in applying anti-heteronormative and anti-cisnormative practices to better support educational outcomes for these students. The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' approaches to gender and sexual diversity in their classroom and school. It seeks to generate further knowledge about how teachers are addressing gender and sexual diversity in schools. I interview ten elementary school teachers and examine their responses within the framing of heteronormative and cisnormative discourses in the education system. By focusing on teachers' approaches to addressing gender and sexual diversity, I aim to gain a better understanding of how discriminatory practices are either perpetuated or curtailed. Teachers certainly play a critical role in whether gender and sexual inequities are dismantled or reinforced through schooling practices. Teachers who reinforce a normative status quo, and thus marginalize gender and sexual minority students, do so by not challenging educational discourses that impart a heterosexist curriculum. Conversely, teachers who work to address gender and sexual diversity do so by creating educational spaces where critical questions about gender and sexual normativity are addressed and an interrogation of privileging/othering is embraced (Kumashiro, 2000). The way children understand gender, privilege heterosexuality, and propagate

heteronormativity is influenced by cultural norms, ideological discourses, biases and behaviours that exist in schools. Teachers may or may not be aware of how heterosexist and cisnormative discourses are reflected and reinforced through their own pedagogical practices. As DePalma and Atkinson's (2009) research reveals, when presenting teachers with the opportunity to grapple with their own experiences and understandings of gender and sexual diversity, different ways of thinking critically about gender and sexual inequities begin to emerge. Teachers' attitudes about sexuality and gender, their ability to understand gender and sexual diversity, and their capacity to endorse diversity in the classroom are essential to ensuring a safe and equitable education. Exploring this area of research offers the potential to provide valuable insights into the limitations and possibilities for addressing gender and sexual diversity in classrooms and schools.

Reimagining the possibilities of education in addressing gender and sexual diversity within schools is not without its resistance. The revised *Grades 1-8 Health and Physical Education (2015) Ontario Curriculum* has sparked a vast array of criticism because of the progressive elements of the document in addressing sexual and gender diversity. The revised curriculum focuses on, and is an incorporation of, gender diversity and same-sex relationships. Such controversy sparked by Canadian Christian Institutes, the Institute for Canadian Values, as well as the Greater Toronto Catholic Parent Network is due to the perceived threat of such knowledge to children. The revised curriculum markedly disrupts norms, values, and expectations related to sex, gender, and sexuality that were once essentialized in the previous curriculum. Discussions concerning the protection of children, especially in the context of the revised curriculum, speak to issues of violence and corruption brought into the context of educating children who are believed to be subjects of a cultural ideal pertaining to innocence (Drazenovich, 2015). Sexual diversity is arguably a threat to the idea of childhood innocence, combating the very notion of heteronormativity which presupposes a proto-heterosexual upbringing (Drazenovich, 2015; Walters & Hayes, 2007). The sexualization that is often forced onto LGBTQ identities clashes strongly with the pervasive fable of the asexual and naïve child in schooling (Walters & Hayes, 2007). Non-heterosexual sexuality is viewed as something that is to be feared because it is habitually viewed as a threat to the child's natural heterosexual identity development (Walters & Hayes, 2007). Walter and Hayes (2007), for example, convey that children's responses to and

understanding of sexuality are highly influenced by adults' discomfort and denial. Despite aims to preserve the innocence of children, schools regularly disseminate a heterosexist curriculum, which works to create a 'hidden curriculum' (Bay-Cheng 2003; Epstein, 1997; Kehily, 2002) that supports heteronormative and cisnormative beliefs and behaviours. Youdell (2005) details that the complex constellations of sex, gender, and sexuality function within schools to create strict parameters for who students are permitted to 'be,' while those that do not conform are invisible or marked as disrupting to the social order of schooling. Elementary schools operate with a hidden curriculum that serves to police childhood innocence which is marked by heteronormative values. Non-normative gender and sexual identities are cast marginally and are constantly negated due to their perceived disruption of the heteronormative system.

In spite of the assumption about the absence of sexuality in elementary schools, this educational site is indeed a backdrop to deeply entrenched rigid cultural expectations that are dictated by compulsory heterosexuality and a hegemonic binary gender system. This explains why I wish to investigate elementary school teachers in order to generate further understanding of how heteronormative and cisnormative practices are either dismantled or perpetuated. The elementary school is not exclusively heteronormative and cisnormative, but functions as a space where children consciously and unconsciously learn to perform gender and sexual norms in normative and acceptable ways to avoid teasing, isolation, and often harassment (Drazenovich, 2015). The ways in which teachers respond to these issues surrounding gender norms and sexual orientation requires further investigation, particularly at an elementary level, due to the underrepresentation of studies in this area (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Letts & Sears, 1999). This focus is important because elementary schools are key sites of intervention and education with regards to the production and regulation of sexual discourses, practices, and identities (Renold, 2003). Wickens and Sandlin (2010), for example, argue that schools hold the potential to intervene and interrupt heterosexism, heteronormative discourse, and homophobia that will allow for considerable improvement in the quality of schooling for LGBTQ students. With the intent to improve the lives and learning of LGBTQ youths and their interactions with schooling, new paradigms need to emerge that deemphasize youth as 'innocent' or 'at-risk.' The need to introduce LGBTQ-inclusive curricula is undoubtedly essential for the purpose of combating the current school culture, which is replete with heterosexist and cisnormative bias (Letts & Sears,

1999; Meyer, 2010). Systematic exclusion and mistreatment is taking place in schools, which compromise school safety, damage students' ability to learn, and deny students' access to a fair education (Dragowski, McCabe & Rubinson, 2016; Russell et al., 2008; Steck & Perry, 2016). Affirming an educational environment where sexual and gender diverse children have the opportunity to not only receive a just education, but to feel safe, means that there must be an examination of and focus on the way that curriculum policies and practices are enacted in schools (Omercagic, 2015; Taylor et al., 2011). This research is committed to learning more about how teachers are engaging in this very important pedagogical work in schools. It is based on the acknowledgement of the pivotal role that educators play in creating a school culture that is supportive of creating and maintaining gender and sexual justice in the elementary school system.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Although countless scholars have focused on inequalities related to class, race, ethnicity, and disability in education research, when it comes to preparing teachers to work effectively with LGBTQ-identified youth and topics--there is resistance (Haertling Thein, 2013; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007). The intent of this research is to extend beyond the culture of silence around LGBTQ issues existing in schools in order to acknowledge and grapple with the current reality of learning about diversity. This research is concerned with extending the importance of critical thinking about queerness in education and the value of educating communities on queer/gender diverse ways of knowing and being. It also provides a consideration of the need to generate knowledge about LGBTQ-inclusive efforts in the classroom. This study further highlights the unique voice of elementary teachers who are largely ignored or dismissed in education research. Lastly, this research lays emphasis on gender justice in an effort to represent the unique challenges faced by transgender and gender-nonconforming students in an educational setting. It is important to develop a deeper understanding of how teachers are confronting, grappling with, and attending to, the complexity of gender and sexual diversity in schools. Children learn to move in and around spaces in education with cues that represent what it means to be a boy/girl (Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007). Because heterosexuality is seen as natural and is normalized, educators may not even recognize issues in their school or classroom where children are struggling to perform gender and sexual orientation to avoid ridicule (Payne & Smith, 2014;

Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007). There are several ways by which teachers produce and reproduce compulsory heterosexuality, such as through classroom seating, assigned or unassigned group work, routes of lining up, classroom duties, as well as playground activity (Thorne, 1993; Woolley, 2015). Educators maintain key roles in early socialization by which children learn ‘normative’ values and behaviours accepted in society (Thorne, 1993).

The pervasive thinking that children cannot understand complex social issues that adults are often uncomfortable discussing, and that these topics are inappropriate for the classroom, is a fabrication. This way of thinking jeopardizes the equity of LGBTQ-identified students who are similarly entitled to a fair and just education within a safe learning environment. All too often adults bestow their fear of discomfort by underestimating children’s’ capacity for critical thinking and deep understanding (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Drazenovich, 2015; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011). In order to teach in a society that continues to be increasingly diverse, educators need the opportunity to examine how much of their pedagogical practices work to reflect this diversity. Educators must be dedicated to embracing their students who are, or come from homes that involve, linguistic, ethnic, racial, class, gender, and sexual diverse backgrounds. If educators do not address issues of homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia and cisgenderism, students will continue to experience harassment within schools, feel excluded, marginalized, and underrepresented. It is prudent to better understand why teachers are not addressing these persistent and damaging effects and their impact on LGBTQ students who continue to experience hostility in their everyday schooling (Taylor et al., 2011). The best way to understand this is through an attempt to generate knowledge that addresses how they experience and make sense of this phenomenon. To offer equitable learning opportunities, educators need to reflect on their own position in the classroom and the responses, or lack thereof, in disrupting norms and deconstructing social constructed categories of identity through inclusive interventions. Queer theory and queer pedagogy offer immense value in terms of informing our understanding about what it means to challenge discourses of normalcy and to disrupt binary ways of thinking about identity, and how to enact such interventions in the classroom.

I am inspired to work with educators, having graduated with my Bachelor of Education in the summer of 2015 from Trent University. My teacher training has resulted in being accredited to teach in the primary/junior division. I have taught a host of subjects during my practicums that

include, but are not limited to, Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Science, Geography, and Health and Physical Education in Canadian Catholic elementary schools. Having been immersed in an elementary school setting as a teacher candidate, I came to witness the challenges of teaching, which brought me to my desire to pursue graduate studies. I desired to acquire a theoretical underpinning for the tensions that I had felt from my own schooling experiences. During my first year of Master's studies, I have learned about the inequities that underpin schooling, the underlying structures and systems that sustain inequities in school, and the role of teachers in supporting or rectifying the heterosexist and cisnormative school climate and their effects on diverse students. The unpacking of my study on how teachers understand and respond to LGBTQ students is a result of my experiences as a teacher candidate and sexual minority gay man, which propelled my passion to learn how to better attend to the current tensions in the school system with regards to addressing gender and sexual diversity. One tension in education is that Catholic schools are often regarded as unsafe spaces for LGBTQ students as illustrated through existing research (Ferfolja, 2005; Jones, 2014; Litton, 2001; Love, 1997; Maher, 2003; Walton, 2014). In Canadian Catholic Schools that are publicly funded, such as in the provinces of Alberta, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, safe spaces for affirming LGBTQ youth and identities are often difficult to sustain because the Catholic Doctrine forms a basis for curricula and policy decisions taken in such schools (Truth and Reconciliation Canada, 2015). The fear of experiencing reprisal for acting on sexuality forces many LGBTQ individuals into a Foucauldian self-surveillance during their time in schools, particularly those of Catholic faith (Callaghan, 2016). Identifying myself as a member of the LGBTQ community placed me in an uncomfortable binary of public versus private during my teacher candidacy in Catholic schools. Jones et al. (2014) suggests that to exist as a non-heterosexual teacher is to navigate a complex landscape where private and professional boundaries are navigated delicately as one moves into 'the risky business of choosing visibility' (p. 340). Meanings associated with non-heterosexual identities are understood through the way in which dominant social structures position individuals as 'other' (Jones et al., 2014). According to Jones (2014) such teachers who navigate these complex landscapes are viewed with suspicion reserved, as he describes as, for the criminally deviant because they defy heterosexual norms.

This research is indeed rooted in my own identity as a gay student and educator. I am interested in transforming the classroom to reflect socially just and equitable practices when it

comes to diversity. My sexual orientation provides a distinct frame of reference that informs my role as a researcher. I recognize that my identity works to shape the way I reflect on the elementary curriculum, as well as how I experience schooling overall. The main intellectual goal of my research is to develop a deeper understanding of how elementary teachers are confronting, grappling with, and attending to gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms/schools. I seek to develop a deeper understanding of how teachers make sense of their own experiences of gender and sexual diversity and the relevance of this self-knowledge for their own practice in the classroom/school. The following questions helped to guide this study and have been addressed:

1. How are elementary school teachers addressing gender and sexuality in their classrooms/schools? To what extent are they aware of the direct and indirect damaging effects of heterosexism, homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality and genderism in schooling? How are issues surrounding diverse sexualities and genders conceptualized, addressed, struggled with, and interpreted in the classroom?
2. To what extent are teachers providing safe spaces in schools that allow for gender and sexually diverse desire and expression? To what extent do they feel prepared and wholly supported in addressing gender and sexual diversity in the classroom?
3. What knowledges/awareness do teachers have of LGBTQ specific policies and to what extent are such policies helpful in informing their practice?

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

I draw on queer and gender complex frameworks for the purposes of grasping complex issues related to sexism, heterosexism, heteronormativity, genderism and cisnormativity, as well as their interactions in the school system. Employing a queer and gender complex theory approach informs both my research questions and critical approach to investigating frames that define gender and sexual identity in normative terms.

#### **Queer Theoretical Framework**

Meyer (2007) indicates that queer theory transcends traditional explorations of gay and lesbian identity and experience by tackling commonsense understandings about relationships, identities, sexes, genders, and sexual orientations (Meyer, 2007). Queer theory goes beyond the exploration of gay and lesbian identity and experience, Meyer (2007) declares, suggesting that:



It questions taken-for-granted assumptions about relationships, identity, gender, and sexual orientation. It [also] seeks to explode rigid normalizing categories into possibilities that exist beyond the binaries of man/woman, masculine/feminine, student/teacher, and gay/straight. (p. 15)

Queer theory provides a necessary lens that holds the potential for seeing the world in new ways by exploring and celebrating existing tensions and generating new understandings of sexuality that are not delimited by a heterosexual-homosexual binary (Meyer, 2007). Through a queer theory lens, I closely examine and interrogate the ways in which teachers work toward accepting, challenging, and interrupting heteronormative discourses and patterns in a classroom setting. This study focuses on educators specifically given that the ways in which students learn how to survive and thrive in their social world at school is directly impacted by pedagogical relations with their classroom teacher. The primary responsibility of the educator is to develop and sustain learning opportunities that support the students' intellectual, social, and personal development. Wyatt (2008), for example, highlights that the educator may hold certain biases, beliefs, and values that either work to deter or promote the use of LGBTQ inclusive curricular. Moreover, Renn (2010) indicates that queer theory attempts to disrupt binaries that establish gender categories and create heteronormative environments that oppress people who do not fit into normative identity categories. In fact, many researchers have drawn attention to the fact that educators play an active role in cultivating learning environments that allow for queer pedagogy and anti-oppressive education, as well as highlight the need for teachers to be reflective of their own practice, opinions, and values, and how these affect the dynamics of their classroom (Kumashiro, 2000; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001; Wyatt et al., 2008).

Employing a queer critical lens can be valuable in understanding and responding to the complex processes of heterosexual subjection and the ontological and epistemological limitations which restrict LGBTQ students from attending school in a safe and educationally rich environment. Educators and other school staff allow for this violence to continue amongst LGBTQ students due to their lack of consistent or effective response to incidents of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism in their schools (Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2011). Schools continue to be institutionally homophobic and allow heteronormative and cisnormative processes to be sustained through structure, procedure, curriculum, and policies. In consequence, the hegemonic norm of compulsory heterosexuality

continues to be a part of the school culture. Students who identify as non-heterosexual, non-binary and trans may perceive their environments as less safe due to the fact that they deviate from the ‘norm.’ For the purpose of undoing the heteronormative culture in schools, educators need to be aware of, and responsive to, critical issues that pertain to the schooling experiences of LGBTQ students. To successfully disrupt this heteronormative climate, it is imperative to identify key areas of change within school culture that work to promote compulsory heterosexuality. This includes the language of the educator, the safe spaces that the educator works to create in their classroom, the anti-harassment policies and laws that the educator is cognizant of, the pedagogy enacted by the educator; as well as the overall training of school staff related to the unique issues faced by LGBTQ students in a school setting (Diaz, Kosciw & Greytak, 2010). Understanding, uncovering, and reflecting on the beliefs, attitudes, and responses of educators toward the LGBTQ community can provide valuable steps toward interrogating insidious practices that sponsor homophobia and heterosexism. It is paramount to focus on educators as they work to navigate the curricular demands, and respond to the demands of parents and students from complex and diverse backgrounds.

I am using theorists, such as Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) and Britzman (1995, 2000) who draw on Foucault (1978, 1984) to work toward exposing the naturalized heteronormative oppressions reflective in the curricula, as well as deconstructing the binaries and interrupting the heteronormative constructions of sexuality and gender. I begin by drawing on queer theorist, Eve Sedgwick (1990), describing the diacritical arrangement of Western culture and its fixation around oppositions, drawing on concepts of “secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, masculine/feminine, same/different, in/out” (p.11). Sedgwick (1990) imparts in her book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, that the heterosexual/homosexual binarism is a fundamental of modern Western thought. She regards this binary as highly problematic as it ignores the understanding that heterosexuality is not separate from homosexuality but rather they are mutually dependent upon one another for their meaning. Sedgwick (1990) remarks:

Categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions—heterosexual/homosexual, in this case—actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous submission and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is

irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A. (p. 10)

Sedgwick's deconstructive analysis is helpful insofar as understanding how the dichotomization of the hetero/homo, which she sets out to unsettle, is tied to politics of difference. This difference works to give oppositional logic about bodies, sexuality, norms, and power relations which are formed through exclusionary practices. As this theorist explicates, queer theory does not seek to institute a new hierarchy, but acts as a means to rupture boundaries for the purpose of revealing and defying polar opposites and rigid orders. Queer theory is critical for the interrogation, disruption, and subversion of the heteronormative schema, providing pivotal implications for delivering queer pedagogy without the conflation of a hegemonic praxis.

Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) is helpful in the conceptualization of my research as I draw on an anti-hetero/cisnormative framework to investigate pedagogical understandings related to addressing gender and sexual diversity as a means to unhinge the dominant social order in school. Queer theory as elaborated by scholars, such as Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) for example, productively allows for an analysis that brings light to the hegemonic discursive matrix, offering a wide-angle lens to showcase discourses that limit gender to fixed dichotomies and sexuality to the heterosexual norm. Her conceptualization of how gender, and by extension sexuality, are repeatedly conferred through a 'heterosexual matrix' is essential in understanding the ways in which normative identities are indissolubly linked to dominant notions of heterosexuality. Butler (1990) explains below:

I use the term heterosexual matrix ...to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized...a hegemonic discursive/epistemological model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (p. 151)

Works by theorists, such as Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) prove useful in challenging conventions that structure the way gender and sex is perceived. For this reason, her work inspires me by way of deconstructing the 'heterosexual matrix' in order to uncover social and cultural narratives that work to help reproduce normative processes, and in turn, subjugate the non-normative ascribing to them an abject status. Markedly, queer theory is successful in disrupting and altering understandings of how sexual minorities are discussed, how they are viewed, as well as how they

should be reflected in the classroom. More specifically, queer theoretical perspectives, such as those grounded in the work of Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) and Foucault (1978, 1984), examine the lives and experiences of those considered non-heterosexual and how and why those lives and experiences are considered outside of the norm and classified as deviant or pathological. The positioning of heterosexuality as normal persists as a normative practice. Heteronormativity is highly saturated within most structures and institutions, including schools. The education system retains heterosexuality as dominant and privileged, which dictates to whom is attended and acknowledged both within the classroom and the curriculum. Otherness is a normalizing mechanism, and is used in an attempt to control and assimilate while concurrently reifying the heterosexual body without having to examine its heteronormative stability. To put it simply, heteronormativity creates a language that underscores the principles of a particular form of governance, allowing learning to be entrenched in a culture that sees straight, reads straight, and thinks straight.

Butler (2006) shows that queer theory does not seek to eradicate identifications, but rather works toward a deeper understanding of identities as conditional, challenged, impermanent, storied, and not inborn essences. The understanding of identity as not connected to an ‘internal core,’ but instead a performance is brought upon by the influential work of Butler, and remains a key idea in queer theory. To illustrate, Butler (2006) notes the following:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (p.185)

According to Butler (2006), once we begin to acknowledge that the process of identity is obscured by this false naturalization, we can thus begin to question integral identity categories. Arising from this questioning is the exploration of the ways in which identity is shaped and regulated, in addition to how various ideologies prevail through the legitimacy of certain identities over others. Common sense knowledge of what constitutes sex, sexuality, desire, and pleasure, and the relationship among these categories need to be questioned for the possibilities they hold for deepened understanding. The hidden curriculum needs to be called for inspection to address the particularities of the perceived differences among people, not merely among

categories of people. The analysis generated from this study strives to expand the possibilities of what counts as knowledge, broadening the understanding of sexuality and gender. Additionally, it is my intent to expand the processes of perception, cognition, and interpretation by unearthing the way sexuality and gender are understood and explicitly heterosexualized.

My research is indeed informed by the work of Butler who exposes the primal roots of false distinctions between the notions of sex and gender, and contests their taken-for-granted assumptions. Butler (1990) is one of the most influential feminist-queer theorists and an ardent supporter of the defiance of essentialist notions of sex and gender. Butler (1990) focuses a large amount of her analysis on the use of gender to regulate and manage bodies in support of heterosexuality. More specifically, Butler (1990) claims that gender is not something that one already maintains, but rather, is something that one acquires through practices of culturally and socially established codes of gender identities. Subjects are constituted and identified by, and as a result of, political, social, and legal norms that inscribe sexed, gendered, et al. identities. Being recognized as a viable subject is successful in the event that a subject is continuously (re)constituted and regulated by discourses and power relations through subscribed, repeated, and reified norms at a particular place and time.

This formation of the subject means that subscription to specific norms allow for recognition, while the absence or subversion of subscription, is resultant of the discrediting or exclusion of a subject. Butler's (2004) central ideas concerning the subject, how one is constituted and constrained, as well as how one might engage in forms of resistance is critical for engaging in the politics of sexuality and gender in education. The nature of a person, the limitations of who a person might be, and the disavowals that are specific to the subjects' position are all central concerns for Butler (1990, 2004) and strictly connected to feminist, queer, anti-racist, and disability politics. Her work moves beyond recognition for identity and equality of its members toward a political engagement to trouble and unsettle notions of stable identities wherein privileges and exclusions work through. Butler's (1990, 1993, 2004) research informs my own thinking insofar as I conceptualize how gender is both a social construction and performance, as well as how discourses of normalcy are constituted and regulated.

Butler (1993) herself reflects on these 'viable lives' and how they are recognized in her book, *Bodies that Matter: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. The subjects who are viable,

with bodies that matter, are those that conform to dominant norms regarding gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality according to a heteronormative framework. Bodies that do not adhere to dominant norms become 'unintelligible' or disempowered, which is established through practices of exclusion, abjection or othering. Butler (1990) argues that gender requires certain socially and culturally determined codes to become intelligible according to the principles of a heterosexual matrix. The constellation of sex, gender and desire is a reproduction of normalized sexed, gendered, and sexual behaviours that give recognition to others that we, 'as a man or a woman,' are consistent with our bodies. Challenging the assumed internal coherence of sex, gender and desire, Butler (1990) argues that gender is produced through the very acts that are said to be its results. These acts fall under a heteronormative framework which consequently masks its depiction as inherent and unchanging.

The belief in 'opposite' sexed bodies is achieved through the repetition and recitation of gender norms over time. To succumb to a norm is not done by choice or initiative; it is however, to employ it as a means of gaining a marker or sign of legitimacy and credibility. The ways in which heterosexuality is normalized is through the reproduction of gender identifications, meaning male masculinity and female femininity. Heteronormativity works to have each gender category consist with various behavioural and physical traits wherein the subject is pressured to fit and uphold hegemonic and dominant practices that are privileged in a hierarchical structure. Because these practices necessitate the subject to emit the apparent signs of gender in order to be eligible to acquire and maintain an acceptable gender identity, Butler (1990) argues gendered identity is performative.

Following through with the understanding of gendered identities as a performative construct, it is possible for gender to become vulnerable to subversion as it is ultimately based on repetitive and reified acts. Therefore, without these acts Butler (1990) argues, there can no longer be such a thing as gender. The naturalized notion of gender is denounced then and the taken-for-granted assumptions connecting sex and gender become unsustainable. Gender is understood to be separate from sex, as Butler (1999) describes. Thus, "the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (Butler 1999, p. 10-11). It is through heteronormative social regulation that the alleged distinction between sex and gender seems prehistoric and unchanging. As a consequence of society being a heterosexual and patriarchal structure, certain social,

political, and legal requirements are produced with the intention to preserve dominating values and traditions. Societies work toward the producing and reproducing the heterosexual matrix as both natural and foundational for purpose of keeping social practices and power structures intact (Butler, 1990).

To this extent, these requirements are sought to guarantee sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage, which requires the reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes which, in effect, guarantee the eventual reproduction of that kinship system (Butler, 1988). The kinship system, which functions on naturalized notions of sex and gender, maintains itself through the presumption that desire is routinely experienced for the opposite sex. Complementing her theoretical perspectives, Butler (1988) draws on Foucault (1976) wherein he acknowledges the body and sexuality as both culturally and socially constructed entities instead of an allegedly natural phenomenon. Foucault writes:

The notion of “sex” made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (p. 154)

The work of Foucault (1978, 1984) is foundational for Butler’s (1988) thinking. Foucault’s (1978, 1984) ideas about power, knowledge, and discourse are key and inform many education scholars who focus on the ways they function in and through institutionalized practices. The understanding of power as productive and implicated in the making of subjects, and the idea that power in itself produces discourses that make claims to knowledge about the subject, are taken up and developed in Butler’s scholarly work.

### **The Relevance and Use of Foucault**

The Foucauldian insight into the nature of power informs the basis of Butler’s (1990) thinking about the formation of the subject. Foucault’s notions of the gaze, institutional power, and panoptic surveillance transcend the pages of *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1975) as they markedly showcase clear relevance to practices involved in the current education system, specifically with regards to schooling. The act of surveillance is rooted in Foucault’s (1975) idea of the panopticon, which involves an all-seeing, however invisible, source of power and control

(Steinberg, 2009). I draw on Steinberg (2009) as he offers important parallels to Foucault (1975) insofar as he pinpoints mechanisms of power and knowledge within social, organizational, and institutional contexts that influence everyday practices. The concept of self-surveillance is based on the cultural postulation that specific thoughts and actions are dangerous or unwholesome to the constitution of the individual as a subject who is of an ethical substance (Foucault, 1975). Foucault (1975) famously observed social control of subjects through the conception of the panopticon in prominent social institutions, like schools, mental hospitals, and prisons. This surveillance and control remains powerful because we unknowingly contribute to it without any question or resistance, Steinberg (2009) claims.

Through this surveillance and policing of bodies and language, school structures continue to mandate compulsory heterosexuality using the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. Some examples Steinberg (2009) offers as evidence are the exclusive study of heterosexual romantic literature, the portrayal of the 'nuclear' family ideal, as well as the teaching of sex through a reproductive lens or abstinence-only lessons in sex education. Other forms of relationships and concepts of desire that are differentiated from heterosexuality are omitted from the official curriculum (Britzman, 2000; Fine, 1998; Pinar, 1998). As Bem (1993) explains, the reinforcement of heterosexuality through social and cultural discourses is made to serve two functions, "first, it defines mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female. Second, it defines any person or behaviour that deviates from these scripts as problematic; taken together, the effect of these two processes is to construct and naturalize a gender-polarizing link between the sex of one's body and the character of one's psyche and one's sexuality" (p. 81). This conceptualization offers important implications for this research in seeking to better understand how LGBTQ students are faring in the education system, which delimits the embracing of sexual diversity and gender democratization.

Foucault (1980) contends that power and pleasure closely interconnect in educational institutions, interplaying through their large populations, their hierarchies, their spatial arrangements, their surveillance systems, and through familial relations. Privileged spaces of extreme sexual saturation are found, as Foucault (1990) identifies, in the classroom where sexual relationships, appropriate desire and expression are established. Schools continue to produce processes of systematic inclusion and exclusion in a way where information about sexual



diversity is introduced in schools as a pathology or deviance (Rubin, 1984; Mayo, 2004; Meyer, 2010). Meyer (2010) captures the contradictory nature of schooling by highlighting schools' efforts to de-sexualize spaces for students while simultaneously affirming heterosexual behaviours and punishing those who appear to deviate from those behaviours. To supplement, Epstein and Johnson (1998) explain:

Schools go to great lengths to forbid expressions of sexuality by both children and teachers. This can be seen in a range of rules, particularly those about self-presentation. On the other hand, and perhaps in consequence, expressions of sexuality provide a major currency and resource in the everyday exchanges of school life. Second, the forms in which sexuality is present in school and the terms on which sexual identities are produced are heavily determined by power relations between teachers and taught, the dynamics of control and resistance. (p.108)

To make sense of my own experiences as a teacher candidate facing schooling through a public versus private sphere due to acts of surveillance and policing, I turn to the important work of Foucault (1975, 1980). In light of his scholarship, those who identify as non-heterosexual must exist in a particular 'closet'-a well-defined and restrictive heterosexual closet. To provide emphasis on the surveillance and discipline in schools, I draw on a ground-breaking study conducted by Lipkin (1999) that provides in-depth accounts of discrimination experienced by educators who identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, in addition to harassment stories of students who assume non-heterosexual and/or gender-nonconforming expressions. The findings by Lipkin (1999) indicate that those who did not display typical archetypes of masculinity and femininity are consequently subject to vigorous scrutiny and persecution by their peers. Invisible scripts are mentioned to exist within the school where surveillance and discipline took precedent in support of this heteronormative script, sending the message that these identities were not valued or welcomed (Lipkin, 1999). Surveillance, as it pertains to sexuality, is justified through anxieties about the risk factors posed to youth in even hearing about sex, let alone performing it (Johnson & Dalton, 2012).

Education as a site of surveillance reflects public health discourses and the tracking of underage sexual practices as risk factors as further detailed by Jonson and Dalton (2012). Sex education is required, yet at the same time, raises questions about the sexualization of children, which requires control over what is expressed (Johnson & Dalton, 2012). Public versus private, gay versus straight, safety versus danger are all lenses and binary frames used to support the

need for surveillance (Johnson & Dalton, 2012). The main issue with sexuality in education is its subjection to power which is implicated in discourses that make knowledge claims about the subject as Foucault (1990) outlines at the beginning of his first volume in *The History of Sexuality*. Sexuality interplays heavily with discursive forms of power, taking many channels, and having discourses permeate through power in order to encapsulate a collective way of being. It is important to appreciate the act of surveillance as it gives rise to meanings of the social and political understandings of sexuality, limited views of knowledge, and essentialized notions of human activity. Sexual identity, for those that assume a non-heterosexual identification/non-normative gender, is indeed subject to conceptual constructions propagated by particular institutions, such as schools, which shape our perceptions of what is deemed normal and proper.

In this sense, Foucault's (1978, 1980) work is influential and informs my thinking about my research as he offers insightful renderings of the relationship between sex and power. Butler (1999) complements Foucault by way of similarly conceptualizing sex as a discursive and material embodiment of norms fashioned in order to subscribe to a heterosexual matrix of power relations. Foucault writes about the notion of sexuality, which is made to seem absolute and a part of an existing reality. To support this claim, Foucault (1978) argues that:

[B]y presenting itself in a unitary fashion, as anatomy and lack, as function and latency, as instinct and meaning, it [the notion of sex] was able to mark the line of contact between a knowledge of human sexuality and the biological sciences of reproduction; thus, without really borrowing anything from these sciences, excepting a few doubtful analogies, the knowledge of sexuality gained through proximity a guarantee of quasi-scientificity; but by virtue of this same proximity, some of the contents of biology and physiology were able to serve as a principle of normality for human sexuality (p. 154-5).

Foucault (1978) continues to assert that sexuality is produced by practices and exclusions, which are effected by disciplinary power. Informed by the taboos against homosexuality and incest through Foucault's (1978) 'productive hypothesis,' Butler (1990) comes to the conclusion that power both represses and produces what is forbidden. The tensions of taboo's existence as it in relative terms to homosexuality, require recognizing sexuality as a complex historical system of discourse and power that produces contradictions of sex as a means to conceal and perpetuate power relations (Butler, 1999). As Butler (1999) concludes, homosexuality plays an integral role in the conceptualization of heterosexuality in respect to having homosexuality maintain its

existence by way of constant association between the two, revealing a discursively constructed mechanism of power.

With attention to Foucault's (1975) theories in *Discipline and Punish*, notions surrounding the body and the prison system showcase how power turns individuals into 'docile bodies.' Correspondingly, Butler (1990) discusses the signification of the body, drawing on Foucault (1975), writing that the law is not externalized from the body but rather operates on and through the body (Taylor & Vintges, 2004). As written above, Foucault (1975) believes that power is conceptualized on and through the body through accounts of self-surveillance which circumscribe bodily experiences for both men and women (Pylypa, 1998). This self-disciplinary practice, which we adopt, and in turn, to which we subjugate ourselves, results in normalization (Pylypa, 1998). From this perspective, we as individuals desire to conform, and do so voluntarily by subscribing to cultural norms (Pylypa, 1998). Butler (1990, 1999) extends this understanding of power producing subjectivity by drawing on Foucault (1975), focusing on the body which, as she maintains, offers possibilities for transgression in respect to gender. The juridical ideas of power relations in regulating subjects by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced by structures draws a contradiction as suggested by Butler (1990).

### **Queer Pedagogy**

Another theorist that I draw on in my research is Deborah Britzman (1995, 2000), who explicitly draws into question queer theory in relation to pedagogical interventions. In Britzman's (1995) publication, *Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight*, the theorist draws attention to the pedagogical implications of the conditions of minoritized sexual identities. Britzman (1995) strives to interrogate the production of normalcy wherein certain identities are produced as 'normal' and credited with intelligibility. The way in which I conceptualize queer pedagogy is not by teaching practices or content, but instead as an invaluable learning opportunity created by teachers where questioning assumptions interferes with the production of gender and sexual identities and formation. Britzman (1995) insists on employing queer theory in an attempt to unearth the production of normalization, calling us to rethink pedagogy and our knowledge systems. Employing a queer theoretical framework aids us in rethinking pedagogical practices because it offers methods of critique "to mark repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as a pedagogy" (Britzman, 2000, p. 154). Normative structure and

pedagogy is where the silencing of LGBTQ people and culture in the official curricula takes place, which construct and sanction heterosexual privilege (Britzman, 2000).

Using a queer theoretical approach, Britzman (2000) works to create resistance to normative sexuality in various forms: structural, pedagogical, and physical. Firstly, Britzman (2000) addresses how sexuality is currently conceptualized in the school curriculum:

This has to do with how the curriculum structures modes of behaviour and orientations to knowledge that are repetitions of the underlying structure and dynamics of education: compliance, conformity, and the myth that knowledge cures. (p. 35)

Structural resistance is the most resistant to change as it places a demand on the renovation on the very design or organization of education. Britzman (1995) raises important questions about the lack of attempt in pedagogical practice to disrupt the “conceptual geography of normalization” in schools in favour of producing the “subject of difference as a disruption” (p. 152). In conceptualizing the ways in which to challenge pedagogical forms of resistance, the theorist encourages educators to be cognizant of the role love/desire can play in teaching. Through understanding sexuality as a force that “allows the human its capacity for passion, interests, explorations, disappointment, and drama,” and because sexuality falls in the public/private sphere- we must focus on sexuality in terms of working through our own internal conflicts and ambivalence as Britzman (2000) advocates. By doing this, serious questions arise on the nature of education and uses of educational anxiety according to Britzman (2000). Britzman (1997) stresses that the perception of sexual identities as different from one another and as private, is a myth contributing to heteronormativity, which she defines as the ‘obsession with normalizing sexuality through discourses that reduce ‘queerness’ to a pathologization and deviance. This myth perpetuates the notion that homosexuality is distinct from heterosexuality, and that sexual identity is a private affair, which has no bearing with our public lives. However, Britzman (1997) exposes this myth, as she argues that schools do in fact “mediate the discourses of private and public” (p. 192), which perpetually fosters the notion that (homo)sexualities must be concealed. Arising from this concealment is the understanding that heterosexuality is the ‘public’ voice, definition, and representation of ‘normal’ and natural sexuality.

Britzman (1997) points out that the homo/heterosexual dualism is representative of a hierarchical power relationship in which definitions and understandings of homosexuality are defined in opposition to what it means to be heterosexual and vice versa. Because sexuality is

continually regarded as a taboo issue, it is difficult for many teachers to speak on, and behalf of those in the LGBTQ community, particularly in open discussion. Queer pedagogy is helpful, Britzman (2000) suggests, in helping educators to explore once silenced discourses and create spaces that allow students to encounter and scrutinize hierarchical relations that give rise to binary constructions in schools. To achieve a queer pedagogy, teachers must learn to view school as a place to interrogate, discover, and seek alternative explanations rather than a place where knowledge is synonymous with certainty, authority and stability (Britzman, 2000). For Britzman (1995), we must think about the ways that “discourses of difference, choice, and visibility” (p. 152) mean in the classroom, in pedagogy, and in how education can be thought about it. Applying queer theory to education, Britzman (1995) argues, is more than giving voice to marginalized identities. Queer theory seeks to extend beyond asking how knowledge is constructed toward asking who constructs the knowledge.

Investigating teachers’ approaches to gender and sexual diversity reflects a queer theoretical stance by understanding teaching as a practice that transmits and creates knowledge. Through the study conducted, emergent understandings of what counts as knowledge, what knowledge is being taught, and how students are learning were brought to light. Britzman (2000) is influential in my thinking as she informs my understanding of the complex relationship between teaching and learning in a transformative way, requiring an interrogative approach that allows new knowledges to emerge. Her work, with respect to queering pedagogical approaches, offers possibilities for interrogating the heteronormative and cisnormative framework in schools in order to create a more social and democratized space for all students. Similar to what Britzman (1995, 2000) reveals in her research, educators need to think about how students that assume a certain identification are dismissed in learning, and how students begin to resist learning. As Britzman (1995) communicates, queer theory maintains the potential to transcend the limits of thinkability, and offers new possibilities for knowledge not previously thought. Britzman (1998) proclaims that the problem of education is related to “how one comes to think, along with others, about the very structures of signification in avowing and disavowing forms of sociality and their grounds of possibility; to question, along with others, one’s forms of thinking, one’s form of practice” (p.84-85). Consistent with Britzman’s (2000) conceptualization of queer pedagogy, I seek to investigate elementary school teachers’ pedagogical decision-making because of the possibilities for applying anti-hetero/cisnormative practices, allowing for gender

and sexual democratization. Britzman's (1995, 2000) work offers tremendous value in developing a deeper understanding of how gender and sexual identities are integrally connected to teachers' pedagogical practices and their dealings with students. Learning from her work, it is by considering subjectivities where insights into the possibilities for rejecting and interrupting the grounds of intelligibility in schools emerge, especially given the institutionalization of heterosexuality in these sites. Britzman's (1995, 2000) work provides important insights into the reimagining of pedagogy through the disruption of difference, the interrogation of knowledge versus ignorance, and the deconstruction of normative discourses.

Queer pedagogy, as it is explicated by Britzman (1995, 2000), offers tremendous potential to dismantle systems that categorize people and ultimately works to disrupt heteronormative cultural codes. Applying anti-homophobia curricula that strive to change ignorance, attitudes, and beliefs of heterosexual students through pedagogical practices is ineffective as it does so by adding marginalized voices to the curriculum (Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 2000). In other words, simply including or adding LGBTQ representation to the curriculum does not result in queering the curriculum. What is needed, rather, is a focus on processes of normalization, and an interrogation of what counts as 'normal,' and how 'normal' comes to be defined and understood. In this sense, Britzman (2000) directs attention away from merely LGBTQ inclusion and visibility to a focus on the privileging of heterosexuality. This approach is consistent with that advocated by Kumashiro (2002) who calls for participants in the classroom setting to recognize the ways in which identities intersect with one another, rejecting understandings of sameness and inclusion. In schools where anti-homophobia policies operate and which work toward remedying homophobia, equity is only guaranteed if 'homosexual' identities bear heterosexual resemblances wherein LGBTQ people are presented as being just like 'us' - not really different from heterosexual people.

Such a logic only serves to reinforce the heterosexual-homosexual binary. Rather, the pedagogical focus needs to be on addressing normative ideologies and hence a commitment to exploring heteronormativity in all its complexities in order to successfully subvert it. Focusing just on homophobia in equity-based policies in schools requires, and thereby produces, normative knowledge about queer lives (Britzman, 1997; Pinar, 1998). For Britzman (1997), education is conceived as a process of personal and social change and progress, learning is

understood as perpetual and conscious, and education reflects the opportunity for discomfort with the possibilities for seeing the world differently and in terms that disrupt heteronormativity. Britzman (1995) sees the transformative potential for educational pedagogies that reflect democratic, inclusive, and transgressive properties for not only the educator, but for students at large. Such insights provided clear implications for this research as they pay direct attention to the need to think about the institutionalization of broader systems of heteronormativity and cisnormativity. These insights are helpful insofar as investigating how these systems impact teachers' pedagogical practices with regard to addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms and schools beyond a mere focus on LGBTQ inclusion and discourses of sameness.

As this study seeks to investigate teachers' approaches to gender and sexual diversity as it is framed within heteronormative and cisnormative discourses, Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) and Britzman's (1995, 2000) queer scholarship remains influential in troubling notions of difference and identity, repositioning analysis on the production of normalcy, as well as rethinking the relations between knowledge and resistance to learning and pedagogy. As Britzman (1995, 2000) emphasizes pedagogy as assumptions about knowledge between the educator and learner, power, as illustrated by Foucault (1978, 1980), operates through the production of knowledge, which constitutes the teacher in certain normative terms. The ways in which teachers approach gender and sexual diversity in their classroom/school is implicated via knowledge-power relations. Although Foucault (1975) informs understandings related to the relation and formation of the subject within regulatory systems of power, Butler (1990) strives to ask specific questions about gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix. Although the subject, in this case the teacher, is constituted through normative discourses, the subject can only be assumed or legitimated by reiterating the acts required by certain regulatory norms, as Butler (1990) argues. This can be achieved by attending to processes of normalization that privilege heterosexuality rather than a mere focus on homophobia and an education that is invested solely in the sexual and gender minority subject as an object of the pedagogical gaze.

### **Gender Complex Approach**

Complementing my use of queer theory in this research is Rands' (2009) gender complex approach. In the article, "*Considering Transgender People in Education*" by Rands (2009), a call

for a gender-complex approach in teacher education is made whereby future teachers begin to think about gender in more complex ways, and enact gender-complex education with students. Gender-complex education is conceptualized as an interrogative stance toward gender while working toward a more complex, nuanced framework for better understanding gender privilege and oppression (Rands, 2013). Rands (2009) helps to illuminate the way in which gender plays an integral role in the pedagogical approaches in education, which disseminates appropriate behaviours for boys and girls, yet ignores and avoids gender for students that identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. For a more comprehensive approach and lasting curricular change, she espouses that a gender-complex approach recognizes the existence and experiences of trans-spectrum and gender-nonconforming people. She believes that this approach is to be adopted in education as a means to evade the discrimination that gender diverse students face. A gender-complex approach requires that prospective and current educators “interrogate their own thinking” (p.427) about gender, its construction, and the normative binaries that continue to pervade and be policed by schools (Rands, 2009). Urging educators to recognize the multiplicity of gender, she states that “gender-complex teachers work with students to analyze at the micro level, the ways in which gender is constantly being socially constructed in the classroom [enabling both] teachers and students to take reflective action to reconstruct gender” (p. 426). To rethink gender, it is necessary to recognize gender as a larger system that includes privileges and punishments. Rands (2009) understands privilege as it pertains to gender as: “exist[ing] when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because anything they’ve done or failed to do” (p. 422).

A gender complex education not only challenges ‘gender category oppression,’ but also ‘gender transgression oppression’ (Rands, 2009). ‘Gender category oppression’ reflects the assumption that there are only two genders, and therefore, transgender people are cast marginally (Rands, 2009). Likewise, ‘gender transgression oppression’ entails the restrictions placed on those who reject gender binary categories altogether and the assumption that gender is marked by biology (Rands, 2009). Both forms of oppression collude within *The Gender Oppression Matrix* to constrain not just transgender people, but all individuals in terms of limiting possibilities for gender expression and enactment (Rands, 2009). Gender category oppression and gender transgression oppression provide a more powerful framework for explaining the complex sets of gender privilege and oppression that individual’s experience. Gender-complex educators are



aware of the ways in which *The Gender Oppression Matrix* and heterosexism work harmoniously with one another to privilege certain groups of people and oppress others, taking action to contest this oppressive matrix (Rands, 2009). This approach, in practice, involves teaching children to acquire a more complex vocabulary, increasing class discussions that address power dynamics, acknowledging and respecting students' gender diversity, as well as including representations of transgender, gender fluid, cisgender, and gender-nonconforming people (Rands, 2009).

As Rands espouses, given that schools continue to be rife with gender category oppression and gender transgression oppression, better preparing teachers to challenge *The Gender Oppression Matrix* in their classrooms/schools is crucial to help all students flourish. A gender-complex education inspires my research insofar as investigating elementary school teachers' approaches to addressing privilege and oppression, as well as other intersecting forms of privilege and oppression, for a more gender just education. This must begin with teachers' own understanding of gender oppression, which highlights the intent of this research in investigating how teachers are approaching gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms/schools. Respectively, teachers need to be presented with a new framework for understanding gender privilege and oppression, along with a clearer understanding of definitions and concepts related to gender, transgenderism, and cisnormativity. To truly instill a supportive school environment, approaches taken need to go beyond reactive steps to proactive and pervasive changes that intercede at all levels of education and across all features of schooling. A gender-complex education takes into consideration the existence and experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming people, seeing it as a basic and pervasive facet for a just education. A gender-complex approach highlights an epistemological orientation similar to queer theory in confronting issues related to power, privilege, and oppression. In keeping with my own research, such an approach maintains the potential for transforming the climate of elementary schools through the possibilities of a gender-complex education, allowing for a more gender democratized pedagogy.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the research problem as well as the purpose and objectives behind conducting this research, which is to develop further understandings of how teachers'

pedagogical decision-making speaks to effectively addressing gender and sexual diversity in schools. I have detailed the importance of examining teachers' approaches to addressing gender and sexual diversity for their considerable contribution in aiding to an anti-hetero/cisnormative school climate. Theorists, such as Butler (1990, 1993, 2004), Britzman (1995, 2000), Foucault (1975, 1978, 1984), and Rands (2009) have helped to provide critical insights and understandings, which inform the conceptualization of this study. These theorists provide frameworks which help to inform my analysis of how elementary school teachers make sense of pedagogical approaches to addressing gender and sexual diversity in schools. Such frameworks are important in light of the objective of this research, which is to gain further insight into how elementary school teachers are delimiting the processes of heterosexual subjection through their pedagogical decision-making. In the following chapter of this thesis, I will provide a review of the significant and relevant literature in the field of education. Chapter three will detail the methodological approach that I adopted. Chapter four will include a data analysis and will identify key themes related to how teachers' pedagogical decision-making speak to addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classroom/school. Chapter five provides implications of the overall study, the limitations associated with the design of this study, as well as recommendations for future studies concerning this topic.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

In this section, I provide a review of the relevant literature that deals with issues of gender and sexual diversity in the education system. Reviewing such literature helps to establish what research has already been conducted, with the view to highlighting the gaps and the need to conduct research into how teachers are addressing gender and sexual diversity in schools. For the purpose of grasping the importance of teachers addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classroom/school in a way that works to disrupt normative processes, I review studies that reveal the current hostile school climate for LGBTQ students. Subsequently, I review recent studies which offer important groundwork for schooling practices that work to disrupt the heteronormative and cisnormative schema pervasive in the education system. I also draw attention to the influential work of the *No Outsiders Project* (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009) which details pedagogical research into addressing sexual diversity in elementary education settings. Lastly, I conclude with implications from the literature review which inform my own research in investigating elementary school teachers' approaches to gender and sexual diversity. Such literature highlights the need to generate further knowledge about how teachers are dismantling or perpetuating heteronormative and cisnormative discourses, which influence socially just learning outcomes. This study provides specific focus on elementary school teachers because they are an underrepresented population in education research with respect to investigating anti-heteronormative and anti-cisnormative practices in schools.

### School Climate Studies

Drawing on the *First National Climate Survey* of Canadian LGBTQ-identified high school students commissioned by the Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (ECHTR), the everyday schooling experiences of these students raise serious concerns for equality and the need to address gender and sexual diversity in the education system. In particular, the study involved surveying over 3700 students from across Canada between 2007 and 2009 using two methods of data collection. The study seeks to identify the practices and degree to which students experienced homophobia and transphobic incidents at school, the effect of those experiences, and the efficacy of interventions made by schools to combat these forms of bullying. According to

the findings, 64% of LGBT youth, and 61% of students with LGBT parents report feeling unsafe at their school. Moreover, 74% of trans students and 55% of LGB youth report being verbally harassed about their gender or sexual orientation. LGBT youth who report being physically harassed or assaulted because of their orientation concerned 21% of the sample. Trans-youth in the study who reported being physically harassed or assaulted due to their gender expression involved 37% of the sample. Similarly, 49% of youth that identify as trans reported in the survey being sexually assaulted as a result of their gender expression. More than one in five (21%) of LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation. Similarly, 37% of trans-identified students reported incidents of physical harassment or assault due to their gender expression. In addition, 80% of LGBTQ students from schools with anti-homophobia policies reported never having been physically harassed versus 67% of LGBTQ students from schools without anti-homophobia policies. Students from schools with Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and other LGBTQ-inclusive student groups are much more likely to feel a sense of support in their school communities. Also, they are much more likely to be open with some or all of their peers about their gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as more likely to see their school climate as becoming less homophobic. Overall, the study reveals that students are exposed to recurrent disparaging language in their daily schooling experience and that teachers are often implicated in this disparagement, either by overlooking such homophobic and transphobic comments or by participating in these comments themselves.

Kosciw et al. (2013) also conducted a *National School Climate Survey*, which is one of the few studies to investigate the schooling experiences of LGBT students in the United States. The sample consisted of a total of 7,898 American LGBTQ students between 13 and 21 years of age. In particular to the results of the survey, 33% of LGBT students were physically harassed in the school year because of their sexual orientation and 23% because of their gender expression. Additionally, 65% of LGBT students reported hearing disparaging remarks, like ‘dyke’ or ‘faggot’ frequently. Likewise, 33% of students heard negative remarks about transgender people, like ‘tranny’ or “he/she” frequently. 56% of students reported personally experiencing LGBT-related discriminatory policies or practices at school and 65% said other students at their school had experienced these types of policies and practices. LGBT students reported feeling less unsafe at school with more supportive staff than students with no supportive staff (36% vs. 74%). Unfortunately, only 39% of students could identify 11 or more supportive staff in their schools.

The results of the survey indicate that schools remain an unwelcoming and unsafe place for sexual minority and gender non-conforming youth in the United States. The *National School Climate Survey* serves as an excellent example of the inequities that exist in schools and the problems of inclusion with regard to sexual and gender diversity (as well as race, class, language, and culture). It is evident that there is an urgent need for action to create safe and positive learning environments for all students, especially those who identify as LGBT. Results from the 2013 *National School Climate Survey* illustrate the ways in which school-based support is needed, involving supportive staff, anti-bullying/harassment policies, LGBT inclusive curricula, and GSAs, all of which can positively affect LGBT students' school experiences. The harsh school climates that LGBTQ students face, as demonstrated in these surveys, speaks to critical questions about how elementary school teachers' pedagogical decision-making effectively addresses homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism.

While transgender issues become increasingly visible, those who work with trans-identified youth often demonstrate a lack of understanding and responsiveness to effectively working alongside them. Stieglitz (2010), for example, claims that trans youth are specifically at risk for discrimination because of barriers they face with cultural norms related to appropriate gender expression and orientation toward normative sexual desire. Negrete (2007) also states that there is little research done with teachers working with trans-identified students which further contributes to their marginalization. This researcher also claims that there is a need to investigate the relationship between inclusive pedagogy and the representation of trans issues (Negrete, 2007). The specific study on trans youth, *Harsh Realities: The experiences of transgender youth in our schools*, uses the data drawn from the *Fifth National Climate Survey* between the 2006-2007 school year. As exemplified in this report, transgender youth face extremely hostile school climates characterized by harassment and stigmatization due to their gender expression. The purpose of this report is to further investigate transgender students' experiences with negative school climates, involving biased language, experiences of harassment, as well as the effect of victimization on educational outcomes. The report also attempts to investigate transgender students' engagement in their school community, as well as their access to institutional resources. Amongst the sample, 295 students participated in this survey- each of whom identified as transgender; were between 13 to 20 years of age, and were generally of Caucasian ancestry. The findings from this survey demonstrate the following: transgender youth face severely hostile

school environments, most transgender students frequently hear biased language, report feelings of unsafety in school, and lack LGBT-related resources and supports. I am therefore interested in exploring the approaches taken by elementary school teachers in disrupting the heteronormative and cisnormative discourses in schools which contribute to the hostility faced by transgender youth. Transgender students report higher levels of harassment and assault in comparison to their non-transgender counterparts. Similarly, transgender students report higher levels of disconnect from their school community, and have poorer educational outcomes. The aim of this study sought to generate further knowledge of the practices involved in problematizing homophobic and transphobic discourses, which work to limit positive learning outcomes for this population of students. Transgender students are shown to be more active regarding LGBT-related issues in their schools, possibly as a result of the unique challenges they face in respect to accessing gender-segregated facilities and being addressed by their preferred names/pronouns. The report concludes with a series of implications for the population of students facing these brutalities in their daily schooling. Educators, policymakers, and school staff are highlighted in this report for ensuring that schools are safe and inclusive environments for all students, including LGBT youth.

Despite schools that claim to operate with the mission statement to provide a “safe and supportive learning environment for all children,” (Safe Schools Action Team, 2008, p. 1) serious injustices in education are occurring. Students are learning that their victimization is a result of the institutionalization of rigid socially constructed norms propagated within a heterosexist and cisnormative culture. The present day school culture produces and reproduces heteronormativity and cisnormativity which are the origin of such violence toward LGBTQ-identified students (Toomey, McGuire & Russell, 2012). The reality of children who do not conform to traditional gender roles or who are LGBTQ is that they enter schools daily where adults and their peers create a culture that ignores, silences or overlooks oppression based on heteronormativity and cisnormativity. The harassment and violence experienced by LGBTQ youth can contribute to increased absenteeism, lower academic achievement, poor self-esteem, as well as the development of psychiatric disorders (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003). As *The National School Climate Surveys* determine, LGBT students feel less of a hostile school climate, as well as an increased feeling of belonging to their school community, when LGBTQ inclusive

curricula is being taught. Teachers who included LGBT-related content in their curriculum, as reported by LGBT students, are viewed as sources of support and as confidants.

This climate research outlines many implications for addressing LGBTQ students' experiences in schools. These implications have informed my own research, which seeks to generate further knowledge of how teachers can work to better support LGBTQ students that allow for equitable schooling experiences. For example, such climate studies highlight that teachers overlook their key role in addressing such harsh outcomes. Furthermore, this literature draws attention to the fact that many teachers overlook or deliberately ignore the possibility that they may be teaching students who identify as other than straight or cisgender in their classrooms. This is a result of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and the pervasive socio-culturally constructed and systemic bias toward heterosexuality and the gender binary system at the expense of non-heterosexual and/or gender non-conforming people. Schools continue to host an environment that includes anti-LGBT sentiment in the form of isolation, bullying, and underrepresentation. The classroom also continues to serve as a place of severe discomfort and a space of remoteness, decreasing equitable learning opportunities for LGBTQ students. Further research is needed to understand how educators are working to effectively support and create a safe environment in their classroom where all students are encouraged to flourish--if such efforts are being made at all. One of the ways to improve school climate and affirm a learning environment for LGBTQ students is through positive representation. As GLSEN acknowledges, LGBT-numerated policies, supportive educators, GSA-type groups, and more importantly, LGBT-inclusive curricula are all correlated with better educational outcomes for LGBT students. In this sense, teachers play a key role in setting a school culture of inclusivity, and must have the opportunity to confront and disrupt unjust situations in schools.

Another prominent study that deserves recognition is conducted by Snapp et al. (2015), which examines whether students' perceptions of personal safety and school climate safety are stronger when LGBTQ-inclusive curricula is introduced in the classroom. A sample of 1232 students from 154 schools, including LGBTQ and straight middle/high school students from California participated in a 2008 *Preventing School Harassment Survey*. This study highlights that LGBTQ-inclusive curricula are shown to be associated with higher reports of individual and school safety, lower levels of bullying, as well as a greater perception of supportiveness.

Despite the equity and safe school policies in both Canada and the United States, sexual and gender minority students encounter tremendous forms of bullying and harassment. The literature is rich with data to exemplify that gender and sexual minorities are mistreated in schools, and it points to the role of the educator in undoing this mistreatment. The significance of supporting LGBTQ students in schools cannot be undervalued. To comprehend why LGBTQ students face barriers, feel isolated, and are treated unjustly in schools, it is important to investigate how educators make sense of these experiences because in order to support a social justice and equity stance for LGBTQ students, it is necessary to examine the obstacles educators face in providing inclusive pedagogy in their classroom. These surveys serve as a reminder of the silence and hesitation facing educational stakeholders with regards to addressing homophobia/transphobia in schools and integrating LGBTQ topics into the curriculum. This research also highlights that support on an administrative level is needed to help encourage educators with the complexities and multi-faceted layers of diversity education.

Drawing on Meyer, Taylor and Peter (2015), schools are among the most problematic sites in facilitating oppressive attitudes and behaviours against those that assume diverse sexual and gender identities and expressions. This study examines the lack of systematically produced knowledge of educators' perspectives on and experiences of LGBTQ-inclusive education in schools. Data collected from this research derived from a large-scale survey of Canadian educators, drawing a total of over 3400 responses. The authors sought to question educators about the importance of inclusive education, how educators perceive school safety and student harassment, whether educators practice inclusive pedagogy and what these experiences include; as well as, what policies are put into place regarding harassment, safety, and inclusion to their knowledge. The results of this study indicate that, although a large sample of teachers have begun to incorporate inclusive education in their classroom (71.9%), these inclusions were largely on an additive level of multicultural education. A smaller number of teachers (61.8%) extended further efforts toward inclusive curricula and actively worked toward challenging homophobia and transphobia, including critiquing heterosexual privilege. LGBTQ teachers were much more likely to have done this than their heterosexual colleagues (83.6% vs. 55.2%). With respect to teachers' personal values, 86.8% reported that it is crucial to implement LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, but only 48.9% did this in actual practice.



The findings of this particular study, in addition to other studies, help to point to the gap between educators' awareness of homophobia and transphobia and the interventions into such incidents. The lack of intervention made by teachers who identify as heterosexual in comparison to their LGBTQ-identified colleagues, may be indicative of their inattention to the safety issues that LGBTQ students face in their school environments. Although LGBTQ teachers are more sensitive to and aware of these negative instances occurring, they are minimally more likely to intervene than their straight colleagues, which may speak to the public vs. private, risk vs. safety that Johnson and Dalton (2012) describe in their research. LGBTQ teachers experience subjugation due to their heteronormative school environments which grants privileges to heterosexual teachers, including choosing to be visible without fear of harassment or discrimination. LGBTQ students reported in the survey that they would not feel as supported had teachers not practiced inclusive education, which underscores that support is necessary on a system level. Scarce administrative support is a clear barrier for teachers taking the necessary proactive steps to address these issues in their classrooms.

### **Literature that specifically addresses Pedagogical and Professional Practice**

A recent study by Richard (2015), investigates the ways in which teachers describe their pedagogical and intervention practices relative to addressing sexual diversity in Quebec schools. In response to an online survey among 234 secondary school teachers from Francophone schools, teachers revealed an uneasiness toward the idea of discussing sexual orientations due to scarce information, resources, time or interest. Most of these findings are not context-specific, therefore this marginalization of LGBTQ content can be seen elsewhere in Canada. The results of the study further indicate that the attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of the teacher affect a pedagogical commitment to addressing the representation of gender and sexual diversity in the classroom. This finding supports the intention of this study which is to investigate how teachers encounter, understand, and respond to gender and sexual diversity as a basis for generating further knowledge about the way in which heteronormative and cisnormative discourses are dismantled or perpetuated. In total, 81.5% of teachers reported discussing diversity in their classroom; however, when asked about the contexts of these discussions, only 13.5% of respondents affirmed that sexual diversity is among the topics they are required to address as part of the program.

There is a clear and highly significant relationship between participant training on sexual diversity and the willingness of teachers to discuss the topic in their classrooms as illustrated by Richard (2015). For example, teachers who had taken part in at least one training session (61.5%) reported increased discussions on such topics compared to teachers with no specific training. Furthermore, 67% of respondents in the survey affirm that their interventions to eliminate homophobia were focused on correcting inappropriate vocabulary. Amongst the sample, 15.7% of teachers believe that homophobic comments are harmless and did not refer to homosexuality but rather something boring or inane. The vast majority of teachers (88.3%) stated that their teacher training did not provide them with the necessary tools to respond to homophobic incidents in school effectively. The need for school administrators to provide more support against homophobia, especially through training, is largely agreed upon amongst the educators (88.8%). This finding supports my research question in exploring whether teachers feel prepared and wholly supported in addressing gender and sexual diversity in the classroom and what support is needed to help them. Two-thirds of the teachers in the survey said that there are not enough opportunities for them to extend their understanding of gender and sexual diversity in education.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that teachers do not feel adequately prepared to tackle homophobia and heterosexism, as well as gender and sexual diversity in the classroom. Teachers working to develop deeper understandings can be helpful insofar as developing greater consideration and outreach interventions toward gender and sexual minorities in schools. Clearly, teachers feel apprehension in responding to gender and sexual minority youth due to lack of institutional supports, lack of training, fear of criticism by other colleagues, and concerns over parental response. By inquiring about the ways in which teachers understand and respond to these issues, my research helps to further build knowledge about the barriers and possibilities with regards to addressing gender and sexual diversity in the classroom.

Ryan, Patraw and Bednar (2013) examine the experiences and outcomes of teaching about gender diversity in an elementary school classroom in the United States. Data from their study derives from a larger study that uses a qualitative, multiple case study approach to document practices of elementary school teachers who address LGBTQ-related issues in their classrooms through literary texts. The project lasted for two years and took place through

participant observation, informal interviews, and document analysis. Following an urban public school teacher in a grade 4/5 classroom, who included discussions of transgender and gender nonconforming people within the curriculum, and the ways in which her students responded to the lessons, provided interesting conclusions. Ryan et al. (2013) found that over a series of lessons, students who mostly abided by traditional gender norms had begun to move beyond simple biological classifications and understand the effects of gender expectations.

The findings of this study further highlight that children are, in fact, ready to learn about gender diversity and sustain the necessary critical thinking skills to address these advanced topics. This highlights the intent of my research which is to investigate how elementary school teachers are approaching gender and sexual diversity in their classroom/school given children's readiness for learning about such topics. The authors propose that through carefully scaffolded lessons over time, gender diversity and other social issues, can be taught appropriately and effectively in elementary schools. Moreover, this study is central for educators to provide opportunities that allow students to reflect on their gendered lives and understand how it is constructed and rule-bound. Such instruction should also allow students to understand gender as one of many significant categories of difference, and to understand the relationship between gender identity and gender expression. As more students openly identify and express themselves as gender nonconforming, while other children continue to function as active agents of gender policing and surveillance, the need for teaching about gender diversity can no longer go ignored. That is why I seek to investigate elementary school teachers' pedagogical decision-making for the purpose of reimagining the possibilities for schools to offer spaces for gender and sexual democratization and expression.

Through exploration of picture books that feature lesbian and gay characters, Schall and Kauffmann (2003) engage students in a fourth/fifth grade classroom with discussions related to issues around diversity and difference, as well as belonging and building a community. Upon reading aloud the picture book *King and King* in which the prince marries the brother of one of the princesses at the end of the story, and following class discussion, the children were asked to choose from a variety of other 'queer-themed' texts. Students were asked to partner with other students who chose the same literary text and form a discussion circle. Students, however, were provided the opportunity to opt-out of the literature circles if they so pleased. With emphasis on

the findings by Schall and Kaufmann (2003), students' voiced that they wanted to know the truth and understand the diversity and reality of families. Schall and Kauffman (2003) further note, "It's unfortunate that so many adults feel that homosexuality is something that needs to be 'handled,' especially when children like these are so curious about the subject" (p. 41), and further claim that LGBTQ representations can fit within the existing curricula as they can be "naturally integrated into themes of family, identity, stereotyping, survival, relationships, a sense of belonging, or discrimination" (p. 43).

As discussed in education research, the cultural myths of 'childhood innocence' are a falsehood that claim sexuality has no bearing on young children's lives and schooling. In spite of the assumption about the absence of sexuality in elementary schools, this educational site is a backdrop to deeply entrenched rigid cultural expectations that are dictated by compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic gender. The elementary school environment is not exclusively a heteronormative environment, but functions as a space where children consciously and unconsciously learn to perform gender and sexual norms to avoid teasing, isolation, and often harassment. The ways in which teachers respond to these issues surrounding gender norms and sexual orientation requires further investigation, particularly at an elementary level, highlighting my research interest. As evidenced from the study done by Schall and Kaufmann (2003), students express interest in representation of LGBTQ issues in their schooling experience. The lack of representation despite student interest is due to the institutionalization of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and cisnormativity (Ferfolja, 2007), which certainly plays a role in allowing the children to opt-out from the classroom. It is evident from such research that school and administrative staff regulate and reify sex/gender boundaries through interrelated social and discursive practices in the staffroom, within the classroom, as well as through interactions extending from cultural, social groups.

The increased visibility of transgender issues and gender justice in schools requires further professional focus on gender diversity, sex, and sexuality at an elementary school level. To provide focus of this attention I turn to Payne and Smith (2014), who through semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers, share their experiences with this population of students. The authors investigate teachers' perceptions of their school success in supporting students, and make recommendations for information and resources needed to provide effective support. They report

that a fear arises amongst educational professionals due to their perceived incompetence with working with this population of students. This incompetence, Payne and Smith (2014) assert, may be a result of inadequate teacher training on meeting the needs of LGBTQ students. The lack of information and access to resources reported by the participants in the interviews pose significant impediments for educators trying to respond effectively to the needs of transgender students. Participants in the study looked upward in the administrative hierarchy for guidance, but such efforts were met with futility. The lack of administrative support commonly revealed in the research indicates a belief that transgender issues, as they pertain to children, is a controversial, dangerous topic to discuss, particularly in an elementary context.

As demonstrated in Payne and Smith's (2014) research, educators continue to be a part of a heteronormative environment where identities and expressions that are non-heterosexual are believed to be, as the respondents suggest, "wrong," or "inappropriate" to discuss. Gender non-conformity continues to be a sensitive topic to discuss in elementary schools because of the ways in which it transgresses a heteronormative and cisnormative alignment not only regarding appropriate sexualized identities, but also gender norms. The continued rhetoric of childhood as innocence is long drawn, and needs to be dismantled as a commonly held belief. Realizing that elementary schools construct and maintain norms that create and police what it means to be a boy or a girl is essential for interrupting the institutional order. As outlined above, trans-identified students face severely hostile school climates which can be combated through embracing alternative pedagogies that challenge traditional views of childhood, gender, and sexuality. Teachers who are committed to such pedagogical interventions are reconceptualising who, what and how to teach about gender and sexual diversity within a curricula that is so heavily embedded in heteronormative and cisnormative constructs produced by schools.

In a recent article by Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2015), the authors examine the pedagogical constraints of one male queer-identified teacher in employing a picture storybook, *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2009) which avows the thinkability and livability of gender-diverse identification and expression. With a commitment to the ethics of viable gendered personhood in the context of the elementary school classroom, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2015) link to broader heteronormalizing regimes and homonormative logics, as well as heterosexism in the

disavowal of such viability. Certainly, hetero-gender normalizing discourses work to create resistance toward addressing queer sexuality, gender-diverse expression, and transgender identification in the elementary school classroom as texts are regularly believed to be “too controversial or personally threatening” (p. 8). Tom, the male queer-identified teacher in the study, relies on “normative assumptions about the cognitive and developmental readiness of young children” (p.11) when including texts which make available non-normative expressions of sexuality. The enduring rhetoric of naivety and innocence renders children as incapable of comprehending gender and sexual differences as it relates to same-sex families and same-sex desire which points to schools as routine sites for the surveillance and policing of normative gender and sexuality. Yet, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2015) work to interrupt this rhetoric by outlining studies, which generate findings of children’s willingness and depth of understanding when being presented with discussions that include the “livability of transgender and transsexual embodied realities” (p.12). This research offers important insight by means of addressing gender and sexual minority issues in schools as they are understood through pedagogical repertoires and thresholds of knowledge.

### **The No Outsiders Project**

Pedagogy plays an instrumental role in deconstructing binaries that are entrenched in styles of learning, teaching, and politics in school. Pedagogy, as detailed with trans-positive teaching, offers opportunities to subvert the processes of normalization that work to abject others in the classroom. Research concerned with queering pedagogy can be found in the *No Outsiders Project* (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006, 2009) which documents the use of such teaching, and the injurious effects of heterosexism and homophobic discourses and practices in schooling. This project was a two-year partnership between primary school teachers and university researchers aimed at addressing inequities regarding sexuality in UK primary schools. Involving 15 primary schools, the project expanded to include over 40 participants and 16 educational sites across the United Kingdom. The participating schools (for children aged 4 to 11 years) received a collection of 25 children’s books featuring LGBT-themed characters as well as video resources and posters.

The research took place in four overlapping phases between 2004 and 2008, incorporating the following methods of data collection: in-depth interviews, university-wide online discussion forum funded by the Nuffield Foundation, as well as an online teachers' discussion forum. The team worked to interrupt the heteronormative discourse that typically permeates within UK primary schools. With attention to both equality and social justice-pedagogy and the curriculum, the teachers and researchers sought to challenge heterosexual and gender-traditional social norms and constraints. Alongside this, the team of the *No Outsiders Project* explored opportunities to celebrate non-heterosexual identities of adults in the children's families, schools, and communities. All throughout, members of the *No Outsiders* team examined themes that involved safety and risk-taking; faith and culture; leadership and role-modelling; silence and speaking out. The work of this project demonstrates a queer focus on revealing the underpinning discourses shaping heteronormativity and gender conformity in UK primary schools.

The details of this project are exemplary in pinpointing the critical stakeholders involved in tackling inequality and promoting diversity. The project invalidates models of tolerance that are typically adopted by schools because they represent a failed attempt to adequately address homophobia. Drawing on feminist, poststructuralist and queer theories, the results indicated the following: heteronormativity is discursively supported by constituting homosexuality in terms of sexual acts, allowing for understandings of homosexuality to be understood as something sexually dangerous, as well as having children be routinely recognized as asexual and innocent. As well, the research addresses the issue of normalcy being considered natural rather than socially constructed, as well as that of sexuality as privatized and not embodied in spaces such as schools. The research also discovers counter-hegemonic acts and discourses whether enacted by students, teachers or parents for bringing about subtle changes in the culture of the school. These acts and discourses render new meanings about non-normative sexualities, and bring about an understanding which serves to loosen the hold of the heterosexual matrix on the culture of education.

Tensions in this study came about with what it meant to queer the curriculum and pedagogy with topics related to identity, sexuality and social justice. As DePalma and Atkinson (2009) note: "one of the central tensions in the project relates to the distinction between anti-

homophobia and counter-heteronormative work" (p. 838). While anti-homophobia work is presented as a means for educating students with concepts related to tolerance, counter-heteronormative work goes beyond this by challenging and disrupting the discourses that support heteronormativity. The problem with the tolerance discourse is that it provides the understanding that "the majority" have both the right and privilege to be 'tolerant of "the other"' (Sinkinson, 2009). Similarly, tolerance involves power by allowing a particular group to dissociate from another, maintaining superiority through an 'us' versus 'them' division. The discourse of tolerance implies an assimilationist framework wherein "the other" can only be legitimated if they can conform to dominant ideals (Sinkinson, 2009).

The work of this project offers pivotal insights into the possibilities and challenges of queering education, particularly through the book, *Undoing Homophobia in Primary Schools*, which provides a comprehensive collection of essays in which the participating classroom practitioners reflect on their experiences of the project (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). Here, the insights given in the book offer a view into the tensions, contradictions and challenges that arise when practitioners try to implement queer praxis in their classrooms and schools. The practitioners involved in the book explore the ways in which they tried to actively challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity through integration of LGBT topics within and across curricula. Addressing sexualities within the context of school often gave rise to certain ramifications wherein the presence of a book in the classroom was characterized by the participating teachers as educating about "queer acts." On a participant level, DePalma and Atkinson (2010) point out the struggles around educational approaches to advance sexuality equality as a result of the different perspectives of the participants and the discourses they drew on in understanding the practice and enactment of queer education. The participants in the project demonstrated a growing struggle with implementing a queer praxis in their classroom. Further, the authors detail that in order to succeed in queering education, we must first start with those who have to implement it in the classroom-the teachers. DePalma and Atkinson's (2006, 2009) research indeed inspires me to investigate elementary school teachers' pedagogical approaches because of the possibilities for queering pedagogies in order to bring about a more gender and sexual just education.



In the DePalma and Atkinson (2010) book, teachers, Kate and Leanne share their experiences of using the book *King and King* (Haan & Nijland, 2002) with children from ages 4 to 11. Kate found that the younger children "took the story at face-value," whereas the older children expressed discomfort. Understanding how to appropriately integrate LGBT content across a variety of subject areas, and with a diverse age range of students is critical. The reflections made by the practitioners were helpful in respect to disrupting their own existing knowledge and working toward resolving their own tensions and possible crises. Opportunities for queering education remain promising in this particular research. To conclude, Leanne writes about her experience when she engaged her year 1 class (ages 5-6) with role playing and creating a film of *King and King*. Leanne writes that she was surprised to have found that through her enthusiastic engagement of the literature with her students, some of the children become more comfortable about crossing gender boundaries, "girls wanting to be a prince; boys wanting to be a princess." Providing the opportunity for children to deepen their understanding and critically reflect on gender expectations allows them to loosen the rigid binary paradigm. As Leanne conveys: "at least two of the boys chose very feminine costumes of their own free will, and we cast two boys as the two princes who fall in love" (pp. 28/29). This research highlights why I seek to investigate elementary school teachers' pedagogical decision-making for the ontological and epistemological possibilities it holds in allowing for new ways of being that are not constrained by heteronormativity.

### **Conclusion and Implications of the Literature Review**

In this chapter, I have discussed the literature on sexual and gender diverse students, as well as the heteronormative and cisnormative practices within the education system that pose significant threats to these students. Much of the research to date focuses extensively on gender identity and sexual orientation or school climates for LGBTQ students. Students who identify as gender-nonconforming evidently receive little attention in this area of study. Research studies related to harassment in school provide a greater emphasis at the secondary level, and consequently, the experiences of adolescents. Therefore, focus on an elementary school level remains largely unattended to by comparison. Research focusing on anti-heteronormative and anti-cisnormative practices in elementary schools is a neglected area of research that I wish to

explore further. There is a gap in research on elementary school safety for children that identify as LGBTQ or have families that identify as such, along with those who do not conform to typical gender expressions. This area of equity prompts much needed investigation and must be addressed in order to ensure that students and families feel safe and welcome, and participate in equitable learning opportunities in schools. The lack of research in this area only supports their marginalization and further silences the voices of children who indeed assume gendered and sexualized identities. This culture of silence around LGBTQ issues is important to acknowledge and grapple with regardless of conflicting social and ideological paradigms. As a matter of social justice based on the concept of human rights and equity, studying how heterosexuality, heteronormativity and cisnormativity pervades in elementary schools, and the messages disseminated about gender and sexual diversity among children is crucial. Such studies have the potential to further highlight how schooling works to privilege one group over another and the consequences of such hierarchies for those who do not identify with the dominant culture. Beyond striving for equitable learning opportunities, the significance of this research lies in the fact that not only do LGBTQ students in fact exist in an elementary context, but there is evidence of ruptures and challenges to heteronormative and cisnormative systems of policing and regulation. Shedding a light on queer and non-normative gender identity and expression at an elementary level can help to deepen understandings of gender and sexual diversity.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

I employ a qualitative research methodology in this research because it fits with the purpose of my study in investigating teachers' own understandings of their pedagogical practices and commitment to addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms and schools. The overarching objective of qualitative research is to acquire a deeper understanding of human or social behaviour (Merriam & Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research focuses on participants' perspectives and is concerned to construct meaning from participant experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). It seeks to gain insight into an individual's reality and how an individual's reality is influenced by their perceptions (Key, 1997). The way in which to describe qualitative research lies with the notion that meaning is socially constructed by an individual's interaction with their world. It is consistent with more constructivist worldviews and subjectivist understandings of the world and reality as something that is not a fixed, single, agreed upon or measurable. Rather, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time (Merriam, 2002). In this sense, such epistemological and ontological perspectives to which I subscribe inform the way in which I conceive of qualitative research methodologies as a means by which to generate data that will enable me to examine the multiple ways in which teachers construct and enact their pedagogical commitment to gender and sexual diversity in schools. Qualitative research, therefore, is suited to my research especially given that it involves examining people's experiences and documenting those experiences in detail or with "thick description" (Geertz, 1973).

A characteristic that sets apart qualitative research from quantitative research is the tools used to obtain data collection. In quantitative research, the researcher will use various measures of data collection, including experiments and methods that can be translated numerically (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 2010). Qualitative research, however, seeks to make the researcher the prime research instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2002b; Stake, 2010). It involves employing interview and observation methods, which enable a more naturalistic examination of meaning making. A qualitative researcher is able to collect valuable data, such as pauses and hesitations in speech, facial expressions, tonal changes, and environmental and contextual changes which quantitative methods do not permit. As qualitative research positions

the researcher as the 'prime instrument,' reflection on one's positionality and assumptions need to be taken into account as they influence the research topic, choice of methodology, and guided analysis of the data (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Therefore, it is important to engage in a critically reflective process as a researcher to acknowledge my own subjectivities, positionality, identities, and social status and how they shape my conceptualization of the research at hand.

As a Caucasian, cisgendered, gay, middle-class man, I recognize that I come to this study from a place of privilege and I take into account this privilege in my data collection. Nonetheless, my experiences with past exposure to homophobia in schooling plays a critical and personal grounding in this research. My interest in investigating teachers' approaches to gender and sexual diversity in the classroom/school notably stems from my own experiences as a student, often navigating unsafe spaces in school. As such, I often felt marginalized in my own learning experience due to inappropriate measures taken by school personnel to intercede in bullying behaviour against me, in addition to feeling underrepresented in teaching practices. I recognize that some of my research participants may not be used to or comfortable discussing content related to LGBTQ issues, especially in the context of schooling where heteronormativity and cisnormativity are very much institutionalized and validated. If a participant shares views that I consider undesirable or inappropriate, I must be conscious of how I interact with them in the data collection processes and how they are being represented in my writing. Although I may disagree with some of the responses the participants may make in the context of the interview, and interrogate some of their statements, I do so from a position of awareness of my own values in employing queer and gender theoretical frameworks to assist in making sense of the data.

## **Data Sources and Collection**

### **Interviews**

This study was designed to discover how elementary school teachers confront, grapple with, and attend to LGBTQ students. Thus, I used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Crabtree and Miller (1999) define semi-structured interviews in their text, *Doing Qualitative Research*, as guided, concentrated, focused, and open-ended communication

events between the investigator and the interviewee(s). Interviews were the selected source for data collection because they offer direct and personal insight into the ways teachers think about and experience LGBTQ students in their classroom. William and Crabtree (1999) employ interviews as a means to get in touch with personal experiences of a particular event and to understand the decision-making and the meaning-making processes of the participants. Thus, interviews are an effective measure to offer insight into participant experiences and understandings of a topic that directly align with the research interests, creating an organized occasion for knowledge construction (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Additionally, I used semi-structured interviews because my employment of them is consistent with the social constructionist epistemological and ontological foundations of my queer focused research, which is committed to documenting the ways in which teachers construct and make sense of their pedagogical practices with regards to addressing gender and sexual diversity in schools.

Using semi-structured interviews allows the researcher and participant to jointly control the direction of the interview. Patton (2002) discusses the interview guide approach, which offers a framework with topics or subject areas for the interviewer to explore, probe, and inquire about in outline form. The advantage of using this approach is that it allows data collection to be more systematic and validates that specific topics and issues of interest will be covered during the interview (Patton, 2002). Constructing a set of questions prior to the interview allows for direction; however, it does not limit the conversational pathway of discussion. For example, if the participant wishes to discuss homophobia as it relates to their classroom, there is the possibility for other related topics to emerge, such as genderqueer presentations. In addition, there is also the opportunity for the participant to continue with a particular line of thinking and to elaborate and explain the significance of their experiences in schools. Patton (1990) provides an added advantage of using semi-structured interviews in contrast to informal conversational interviews and standardized open-ended interviews as he advocates that:

The interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style—but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined. (p. 283)

Although the interviewer is the instigator and maintains a certain amount of control over the interview, the participant still maintains some capacity to direct the conversation and the extent of or variance of a specific topic. In order to control for the direction and flow of an individual

interview context, it is important Patton (2002) explains, to “generate rapid insights [and] formulate questions quickly and smoothly” (p. 343). To further add, Seale et al. (2004) write about the interpersonal interactions of interviews where the subjects involved are mutually building on each other’s talk, and that conversations made are locally and collaboratively produced.

I interviewed ten participants, outside of the school context, during a time and location that was convenient for each individual teacher. The interviews took place between the months of December 2016 to January 2017 and did not extend beyond one interview session. The semi-structured interviews were approximately forty-five to sixty minutes depending on the teacher’s availability and breadth of responses. Each interview was face-to-face for the purpose of establishing a positive rapport, building trust, and identifying any nonverbal cues that warrant further questioning. Face-to-face interviews are presented as ways to enable a 'special insight' into subjectivity, voice, and lived experiences (Seale, 2004). The first five to ten minutes of the interview was spent on discussing the reasons for conducting the research, and what I hoped to achieve from the research conducted. Likewise, I discussed informed consent including confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation with the option to withdraw at any point. Each participant interviewed was required to give informed consent by signing a letter of information. I also requested permission to record the interview for transcription purposes and to have an account of the interview be supplied to participants to ensure accuracy.

### **Recruitment**

Because of my prior teacher-training, I began by interviewing previous Associate Teachers of mine at the primary/junior level and made use of a snowballing sampling technique to gain further access to participants. Sadler et al. (2010) describes snowballing sampling as: “find[ing] an individual (the “source,” also referred to as the “seed”) who has the desired characteristics and uses the person’s social networks to recruit similar participants in a multistage process” (p. 370). According to Bell (1997), snowball sampling is used extensively in qualitative research, particularly in relation to studies on sexualities. Aligned with this pattern of thinking, I recognize that because snowball sampling relies on interpersonal relations, similar characteristics of a population may come to the forefront over others, which risks creating an over-

representation. This is to conclude that an unbalance of demographic characteristics might occur in reference to class, ethnicity, and geographic location (Sadler et al., 2010). However, due to the sample size of this study my intention was not to generalize across a population of teachers, as a selected portion cannot speak for a sector of a larger population. The aim of my research was to generate detailed insights into pedagogical decision-making practices of individual teachers with regards to addressing gender and sexual diversity in schools.

Employing a snowball sampling technique proves useful in helping the researcher identify study participants where ‘multiple eligibility requirements’ are met as it pertains to the research objectives. For example, if a teacher knew a colleague who was employing LGBTQ-inclusive pedagogy, he or she could refer them to the researcher as a means of potential requirement for the study (Sadler et al, 2010). It is important to note that the teachers recruited for this study were those that support elements of queer teaching practices in order to focus the analysis. While conducting a snowball sampling technique, researchers must take into account the privacy of both the source (‘the seed’) and those who are being invited to participate in the study (Sadler et al., 2010). The source may indeed be hesitant to contact other individuals whom they believe, as Sadler et al. (2010) argues, “[have] certain characteristic that might represent a disclosure of information about themselves or information that has been obtained in a personal and private context” (p. 371). Certainly, it is critical not to disclose or imply any disclosure of personal information about either party (Sadler et al., 2010). To prevent a breach in confidentiality or an invasion of privacy, I devised an email and letter of information, which gave details of my background, research interests, intellectual and personal goals from the research conducted, as well as contact information. I asked the participants if they would be willing to pass some information about the study that they had just completed to other potential subjects who might be interested in participating in this research. A copy of the recruitment item was submitted to the ethical review board of the university in order to ensure that proper guidelines were met before any contact information was distributed. In support of snowball sampling, trust can be developed as a result of having referrals made by acquaintances or peers rather than other more formal methods of identification (Bolieraki, 2010). Lastly, it is important to address the limitations of snowball sampling, which include saturation of the sample studied. Saturation is defined by Sadler et al. (2010) as “when no new information is forthcoming from the participants in the sample that has been recruited already” (p. 371). It was important for me

to acquire a sample size that embraces a variance in age, gender/sex, school grade levels, as well as teaching experiences.

To elaborate further, participants who volunteered in this study are working educators within urban public elementary schools in the province of Ontario, Canada. Gaining access and building rapport are significant to the success of the study and are largely connected to the IRB process of approval. I have gained permission from the IRB and have had them review the study for any potential harm and risk to participants. To abide by ethics, consent forms for participants were key to the success of my research study. These forms were subjected to review by the ethics board and required signatures that sign off on the specific elements of my study. This includes: the central purpose, the procedure to be used in data collection, statements about the risks associated with participants, the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time, details regarding the safeguard of confidentiality of the respondents, and the anticipated benefits to the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon completing all of the participant interviews, I used the audio recordings to transcribe our conversations and copy and save these transcriptions electronically in a password protected file. Once transcriptions were finalized, I confirmed their validity and correctness with the participants before beginning analysis. I played back the audio following the transcript to guarantee accuracy. The audio recording device was erased thereafter once the transcription was concluded. I also kept an inventory of my data set in order to protect the confidentiality of my participants, keeping transcripts, consent forms, memos, emails, and related documents in a file-labeled according to a code assigned to each participant. I used pseudonyms in all transcripts for the purpose of ensuring confidentiality. Likewise, I did not disclose any geographic location or school district in the research documents. Transcripts generated through teacher interviews were only available to Jordan Gentile (researcher), Dr. Wayne Martino (University supervisor), and Dr. Jenny Ingrey (Co-supervisor). These documents were not made available to school administration or any other personnel at The University of Western Ontario at any time.

Data analysis was reflective of inductive and deductive reasoning as a means to mould the coding scheme. Beginning stages of analysis concerned developing classification or a coding scheme to identify, code, categorize, and label the primary patterns in data generated from the



interview transcripts (Patton, 2002). This means identifying the core content of interviews in order to determine what bears significance (Patton, 2002). During the initial coding phase, I examined each transcript line-by-line to establish codes that were reflective of participants' perspectives and experiences. Preliminary codes included words, phrases, or general concepts that emerged from the raw data. This was a process which is reflective of an open coding framework to capture meanings and overarching themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding is illustrative of what qualitative content analysis emphasizes as an integrated interpretation of speech/texts and their specific contexts. Patton (2002) refers to content analysis as: "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (p. 453). The core meanings found through content analysis are called patterns or themes, as Patton (2002) indicates.

While developing codes and categories, I looked for recurring regularities in the data that reveal patterns that can be sorted into categories. After this categorization was established, I began to conduct axial coding to conceptually connect these categories of data to their subcategories to determine the ways in which overarching categories are associated with one another (Strauss, 1987). Patton (2002) claims that once inductive content analysis is reached, having the categories developed, deductive analysis can begin whereby the relationships between the data is conceptualized through a theoretical framework. Inductive analysis is reflective of discovering patterns, themes, and categories in a researcher's data; whereas, deductive analysis comprises data analyzed within an existing framework (Patton, 2002). However, I want to stress that while I do not conceive of my research as a grounded theory study, I employed elements of this methodology to assist me in a systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis. In generating themes for example, I relied on insights and understandings gained from my reading of queer theorists, such as Butler (1990, 1993, 2004), Britzman (1995, 2000), Foucault (1978, 1984) and Rands (2009), paying attention to the extent to which teachers' reflections on their pedagogical decision-making spoke to effectively addressing heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the school system. In this regard, my approach to data analysis was not simply reduced to an inductive process.

Content analysis goes beyond the numeration of words or the extraction of quintessential content from a particular text to examining meanings, themes and patterns that may be clear or

underlying in a text. In support of this approach, this analysis generates direct information from the participants of the study without imposing preconceived categories. To make defensible inferences based upon the data collected from the study, it is important that I outline a description of the context, selection and characteristics of the participants, as well as the process of analysis. Also, authentic citations can be used as a way to increase the trustworthiness of the research as Patton (1990) recommends. Using the transcriptions verbatim was key in my analysis because they maintain what Patton regards as the participants' "depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions" (p. 21). To ensure credibility regarding this research, participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on certain aspects of the analysis made, providing emphasis on member checking. Once the member check was received, the interviews were coded again in conjunction with the research questions. Although it was never followed up, participants were presented with the opportunity to expand, refine, adjust or change their transcript until they were satisfied with the views presented in the transcript. The data analysis conducted from the interviews helped to illuminate the significance of supporting LGBTQ students in the education system, as well as the efficacy of teachers' pedagogical decision-making in addressing gender and sexual diversity within public schools.

### **Participant Profiles**

I have provided profile information for each participant in order to give a more succinct description of each individual's background, which includes their gender/sexual identification, the number of years they have been teaching, the grade level that they currently teach, as well as their school division. Below is an overview of the participants in a chart that highlights this information.

**Table 1: Summary of Participants**

Participant Name	Sex	Race	Self-described Identity	Grade Level	School Division
Marina	Female	White	Lesbian, Queer	4	Public
Lana	Female	White	Straight, Same-Sex Attraction	K-8	Public
Marie	Female	White	Bisexual, Pansexual, Cis	6-8	Public
Natalia	Female	White	Straight	3/4	Public
James	Male	White	Straight	3	Public
Anne	Female	White	Straight	2	Public
Christopher	Male	White	Bisexual, pansexual, queer	K-5	Public
Richard	Male	White	Gay	8	Public
Doris	Female	White	Straight, cis	K	Public
Kevin	Male	White	Straight	6	Public

Marina is a grade four teacher at a public school in Ontario, and has experience teaching at a grade level from kindergarten to grade five. Her experience teaching spans above three years and she self-identifies as lesbian, queer. She is currently teaching at a school with a “high population of Syrian refugees.” Many students at her school speak English as their second language, and are of a Middle-Eastern background. She is open about her sexuality at her school and had decided to come out to her students as a result of witnessing a “lot of issues with homophobia in the school.” She also helped to administer, with the partnership of her principal, a workshop last year that spoke to addressing gender and sexual diversity in her school with her colleagues. In addition, Marina “co-chairs the Make Me Proud Committee at [her] board” where they have “monthly meetings” that deal with different topics, including LGBTQ issues.

Lana is a kindergarten to grade eight teacher who teaches at two public schools. She was formerly a Special Education Resource Teacher as well as a Math Coach, working between grades one to six in various public schools across Ontario. She has been in the teaching profession for more than five years and self-identifies as straight, but has same-sex attraction. Her schools have “a lot of new Canadian population[s]” with the “second most common language [being] Urdu.” She desired to take part in this study because she believes that there is not enough “action [or] advocacy” related to this kind of work.

Marie teaches grade six, seven and eight health at a public middle school in Ontario. Her teaching experience spans over five years and she has been currently teaching at her school for four years, which is described as a “mix between white working class and affluent kids.” She self-identifies as a bisexual, pansexual, cis woman and is in a relationship with her partner; they have a newborn baby. Marie is out about her sexuality at her school and feels “comfortable teaching about these topics” as it pertains to her own teaching practice. Marie has experience working with students who identify as LGBTQ, and works to support these students through her own teaching practice and by keeping informed via policy. She “facilitates the GSA at [her] school”, and believes “every school should have one” in order for students to have “agency.” At her school, Marie has “staff meetings [where she] will encourage staff members” to use appropriate “tools to have conversations with students if they hear homophobic language.”

Natalia is a grade three/four teacher who has been in the teaching profession for twelve years. Before teaching at her current grade level, she worked as a Resource Equity Teacher for her board. Her decision to take part in the study was due to her belief that “more attention needs to be brought to gender and sexuality” in education because of the “harsh conditions LGBTQ students face” in school. She self-identifies as straight, and is in a relationship with her partner who teaches at the same public school in Ontario. She describes her school as more “middle-to-upper class” with students being of “Caucasian descent.” She hopes to see more “organization of GSAs in elementary schools,” including hers for its purpose in providing “safe spaces for these students.”

James is a third grade teacher who is in a relationship with his long-time partner who is also an educator at the same public school in Ontario. He has been teaching for seven years in a school he describes as “middle-to-upper class” with more students coming from “First Nation families.” His interest in taking part in this study emerges from his experience teaching students who “identify as a member of the LGBTQ community in [his] own classroom.” He also stated that he partook in facilitating the GSA at his school, which he believes provides a “safe space for all students to discuss” a host of issues that concern “equity in school.”

Anne is a grade two teacher who self-identifies as a straight, cis woman. Prior to entering the teaching profession, she worked as an engineer in the Canadian military. She now works at a public school in Ontario that has a lot of “cultural diversity” with a large number of students

from “lower socio-economic backgrounds.” She states that she is an “ally to those of the LGBTQ community”, and would like to see more “administrative support from her school” for students who identify as LGBTQ. Her colleagues at her school are currently working to organize a GSA, which she believes will help to create a “supportive school climate.” She decided to take part in this study because of the “lack of knowledge” regarding gender and sexual diversity, which she “takes part in.” She admits that she is not well versed with the topic but is eager to “do more” as it relates to “better supporting [her] students.”

Christopher is a public school teacher in Ontario who is currently teaching from kindergarten to grade five. He self-identifies as bisexual, pansexual, queer, and states that he is out at his school. Christopher volunteers for the PFLAG<sup>2</sup> organization which offers different resources “to better support non-heterosexual children.” He also mentioned that he participates in other “LGBTQ community committees” and keeps informed about this topic through “school board initiatives and policies.” Furthermore, Christopher maintains that he would like to see “gender and sexual diversity” further discussed “at the elementary level” and more opportunities for “further professional development” for teachers to be better informed.

Richard is a grade eight teacher at a public school in Ontario. He self-identifies as a gay man and is in a relationship with a trans man. His school is described as “middle-to-upper class” with a large population of “Indian, Arabic, and Caribbean students.” He is out at his school and believes that his school board is “progressive” as it relates to gender and sexual diversity. He also participates in the GSA at his school, and states that his colleagues are supportive with helping to facilitate the GSA. He co-chairs the equity committee at his school board and would like to see more of an “administrative role” to help encourage educators to engage with this kind of work.

Doris is a kindergarten teacher at a public school in Ontario, which, as she describes, has more “Caucasian students” coming from “lower class families.” She has been in the teaching profession for twelve years and has mainly taught at the grade eight level in the past. She identifies as a straight woman, and is an “ally” to those in the LGBTQ community. She has a GSA at her school, but believes she can “do more work in it” with respect to participation. At the time of the interview, she had expressed interest in joining the equity committee at her board.

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<sup>2</sup> PFLAG is a national non-profit organization which brings together family, friends, and allies of LGBTQ people for the purpose of promoting the health and well-being of non-heterosexual persons.

Her interest in gender and sexual diversity stemmed from her experience teaching gender and sexual minority students in the past. She believes that she can be better informed with “policies that deal with gender and sexual diversity,” and recognizes that further professional development is needed to help her with that.

Kevin is a grade six teacher who works at a public middle school in Ontario. He self-identifies as a straight man, and has been teaching for less than fifteen years. He had previously taught grade seven and eight French at a different school and “regularly help[s] to facilitate the GSA at [his] school.” Kevin’s interest in this study was due to his belief that LGBTQ students need to be “better supported by teachers” who may have “lack of knowledge and experience” in effectively “advocating for these students.” He affirms that more knowledge is needed at the elementary level for issues related to “transgender students and gender nonconforming students” which was a topic he felt not as “familiar with.”

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a justification for the methodological framework, including the data collection and approach to analyzing the data. I provided reasons for employing this qualitative research methodology as it pertains to generating insight into teachers’ reflections on their pedagogical practices related to addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classroom/school. This particular methodology is shown to provide a more in-depth investigation of how teachers are making sense of gender and sexual diversity, and the impact of their understanding on their pedagogical decision-making. To garner further understanding of teachers’ pedagogical commitment to gender and sexual diversity, I employed semi-structured interviews to gain “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of participants’ meaning-making processes (William & Crabtree, 1999). Employing a snowball sampling technique to gather the knowledge of ten elementary school teachers, helped me to obtain critical insights (Patton, 2002) by centering on teachers with a commitment to addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms/schools. As well, I provided participant profiles of each elementary school teacher interviewed as part of this study for purpose of encapsulating individual backgrounds. Ultimately, using semi-structured interviews and queer and gender complex frameworks helped to generate insights into teachers’ knowledge and practice which will be explored in the following data analysis chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I examine how ten elementary school teachers are conceptualizing, grappling with, and responding to gender and sexual diversity in their classroom/school. This chapter is broken down into themes generated by the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with these teachers. In order to understand if teachers are effectively addressing anti-hetero/cisnormative practices in their schools, I draw on the insights and understandings of theorists including Butler (1990, 1993, 2004), Britzman (1995, 2003), Foucault (1978, 1984), and Rands (2009). Such relevant scholarship helps insofar as making sense of the teachers' reflections regarding their pedagogical decision-making and to understand their approaches to addressing gender and sexual diversity in elementary schools. The most significant themes that emerged are as follows: (a) teachers' understanding of the limitations of a hetero/cisnormative framework in conceptualizing the fluidity of gender and sexual identity categories; (b) using teachable moments to address gender and sexuality diversity in the classroom; (c) attitudes in limiting safe spaces<sup>3</sup> in schools that allow for the expression of gender and sexual diversity; and finally, (d) teachers' perceived need for further professional development to better attend to the current tensions in the education system as they relate to LGBTQ issues.

I have organized the themes in accordance to what helped guide me in the analysis of the data. For example, investigating teachers' knowledge of gender and sexual diversity helped to generate insight into the possibilities of addressing this diversity through pedagogical repertoires that allow for the disruption of a hegemonic, heterosexual praxis. Congruently, the extent to which educational pedagogies reflect democratic, transgressive properties is guided by the production of knowledges (Foucault, 1975), which constitutes the teacher as a particular subject. Therefore, it was important to identify teachers' knowledge related to gender and sexual diversity, and the impact of this self-knowledge on their pedagogical decision-making, in order to uncover how gender and sexual diversity were being effectively addressed. Moreover, examining teachers' pedagogical decision-making in effectively addressing gender and sexual

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<sup>3</sup> Safe Spaces refer to an environment where individuals of who experience oppression can safely come together to communicate their experiences with marginalization, as well as address other forms of oppression without fear of violence, harassment or discrimination. It is important to note that these spaces are open to all interested in engaging in dialogues concerning oppression.

diversity can provide important implications in rethinking knowledge and pedagogy in a way that reimagines school spaces to challenge a heterosexual order. Lastly, both teachers' knowledge and teaching practice spoke to the significance of needing further professional development for the purpose of bridging the relationship between knowledge and pedagogy as a means to diminish gender and sexual inequities.

### **Understanding Gender and Sexual Diversity**

To gain further insight into how teachers are confronting, grappling with, and attending to gender and sexual diversity, it is important to draw attention to how they make sense of gender and sexual diversity, and the relevance of this self-knowledge to their pedagogical decision-making. When I asked all participants how they conceptualize gender and sexual diversity, some were reluctant to answer. It was evident that some teachers had an enthusiastic attitude toward discussing gender and sexual diversity, while their body language and subtle hesitation to the question indicated that they were not entirely comfortable defining these terms. Many teachers attributed their hesitation to a lack of confidence in their knowledge about the expansiveness and complexities that these identities have to offer. Teachers play an active role in cultivating a learning environment that allows for queer pedagogy and anti-oppressive education, requiring a need for reflexivity about their own practices, opinions, and values which may hold heteronormative bias (Ferfolja, 2008).

Examining teachers' thinking about these terms helps to provide insight into taken-for-granted normative discourses and practices that structure teachers' pedagogical decision-making, providing understanding of the kinds of knowledge valued in schools (Britzman, 2003; Kumashiro, 2009). Mayo (2013) argues for the need for students, parents, teachers, and administrators to recognize their contradictory and complex positioning(s), and negotiate together toward new understandings. The application of queer theory, Britzman (2003) suggests, is rethinking the grounds of knowledge and how knowledge is organized, transcending the limits of traditional paradigms of thinking toward new possibilities of knowledge not previously sought after. I wish to acknowledge the possible contradictory and complex positions in teachers' bias, beliefs, and perceptions (Mayo, 2013), and the reluctance of these as (Britzman, 2003) addresses, in order to provide insight into the limitations and possibilities for effectively addressing gender



and sexual minority issues in schools as they are framed through pedagogical practices and thresholds of knowledge (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015).

Focusing on teachers' understanding of gender and sexual diversity, and the impact of their understanding on their teaching practice, makes it possible to interrupt the cycle of reproduction of hetero/cisnormative practices, and the need for new and critical pedagogies. Specifically, when I asked Marina, a grade four public school teacher, how she conceptualized gender and sexual diversity, the response she gave reflected an understanding of these identity categories being on a continuum rather than restricted to a binary:

There's all these terms and all these labels but at the end of the day which are great, which are really great...and...for a lot of people who because...because we have such a heteronormative and cisnormative...sort of...you know...society we need these labels so that people don't feel alone and that they're weird. We need the labels...but uh...to me...it's just about being true to who you are. There's so many different ways to express who you are. It's a continuum. It's not a binary. It's not either gay or straight. You're either male or female. There...to me...there is a continuum that we need to be more open to and that this whole problem will go away. The problem is that we are trying to put people into these two places but they don't work for everybody. I don't know if that really answered it.

Marina acknowledges that we need labels for purposes of identification because of "heteronormative and cisnormative" notions, which guarantee compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Marina's remark about needing labels "so that people don't feel alone and...weird" is an example of the way in which heterosexuality is reproduced as "normal" and other forms of sexual identification are constructed as the "other"- who are viewed as abnormal, unnatural, and socially pathologized (Mort, 2000). Because certain identities do not follow these established set of rules dictated by heterosexuality, they are labeled abject beings, as Butler (1990) describes, who exist in locations that are "unlivable" and "uninhabitable." Butler (1990) further conveys that due to this abjection, a representation of these identities is constructed as illegitimate and unintelligible through dominant discourses. Through these dominant discourses, Butler (1990) declares that the understanding of what normal subjects are and are not is in association with the understanding of abject beings who are viewed as threatening normalcy. Marina rejects the binary by stating "it's not either gay or straight" in regards to identification and that there are many different ways to identify. She announces that this continuum is needed in order to broaden understandings of identities and to remove binaries to allow for different ways of being that go

beyond these “two places.” Gamson (2000) argues that we need to dismantle hegemonic ideologies that foster inequitable binary systems, which requires a critical examination and a deconstruction of sexual and gender categories. Marina seems to fall in line with this by recognizing that individuals do not align with normative gender and sexual identities, but rather identities need to move beyond traditional forms of hegemonic discourses related to gender and sexual grouping.

When investigating whether teachers’ are using anti-hetero/cisnormative practices, it is imperative to identify who they are taking about in order to disavow the resignification of "cultural myths" as Britzman (1986) suggests, sustained by heteronormative beliefs. To address gender and sexual diversity means to have critical discussions about social norms and social systems that privilege some sexual/gendered arrangements over others (Lipkin, 2002; Plummer, 1999; Sears, 1992). To provide such critical discussion requires, as Britzman (1995, 2003) supports, the interrogation of the production of normalization and the repetition of these normalizing practices through the use of queer pedagogy. She defines such teaching as:

one that refuses normal practices and practices of normalcy, one that begins with an ethical concern for one’s own reading practices, one that is interested in exploring what one cannot bear to know, one interested in the imaginings of a sociality unhinged from the dominant conceptual order. (p.165)

Britzman (1995, 2003) seeks to reimagine pedagogy through the disruption of normative subjectivities, the interrogation of knowledge versus ignorance, as well as a deconstruction of normative discourses which provide possibilities for the unhinging of heterosexual dominance existing in schools. Britzman (1998) addresses the “unthinkability of normalcy” (p. 87), which is attributed to the inability of society to interrogate socially constrained norms connected to sexuality and gender. Identifying if elementary school teachers are working toward providing these learning opportunities is a necessary step toward better attending to the needs of LGBTQ students and to undoing hetero/cisnormativity within education.

Marie, a public middle school teacher, shares her understanding of these terms, providing insight into the limitations of binaries:

So I guess. To go deeper. Gender is how we express ourselves. How we identify. In our brain and in our hearts. It has nothing to do with what the outside of our bodies looks like. Our society is really strict with how people are supposed to conform to gender

norms. What girls are supposed to do. They're not really written down rules. They're secret rules that we carry on and we impose on each other and we don't really realize we're doing that most of the time. And for folks who...uhm...who don't fit into those boxes for whatever reason... if it doesn't fit with how they feel on the inside it can be devastating. For the most part, for those who fit into the category boy/girl categories, there's still instances of when those gender roles don't fit for us. So sexuality and gender are totally different things and I think when we talk about someone being transgender I think people think about sexual orientation. When we talk about sexuality it's who you might be interested in or attracted to or not attracted to. It's kind of a huge realm of homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, uh.....asexuality...and then sort of the....sexual attraction side of things. There are those that are aromantic as well.

Acknowledging that the gender binary as male-masculine/female-feminine is too limiting is essential to comprehend. By opening up the dichotomy of male versus female, one is able to see the rich diversity of both gender and sexual diversity in contrast to the stark rigidity of “societal norms” Marie refers to. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) argue that as a society, “we want to shift [the] normalizing gaze away from the other and to fix it firmly on those who have the power to classify and objectify” (p. 75). Marie is aware of how sexual diversity defies the essentialist understanding of heterosexuality as she identifies the “huge realm of homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, and pansexuality” which do not necessarily have to correlate with gender as she identifies that they are “totally different things.” As Dean (2011) argues, gender and sexual diversity fundamentally challenge the assumption of naturalness related to biological sex and gender. For those who do not abide by the assumptions of naturalness related to biological sex and gender, it can be “devastating” as Marie expresses due to the displacing and subordination of those who do not conform (Irigaray, 1980; Ferrida, 1982).

Marie speaks to the gender norms which “are not really written down rules” but “secret rules,” which Rands (2009) contends act as a system of privilege and punishment pertaining to the use of power and sexuality, as well as the constructs of terms like *woman*, which “is defined as everything a woman is not and vice versa for men” (p. 420). Both privilege and oppression operate at the level of groups or categories, according to Rands (2009), where privilege need not be understood as belonging to the individual, but instead in relation to groups or social categories. Marie further espouses that when sexuality is talked about it is associated with sexual desire, “who you might be interested in or attracted to or not attracted to.” Butler (2004) writes about how heterosexuality begins to regulate the gender binary system “in which masculine is

differentiated from a feminine term, and the differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (p. 31). She continues to write that the “act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire” (p. 31).

Contrastingly, when I posed the same question to Richard, a grade eight public school teacher, his answer was a bit more expansive than Marie as he names the terms of the LGBTQ acronym and provides definitions for each of the terms. He touched on gender which was often underrepresented in the responses given by other participants who focused more on sexual identities, which again reinforces how little understood the topic really is. Following Richard’s quotation I will use Rands (2009) to help unpack his use of gender vocabulary. Richard defined it in the following way:

In terms of the LGBTQ. To me that speaks to someone gay, bi, pan, whatever their sexual orientation or rather orientation. I really prefer to drop the sexual to it. It is somehow diverse from the norm. From being straight. Very much...very much...you know...depends on the person. It’s different in time, attraction, whatever. There’s no concrete box where someone is placed. How someone identifies or presents that is entirely their understanding of themselves. I won’t say choice, obviously. It is how they understand themselves and how they identify themselves. Gender identity versus gender presentation versus gender, just gender, versus biological sex. All three of those things are different. None of them have to match. Biological sex, what body you’re born into, male female or intersex or something altogether different. Then gender being the identity, I consider myself to be blank. Again either male or female or something completely outside that box. I have kids at my school who identify completely as gender neutral. Then gender presentation which is often the piece that gets overlooked even in transgender communities. My current partner has been certainly made clear that he...he’s trans himself. He’s been critiqued himself for not wearing the right clothing by other trans people. There is a lot of pressure to fit into one box. Certainly within the trans community...there will be trans guys who say...you know...not committed enough to being a man because you know they might wear makeup. I don’t know something like that. Uhm....so gender presentation...so they are presenting however makes sense to them.

Richard initially begins by recognizing the plurality of sexuality as he refers to “someone gay, bi, pan.” Having him “drop the sexual to it” when describing orientation as it “somehow is diverse from the norm” seems to speak to Foucault (1978, 1984) and the role moral and medical discourses play with the pathologization of sexual difference. For Foucault (1978, 1984), knowledge and power are inextricably linked and work to provide understandings about

sexuality which function as commonsense knowledge and consequently reduce certain identities to sexual behaviour. Moreover, Richard moves on to discuss “gender identity versus gender presentation” and “gender versus biological sex,” identifying the ways in which “none have to match.” Addressing gender through a complex lens is necessary, as Rands (2009) suggests, to develop a gender just vocabulary. Richard defines gender identity being “either male or female or something completely different.” As Richard indeed acknowledges, Rands (2009) defines gender identity as a sense of self being a boy or a girl, woman or man, and increasingly recognizing non-gendered, transgendered, and intersexed gendered people.

Gender expression is also defined by Rands (2009), which Richard refers to as gender presentation, the manifestation of an individual’s association with being masculine or feminine through their clothing, behaviour, grooming, etc. He pays particular attention to gender expression as it relates to his current partner, who as he articulates, "has been made clear by other trans people" that he is not "trans enough...committed enough" to gender norms. Gender attribution is another term by Rands (2009), which refers to the cues given to onlookers that allow them to identify somebody as a man or a woman. Richard stresses the pressure to “fit into one box” as it relates to gender expectations given to a gender category, which as Rands (2009) avows, expects people to subscribe to certain behaviours and activities to reach intelligibility. Butler (1990) stresses the citational nature of identity where gender is assumed through a series of repetitive performances that give the illusion of a proper, natural or fixed gender. She further postulates, “bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constrains of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas” (Butler, 1993, p. 11). Butler (1993) exposes the path of sex, gender, and desire to be wholly illusory, and further illustrates that, along with other identities, this illusion is sustained through practices of policing and shaming of "other" sexual/gendered identities.

When referring to gender it is important to recognize the gender oppression matrix (Rands, 2009), which functions as a system that is associated with privileging and punishing as Richard discusses when he speaks about the pressures to conform to gender norms (Rands, 2009). Rands notes that privileging exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others because of the group they belong to, instead of what they’ve done or failed to do. As Richard speaks about when he refers to his partner experiencing criticism as a trans man, those

who cross gender lines in their gender identity or gender expression, and those who challenge gender categories altogether, are oppressed because they challenge binary categories and essentialist assumptions about biology (Rands, 2009). To provide a gender-complex education requires a recognition of the failings of a dichotomous classification of gender (Rands, 2009), and the understanding that fluidity exists in, and between, gender categories.

In exploring the ways in which teachers are working to address gender and sexual diversity through their pedagogical practices, I draw on how they too are implicated in hetero/cisnormative thinking. Providing insight into teachers' hetero/cisnormative thinking allows for the discovery of the ways in which they are enmeshed and actively (re)producing the oppressive cultures within schools. As Britzman (1995) requests, educators need to be aware of their own biases and experiences informing their view of the world which may be aligned with heteronormative assumptions. In exploring the use of heterosexism and genderism attributed to heterosexual expectations as Meyer (2007) affirms, I turn to Marina's observation of her colleagues continually engaging in binary thinking through naming practices of their students:

I still hear boys and girls and that doesn't work for everyone. I just say people. I usually call them people and that was a shift for me too because that's such a...you hear it growing up. All your teachers saying boys and girls or ladies and gentlemen. So I think language is still there. I think we're are still reading predominately...or telling stories... [that] predominately [have] heteronormative messages.

Rigid gender norms, such as hearing "boys and girls" to address the classroom functions as a cultural foundation of gender based and sexual harassment that make LGBTQ students experience a negative school climate (Pascoe, 2007). Marina, hearing other teachers use language specifying "boys and girls" or "ladies and gentlemen," understands that it serves to maintain the status quo through the reproduction of heterosexist language and discourse that maintain normalcy of oppressive behaviours, like binary language (Kumashiro, 2000). A gender and binary system where concrete male/female dualities exist and no fluidity is present "does not work for everyone," as Marina says, which creates an incoherent way of making sense of lived identity experiences that occur in the world (Bockting, 2008). Having it "not work for everyone" speaks to Rands (2009) as she addresses the multiple axes of oppression, which presume pre-ordained identity categories and ignore multiple socially oppressed groups/identities.

Moving beyond language, Marina refers to the way in which schools continue to read “predominately or [tell] stories [that are] predominately heteronormative,” which functions through systems of oppression. These systems of oppression, according to Shields (2008), begin to trivialize members of marginalized groups and subjects them to a subjugated status, increasing the subordination of the members of those groups. Shields (2008) argues that one’s identity need not only to be recognized as his or her own self-identification, but rather as part of an intersecting larger social structure and power differentials associated with belonging to certain group(s) as Marina alludes to when exclaiming “boys and girls.” Mariana does indeed account for the naming practices of students in schools, which give rise to heteronormative assumptions that plague the thinking patterns of people, limiting fluidity and imposing certain constructs on the body. As Marina highlights, teachers need to be careful of the way in which they are influenced by social structures regarding the polarity of gender, and how social forces coerce individuals into fitting into a closed binary with prescribed heterosexual expectations.

Providing the opportunity for teachers to examine their own thinking with respect to diverse gender and sexual identities can help to question the multifaceted processes in which power and privilege circulate through knowledge. While Kumashiro (2002) writes about students’ desire for normalcy and affirmation, which as he describes, “prevent[s] many...from confronting and tolerating...new yet discomfoting forms of knowledge” (p. 6), teachers may indeed be constrained by certain ideologies that delimit them from generating new ways of understanding. Among the sample, gender and sexuality were believed to be flexible rather than permanent, recognizing the fluidity of these identities and the ways in which these identities defy the overarching heteronormative framework.

The teachers’ reflections showcase hierarchies embedded in membership in certain identities, and the limitations placed on identity categories as a result of heterosexual norms. Hegemonic heterosexuality is shown to construct dominant notions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation in ways that are deemed oppressive. The teachers’ understanding related to transgender and gender-nonconformity may not have fully embraced a gender complex framework as suggested by Rands (2009), but did however, capture the boundless possibilities of identity and expression that exist irrespective of a binary system. Having elementary school teachers confront their own understandings of gender and sexual identities is crucial in beginning

to think about how these identities are addressed and interrogated to limit the discursive practices of dichotomization in pedagogical decision-making.

### **Using Teachable Moments to Address Gender and Sexual Diversity**

While asking participants to reflect on their pedagogical decision-making to examine the ways in which anti-hetero/cisnormative practices are being effectively addressed, the majority of participants discussed taking advantage of teaching moments as one possible teaching strategy. To discover if the reproduction of hetero/cisnormative culture in schooling is being rejected or interrogated, it is necessary to examine teaching practices that work to effectively address gender and sexual diversity (Cohen, 2005; Blackburn & Smith, 2010). Addressing oppression within schools requires, Kumashiro (2004) avows, an investment in the status quo, which calls for a rethinking of pedagogical practices because of its potential to offer methods of critique “to mark repetitions of normalcy (Britzman, 2000, p. 154). Change, as he explains, is enacted when a “willingness to step outside of [one’s] comfort zone [occurs]” (p. 46). Teachers need to examine the ways in which they work to re-inscribe oppression, and reflect on ways to challenge this oppression in the educational system in order for all students to be exempt from the dangers of crossing gender/sexual lines (Rands, 2009).

Using teachers’ reflections, conversations with students were often thought of as one teaching strategy to address gender and sexual diversity and a way to create an overall supportive classroom environment. In this section, I focus on three teaching strategies used by the teachers in this sample to address gender and sexual diversity in their classroom. These include: using one-day events to speak to LGBTQ issues, media integration to bring light to LGBTQ lived experiences, as well as using storybooks to address diversities. Providing a focus on these three teaching strategies provides valuable insight into how gender and sexuality are being addressed, as well as the epistemological possibilities for having LGBTQ students attend school in a safe and educationally rich environment.

With respect to his teaching practice, Richard commonly used certain LGBTQ events in the media to bring about discussions surrounding gender and sexual diversity in his classroom:

Mostly by ensuring that I include it in classroom examples. Uhm I’m teaching French right now as I said so opportunities come up less frequently. Uh...but when I do it. I try



to do it with respect to the one I will focus on is events happening around the world. International Day against Transphobia, Transgender Day of Remembrance, Day of Pink or Day of Silence. I will do it on occasions where the conversation will come up but that's only in terms of speaking about it seriously or on a note where it's entirely devoted to conversation.

To address gender and sexual diversity mostly “by including classroom examples” of events “happening around the world” within the media can be restrictive. Queer scholarship by Britzman (1995) considers the limits of inclusion as it “sets to produce the very exclusions [it] is meant to cure” (p. 158). Simply including LGBTQ-content is not sufficient in interrogating what is normal and how normal becomes to be defined and understood; instead, a reiteration of sexual difference might still be ever-present. Specifically, inclusions warrant particular concern for Britzman (1995) as the inclusive representation that Richard sets to produce, only serves to reproduce “a theoretical gesture of pathos in which exclusions are simply affirmed as sad necessities of significance” (p. 158). The ways in which Richard speaks to his pedagogical practice in addressing gender and sexual diversity in his classroom may serve to create a discourse of tolerance. As well, by speaking to his pedagogical decision-making for inclusion, Richard may position his students as innocent bystanders that are exempt from oppressive practices experienced by those with norm-disruptive gender and sexual identities. Britzman (1995) encourages educators to use transformational pedagogies, existing beyond one-day events, in a way that ensures students understand and acknowledge heterosexual subjection and the systems that work to perpetuate it.

Similar to Richard, James also extrapolated material from the media to help engage his students with issues surrounding gender and sexual diversity in his classroom:

If something comes up in the media...actually one of the best conversations and most serious I've had with my students come from what's happening in the news. As an educator you are required to teach x amount of subjects in the day so when there's something in the news that can be discussed...I think it's important to bring it to their attention and talk about what's going on in the world outside of these four walls. Not too long ago we talked about the Orlando shooting and I think that was a way to bring up discussion about what does it mean to be not straight. We talked about terrorism and cultural beliefs and what it's like for LGBTQ people. It was one of the most serious conversations we had. The kids were engaged and really empathized. It was a very positive experience.

While media integration can be helpful and productive in certain aspects of addressing gender and sexual diversity, it may also hold the potential to lead to victim narratives, as well as

pathologization. If this is the only teaching strategy used, the tendency for normative processes to be interrupted becomes lost. Rofes (2005) calls for a truly radical restructuring of schooling that focuses on the complexities of LGBTQ lived experiences than the martyr-target-victim model and traditional "sentimental" homophobic undertaking often assumed in pedagogical practice as James appears to use. Such an approach, Rofes (2005) argues, is ineffective and promotes superficial thinking which fails to address core issues, making only gradual and incremental attempts to challenge the overarching structures and systems that maintain dominance and replicate power imbalances. Kumashiro (2002) warns that educators cannot only focus on the treatment of oppressed individuals, but rather, on the ways in which oppression operates in school, and how students are marginalized on the basis of more than one identity.

While media integration may help to inscribe empathy related to LGBTQ issues, it is important that pedagogy also be used in a manner that critically interrogates the binary system which separates and maintains difference (Kumashiro, 2000). Kumashiro (2000) reminds us that a dual process is needed in order to undertake an inclusive approach to 'otherness' which involves not only inspecting 'the other,' but the practices of power and privilege which give rise to othering. Britzman (1995) contends that providing information about LGBTQ people and issues as a sole teaching strategy does not seek to trouble how educators engage with such knowledge. She argues that it is not insufficient knowledge that needs to be addressed, but rather, students unlearning existing harmful knowledges that work to produce oppressive practices in schools and beyond.

When answering how he addresses gender and sexual diversity in his classroom, Kevin discussed the use of storybooks to help educate his students about diversity as it relates to families:

I will add storybooks here and there and talk about diverse families and such. Acting as a trusted role model and they will come to you with anything. And again...creating teaching moments where they can ask enquiry-based questions and go from there. You shouldn't have to teach acceptance. If you're reading a book about two moms then you can dive deeper into it. As far as homophobia goes...uhm...you...you can tie it back to any bullying thing. Let's say someone in the school yard was bullied for being gay and you address it in the classroom. You can make it a teaching moment. I try to make sure my students can talk if they need to. I go out of my way to being open and honest. I guess I don't do anything explicitly...or as much as I need to be doing but...when language comes up I make sure to address it. I guess I'm not proactive but rather reactive. I would like to be more proactive though.

Kevin seems to integrate LGBTQ content within his classroom through the use of storybooks, and offers a willingness to address homophobic language with his students. This focus provides a window of opportunity to unsettle the heteronormative culture of schools, making it possible for students to develop a deeper understanding of gender and sexual diversity. Kevin strives to “dive deeper into it” when addressing diverse familial representations which may help to reposition students’ thinking about gender, sex, and sexuality. This thinking is influenced by a highly regulated social system of control (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1990), and is culturally and politically produced through discourse and practice (Foucault, 1978). Such exploration offers the possibilities for disrupting hegemonic discourses that structure knowledge about sex, gender, and sexuality for more transformative ways of thinking. Kevin’s reflection on being “not proactive but rather reactive” and a desire to be “more proactive” with eliminating homophobic pejoratives is vital for heteronormativity to be questioned for its dominance and denigration in schooling.

### **Lost Teachable Moments for Addressing Gender and Sexual Diversity**

The sub-section of this theme will provide a focus on teachable moments that may have been lost in working to disrupt the “conceptual geography of normalization” (Britzman, 1995, p. 152) that often takes precedent in schools. To disrupt the heteronormative climate, it is imperative to identify areas within education that require change in order to delimit the works of compulsory heterosexuality. Among the many changes recommended by Diaz et al. (2010) is the language of the educator and the pedagogies used by the educator in order to effectively address gender and sexual diversity in the school setting. It is my intention to expose the processes of perception, cognition, and interpretation by unearthing the way gender and sexuality is still being understood and spoken about in a way that remains explicitly heterosexualized. Therefore, I would like to begin with Lana’s reflection of a time when she had a staff meeting where the principal informed the staff about a student at their school who was in the process of transitioning. Understanding, uncovering, and reflecting on the language used by educators regarding gender and sexual diversity can be useful in interrogating insidious practices that promote hetero/cisnormative thinking, and the impact of that thinking onto teachers’ pedagogical decision-making. This specific example illustrates a learning opportunity for normative knowledges to be disrupted so that a process of personal and social change can emerge

(Britzman, 1995). During this meeting, Lana recounted the time that staff were asked to use gender neutral pronouns as requested by the student. She recalled:

We had a talk about pronouns in one of our meetings where a student wanted to identify as gender neutral. I overheard some of the staff say, gender neutral? Really? Why can't they just make up their minds? There was definitely resistance there and obviously a lack of knowledge. But you know...they were really puzzled by the idea of somebody identifying as out of the binary. They now had to watch their language.

Lana's account of teachers experiencing difficulty with using gender neutral pronouns when addressing this specific student speaks to Britzman's (1995) discussion of resistance toward learning which is a desire to ignore and a desire for self-affirmation. Lana speaks to hearing the other teachers make remarks like "why can't they just make up their minds?" which, as she states, indicated "resistance...and [was due to] an [obvious] lack of knowledge." Moreover, Britzman (2009) emphasizes "that receiving knowledge is a problem for the learner and teacher" (p.159) and is resisted in the event that it "cannot be incorporated because it disrupts how the self might imagine itself and others" (p.159). Teachers expressing resistance toward the idea of "somebody identifying as out of the binary" may be reflective of what, Cavanagh and Sykes (2006) demonstrate as, defying the binary system which is based on ideological understandings of unverifiable biological absolutes (Dworkin, 2009).

The student identifying as gender neutral may generate resistance from the teachers because of how gender diversity transgresses the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), disrupting the assumption of sex, sexuality, and gender aligning with one another (Connell, 2010). Within this matrix, bodies are limited via a heteronormative framework of intelligibility which not only limits gender possibilities by conflating sex with gender expression, but also the multiplicity of sex, gendered, and sexual bodies as being abnormal, unnatural or deviant (Butler, 1990). To offer a gender complex approach as Rands (2009) states, requires an awareness of "gender transgression oppression" (p. 426), as well as sexist and heterosexist privilege which tend to marginalize some groups of students. This is specifically aligning with the student who identifies as gender neutral being met with resistance by teachers in respect to using gender just vocabulary as detailed by Lana. A complex shifting is required by those teachers because transphobia involves a deeper intermeshing of multiple forms of oppression and resistance (Bettcher, 2014), which demands the recognition of multiplicity of identities in relation to dominant ones (Rands,

2009). Maintaining binary thinking as it pertains to language is a normalizing mechanism which heterosexism enacts and through which it communicates hostility toward LGBTQ people (Meyer, 2007; Rands, 2009; Sinkinson, 2009).

While Lana later acknowledges in the interview that this was a missed opportunity to have other teachers better understand gender diversity, she indeed highlights the deeply entrenched rigid cultural expectations existing in elementary schools, and the need to interrogate such thinking in order to allow for new ways of being. The elementary context, as Lana points out, is not exclusive to a heteronormative and cisnormative environment, but rather functions as a space where children are learning to consciously and unconsciously assume gender and sexual norms (Renold, 2003). This learning can occur through the choice of language used by the educator and their choice of pedagogy which may reveal hetero/cisnormative bias.

In addition, when working to engage in anti-oppressive education, it is important for students to be challenged to consider their own limits, norms, and constructs of gender binaries as Kumashiro (2000) advocates. The classroom needs to function as a space for both students and teachers to develop an awareness of practices that create and perpetuate a heteronormative environment (Dinkins & Englert, 2015). Encountering a heteronormative environment encourages students to a line of thinking that reinforces heterosexual dominance and an allegiance to gender binaries (Dinkins & Englert, 2015). In identifying the ways in which hetero/cisnormative school culture prevails, it is important to acknowledge teaching practices which allow, Kumashiro (2004) and Britzman (2003) argue, commonsense notions to continue.

More specifically, Kevin talked about the prevalence of gender policing in his grade three classroom. He recounted a time where his students were working on an art project where they had to decorate masks using a variety of shapes, colours, and utensils:

I have some boys in my class who are extremely keen to, I guess, gender norms. We were working making masks for a project and one of the boys in a group picked up a pink feather and the boys just sort of attacked him. They said, why are you picking up that? That's for girls. And it struck me how entangled they are with these gender norms. They are learning it from somewhere, right? It was like the end of the world that this kid was going out of his gender realm. I feel like it's those students who are doing that [policing] that are the ones calling other boys gay and all that.

This example demonstrates the understanding of gender expectations from students at a primary level who interact within a school culture that perpetuates homophobia and heterosexism. Recognizing the connection between gender normativity and heteronormativity requires us to address the extent to which policing of sex and gender functions to construct gender binaries and cissexual privilege (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2010). In this case, the boy who decided to use the pink feather to embellish his mask was regulated by his friends and narrowly-defined to a hetero-masculine norm to avoid being targeted as “gay” or a “fag” (Pascoe, 2007). For those students who wish to evade such labelling, it is an important expression of masculinity, expecting to maintain an ability to withstand or deflect being called “gay” or a “fag” (Pascoe, 2007). Butler (1999) sees gender as accomplished interactionally through “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (p. 43) that congeal over time to produce “the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 43). Drawing on her scholarship, the constitutive gendered being is created through processes of citation and repudiation that produce a socially recognizable gender category (Butler, 1993). The constitutive gendered person who occupies an abject identity, extending beyond their binary, are persons that go unrecognizably and unacceptably to be gendered selves. Kevin had mentioned that he did not intervene at that time which speaks to what was being silenced in respect to hetero/cisnormative subjection. In order to engage in anti-hetero/cisnormative practices, it is important for teachers to examine what is being taught on a daily basis, what is being excluded, and the influence on the lives of LGBTQ students. Ignoring gender allows the student and teacher to abide by internalized notions of gender based on the gender oppression matrix (Rands, 2009). By failing to address the gender oppression matrix, which privileges men and boys and those who conform to dominant gender expectations, gender-stereotyped education remains sustained.

### **Attitudes in Limiting Safe Spaces that Allow for Gender and Sexual Diversity**

When discussing the ways to create a safe and supportive environment for students who identify as LGBTQ, most participants spoke about the organization of GSAs at their schools. GSAs were often deployed as a way to make schools safe and respectful for all students by addressing homophobia and heterosexism, as well as other forms of oppression (Lapointe, 2015; Wells, 2006). GSAs are shown to be an effective school-based support that can positively affect

LGBTQ students' school experiences (Greytak et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2014); having most of the participants suggest that the organization of the GSA at their school be a way to create safe spaces. To draw on the sample of this study, Christopher acknowledged the formation of his GSA as a result of homophobic bullying occurring at his school:

There was some kind of homophobic language going on in the intermediate grades...and so the students asked for formation of it. But I wasn't directly a part of it. I came in afterwards.

Doris also described the organization of her GSA similar to what Christopher spoke about:

The GSA at my school was done by another teacher. If it wasn't for my colleague, I don't think it would be a thing at our school. There was definitely some homophobic language being said and he wanted to combat that by creating a safe space where students can talk freely and safely.

Natalia spoke to how the GSA came about in her school, which was, as the other participants had mentioned, due to recurrent disparaging language made by students:

You know...another teacher and I had started it. There was nothing organized before we initiated it at our school. It's important to have, I believe. I think it has its benefit. You know...in creating a safe space for these students. No child should be coming to school feeling like they're not being supported or represented or anything. That's why we did it. We wanted to have these spaces be a place where LGBTQ students and those like-minded feel like they are heard, safe and...and...supported. Even for kids who don't necessarily...you know...identify as LGBTQ...having empathy built is important.

Doris indicating that the organization of the GSA at her school would not have been made "if it wasn't for [her] colleague" is troubling because all schools should have the presence of a GSA without the initiative of one educator alone because of its association with lower rates of victimization, in addition to a greater sense of school belonging for LGBTQ students (Greytak et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2011; Kosciw et al., 2014). As Doris points out, homophobic language can make for a hostile school climate for LGBTQ students (Meyer, 2007), which creates the need for a GSA to provide a space for students to feel "safe." GSAs can create safe spaces by supporting partnerships, providing LGBTQ-related information and resources, as well as engaging in social justice work aimed at rectifying myths and stereotypes that encourage abuse (Wells, 2006, Lapointe, 2015).

Natalia similarly touches on the role that the GSA can play “in creating a safe space for these students” and offering a supportive environment for all students who can participate in learning more about oppression (Mayo, 2013). Schools that continue to assume heteronormative bias through a formal curricula, school policies and practices consequently foster a culture of silence, exclusion, and marginalization of LGBTQ students (Britzman, 1995; Mayberry et al., 2013). Providing both support and representation in school for LGBTQ students, as Natalia comments, is shown to be associated with higher reports of safety at both the individual and school level, as well as fewer instances of harassment and discrimination (Snapp et al., 2015). It is important to note that when working to build empathy within GSAs, as Natalia addresses, we do not work to produce new lines of exclusion by centering on identity politics that contribute to the re-inscription of otherness (Kumashiro, 2002). Regarding pedagogical practice, Clark and Blackburn (2009) address the limitation of such an approach by having students’ homophobic position in the classroom be sustained through a lack of interrogation, while at the same time, trying to “provoke empathy, understanding, and a sense of commonality across differences” (p. 28). Establishing a GSA can potentially provide a space for critical dialogue that works to challenge and deconstruct heteronormative culture in exchange for a more inclusive culture (Lapointe, 2015)

In creating safe spaces in schools, it is important to recognize the ways in which teachers are working to combat homophobia, heterosexism, and genderism which can make school a hostile climate for those LGBTQ-identified (Goodman, 2005; Greytak et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2014; Pinar, 2007). In light of the research question of this study, exploring the experiences of educators in challenging homophobia can provide a deeper understanding of the possibilities and limitations of affirming LGBTQ students’ identities in school spaces. As well, focus on teachers’ awareness of the damaging effects of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism can help to develop implications for better preparedness to disrupt the marginalization of LGBTQ students in schools. I draw attention to the attitudes related to gender and sexual diversity in school because, as Richard (2015) contends, it generates insight into the realities and knowledges that may limit LGBTQ students navigating in and between safe spaces. In particular, Lana spoke to the prevalence of homophobia at her school and the common response she witnessed to hearing such language:



Homophobic language is prevalent. I think it is more prevalent than it should be. It's still present and I don't think that's okay. It's not appropriate to say stop being such a fag and I don't see a lot of people flinch. I'm talking about stuff like that. Then if a student says something and brings that forward. The attitude I've seen a lot of administrators display is that this is not a big deal...that it was not a hurtful thing. Yet, I think that still continues to promote a culture of suffering and isolation.

As Lana puts it, having people “not flinch” is a commonplace behaviour perpetuated by the very school environment that thrives on the subjugation of non-normative identities through heteronormativity. Heterosexuality is indeed naturalized by having such homophobic language as described by Lana be “not a big deal” and “not a hurtful thing,” and perpetual due to heteronormativity wherein any other sexual identity variant is considered “other” and worthy of ridicule (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Renolds, 2010; Russel, 2010). Lana seems to speak to the production of normalization in school where practices of normalcy go unsettled regarding the lack of intervention with homophobic pejoratives due to what Britzman (1975) calls, “a problem of culture and thought” (p. 154). She seemingly scrutinizes the response to this “culture of suffering and isolation” against LGBTQ students because of the muddling of intelligibility that produces “the normal as the proper subject” (Britzman, 1995, p. 157) one which is exempt from derision (Meyer, 2008). To evade this commonplace response toward homophobic pejoratives being used by students as highlighted by Lana, it is important to engage in the “rethinking of pedagogy and the rethinking of knowledge” (Britzman, 1995, p 155) to discover the possibilities of new ways of being.

While this study sought to identify teachers' awareness of the damaging effects in schools related to homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia, what the data revealed is the interwoven nature of factors contributing to these inequities. Particularly, the participants' responses helped guide the analysis regarding the problems and incidents which lead to homophobia, and other biases being inadequately addressed in schools. Many elementary school teachers reported an ambivalence toward intervening in the midst of homophobia due to students' (mis)understanding behind terms like “gay” or “fag.” For example, several participants believed that some students may call a peer “gay,” “fag” or use the term “that's so gay” but not refer to sexuality. It is important to note that the phrasing “that's so gay” may be used in a manner to express displeasure without intent to reflect on how it transmits homophobia/heterosexism/transphobia (Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010; McCormack,

2011). Both Rubin (1984) and Hillier and Harrison (2004) argue that although homophobic language is used to marginalize a behaviour or action rather than a person, it still reproduces homophobia because users intend to denounce same-sex desire. Using homophobic language regulates those who do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes, reproducing the hierarchical stratification of genders, specifically masculinity, as well as harming the recipient of the abuse (Messner, 1992; Pascoe, 2007).

Many of the elementary school teachers spoke about not addressing the use of such language because of the uncertainty they felt about its meaning. DePalma and Jennett (2010) argue that teachers tend to misattribute phrasing like, “that’s so gay” because they are uncertain of the attitude by the abuser in using this language. Richard spoke to how he believed some students may use certain language but not necessarily associate it with homophobic pejoratives:

I think bullying is tailored to this boogeyman which is unfactual. Bullying isn’t just bullying. There is a root to it because sometimes its insecurity and sometimes its superiority. But quite often it is prejudice...and...and...and even more than that it’s bigotry. In the form of the kids...trying to know what they’re talking about. When they called somebody gay in my school some didn’t know what the word meant. Addressing the root of discrimination is important.

Despite its potential meaning, what is communicated is not only the stigmatization of non-heterosexuality (Rubin, 1984), but also the conflation with femininity being in opposition to masculinity (Lorber, 1994). Any conjunction between femininity and non-heterosexuality is resultant of being socially marginalized or having to defend one’s gendered identity (Richardson, 2010). Language can act as a currency through which social norms are produced (Kiesling, 2007), for Butler (1990), stigmatized gendered behaviours are deemed socially unacceptable because of how it defies the false naturalization of identity produced by cultural norms. This includes same-sex desire and she insists that this false naturalization is violently and repeatedly repudiating same-sex desires in favour of “acceptable” gender and sexuality.

Richard draws attention to addressing the “root cause of discrimination” which is the maintenance of hetero/cisnormativity in schools, providing a “climate of normality and abnormality [which may lie] in the root causes of heterosexism and homophobia” (Sue, 2010, p. 196). In their study, Atkinson and DePalma (2008) reveal that educators commonly deny the existence of heteronormativity in schools, rendering it invisible and affirming schools as neutral.

Richard seemingly speaks to this by needing to acknowledge discriminatory behaviour at the elementary level, having the “root of discrimination” not go ignored or be overlooked. Responding to bullying on the basis of diverse expressions of gender and sexuality, can oftentimes perpetuate stereotypes and propagate assumptions about students fittingly and permanently falling within normative categories. Interventions that do not address the insidious nature of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia as it is functions in school operations do a real disservice for those with non-normative identities (Rands, 2009).

When working to create safe spaces, particularly in the context of a GSA, which may provide spaces for dialogue that questions myths and stereotypes surrounding LGBTQ people (Lapointe, 2015), it is important for teachers not to fall victim to such stereotypical thinking themselves. The majority of participants in this study referred to creating safe spaces in their schools as a measure of being inclusive of gender and sexual diversity; however, a few seem to have reinforced heteronormativity while simultaneously talking about defying it. For example, Anne describes circumscribing stereotypes amongst her students but propagates heteronormativity through her own line of thinking. When talking about students who may identify as LGBTQ in her classroom, which she considers to be a place of inclusion, she remarked: “none of my students are out in terms of being LGBTQ. I have one student who may fit the stereotype but I don’t know for certain.” When asked to elaborate on how her student may fit a particular stereotype, she responded:

It’s that flamboyant behaviour that the student exhibits himself who gives off the impression that may have people assume he identified as homosexual. None of the other students seem to recognize his behaviour, and I don’t know if that has to do with the age group, but it is something that I have noticed.

While Anne acknowledges that her students are unaware of this child’s “flamboyant behaviour,” she exclusively accentuates her own biased thinking through her personal stereotyping and labeling of gender behaviours with that specific student. Due to his gender transgression, he is singled out by his teacher for challenging binary logic which stigmatizes those who do not conform to heterosexual gender norms. Rands (2009) suggests that teachers who engage in gender-stereotyped education leave the gender oppression matrix intact as internalized notions of gender roles go uninterrupted, allowing for essentialist understandings related to how to speak, behave, and think in a way that aligns with normative expectations. A gender-complex

education, rather, reflects a more nuanced way of looking at gender in a way that refuses to stabilize gender identities and recognizes gender diversity. This includes a student who does not subscribe to hegemonic masculine norms and avoiding labels of stereotyping because of it. For teachers to support enacting a gender-complex education, interrogating their own line of thinking about gender is a necessary step (Rands, 2009).

Conversely, James acknowledged his stereotypical thinking, but still maintained heteronormative assumptions that produce strict gender boundaries. James communicated his belief of his principal possibly identifying as a gay man as he articulated: “as much as I don’t like to stereotype, I presume the principal is.” When asked how he would presume that his principal might identify as homosexual, the question produced a sense of discomfort through an evasion of eye-contact and rapid movements within his seat. He cautiously responded: “I guess I’m stereotyping...just based on mannerisms. He would speak about his partner so I just assume what his sexuality is.” Teachers who engage with such stereotypical thinking only serve to reinforce the gender order and circumscribe what it means to fall on the continuum beyond what is confined to masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual.

It is important for James, although aware of his own stereotypical thinking, to engage with anti-oppressive education. Kumashiro (2009) requires that both the teacher and student reflect on their own “assumptions, identities, theoretical groundings, as well as educational practices” (p. 25) and put whatever insights are gained to use. Paying attention to the prevailing, competing, and challenging norms that pervade our own line of thinking is essential in moving forward with equitable educational opportunities (Nelson, 1999). This requires James challenging taken-for-granted notions of sexuality and gender (Nelson, 1999), which can give rise to systems of privilege, binaries, hierarchies, and practices of marginalization (Pinar, 1998). Commonsense knowledge regarding sexualities and genders tends to be naturalized, and if left unruffled, untouched, and untroubled, produces damaging schooling experiences for those who do not conform (Davies, 2006). Kumashiro (2000) reminds us that our experiences and understandings are contextual and partial and that by acknowledging our own lenses and interpretive labours we can begin to challenge: oppression, desire for normalcy, contradictions, as well as work through resistances.

## Need for Further Professional Development

Upon teachers reflecting about their pedagogical decision-making practices in addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classroom/school, all participants deferred to needing greater support through further professional development opportunities. In order for teachers to effectively be supported by way of employing anti-hetero/cisnormative practices, they need opportunities to generate further knowledge about the intersections between gender, sexuality and schooling. Educators, policymakers, and school staff are all acknowledged in ensuring that schools are safe and offer inclusive environments for all LGBT children and youth (Greytak et al., 2009). Providing opportunities to better support these students derives from further teacher training (Taylor et al., 2011; Kosciw et al., 2014). The following teachers reiterate the need for professional development opportunities as a means to encourage preparedness in teaching about this topic, limit anxieties or concerns surrounding these identities, as well as cultivating an overall positive school climate.

Christopher commented:

I think there needs to be more mandatory training with LGBTQ issues and realities. Especially at the elementary level. I think it's overlooked at the elementary level which is absurd because it suggests that children are genderless or asexual. I think more discussion needs to focus on gender nonconforming children. Again...I think it's something teachers are still not knowledgeable on. I can definitely see the benefit of more training.

Natalia suggested:

Having a mandatory training would be helpful for all those working in the school. Providing that training will help for teachers to be more active, more comfortable talking and doing this kind of work. In return...you know...it will help students feel safe which is ultimately what you want to happen. For all students to feel like they belong.

Laura noted:

I think mandatory training would be great. I would like to see teachers who have this fear or this uneasiness toward this...to be...to have that understanding and confidence in teaching because they are backed up.

Kevin further added:

I do think more professional training is needed. I think it would...you know...those who are on the fence about teaching this material because a lot of it is a lack of knowledge. Even a feeling of not being supported by administration or on a policy level. Professional development...would...help...also to encourage people to be advocates, collaborate, and

really be motivated to do this inclusive work. There are going to be times where teachers have a student who identifies as LGBTQ. I think it's helpful for teachers to be able to respond to those students. And do so effectively.

Christopher acknowledges how at the elementary level children are deemed “genderless” or “asexual” despite existing as a site where social and cultural expectations are actively maintained (DePalma & Atkinson, 2008; Renold, 2010; Bale, 2011). He draws attention to a better understanding needed by teachers regarding gender nonconforming students, requiring teachers to invest in self-education and creative exercises to provide opportunities for gender-complex education to take assumed in their teaching practice (Rands, 2009). Furthermore, Natalia emphasizes the need for further training opportunities to allow for teachers to be “more active, more comfortable talking and doing this kind of work” as a way to help students “feel safe” and “like they belong” in school.

Teachers who are more knowledgeable about gender and sexual diversity, and whom work to address these diversities in their schools, lead to students reporting a better sense of belonging, greater sense of safety, as well as positive learning outcomes (Greytak et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2011; Kosciw et al., 2014). Kevin refers to teachers who may be “on the fence about teaching this material” due to a lack of perceived support, which he believes can be combated by further professional development to better inform teachers. Speaking to the “uneasiness” that Laura mentions and the “indecisiveness” that Kevin reports in teachers possibly addressing gender and sexual diversity, a crisis in learning is needed in order to engage with anti-oppressive education. Kumashiro (2002) argues that “desiring to learn involves desiring difference and overcoming our resistance to discomfort” (p. 63). Knowledge becomes discomfoting when the knowledge one holds is an “entitlement to one’s ignorance” (Britzman, 1995, p. 159). All of these participants appear to strive to awaken new imaginings within education by way of creating new lines of thinking about difference and identity. All of the teachers speak to reconceptualizing the relation between knowledge, resistance, and ignorance and the impact on normalized processes in schooling.

On the topic of further professional development, most of the participants interviewed in this study spoke about needing a greater awareness as it relates to policies regarding gender and sexual diversity. Most of the participants spoke to policies concerning anti-bullying which draws into question notions of anti-harassment that focuses on oppression at the individual level rather

than systemic issues that give rise to hetero/cis sexism and normativity. As teachers work to combat homophobia in their schools, anti-bullying discourses need to move beyond individual behaviour toward addressing systemic factors related to sex and gender based harassment and discrimination. It is essential to highlight that while discussing professional development opportunities, the teachers stressed that schools needed to be more diligent in ensuring that these policies are being enforced appropriately in a way that produces change.

Kumashiro (2002) believes that anti-oppressive education transpires when practices are recognized as continuing to maintain hegemony and reproducing existing order, such as having policies go unenforced. Britzman (2002) similarly speaks to forms of resistance in particular to the physical constraints of sexuality within education. She conceptualizes the third form of resistance as the personal values of teachers and administrators which may delimit gender and sexual desire and expression in schools. She addresses structural resistance as resilient to change as it refers to the “very design or organization of education” (p. 34). This resistance may give reason as to why gender and sexual diversity is still ineffectively addressed, particularly at a governing level. In discovering how to better attend to the tensions of pedagogical forms of resistance, Britzman (2002) advocates working through internal conflicts and ambivalence toward sexuality for the purpose of “rais[ing] rather serious questions on the nature of education and on the uses of educational anxiety” (p. 35).

Many of the participants in this study called for administrators to be more aware of policies and help to support teachers in their learning about LGBTQ issues and identities as it relates to schooling. A greater emphasis toward policies made by the school or administrative level, in conjunction with teachers, were exclusively preferred by participants as Lana highlighted:

Yes, yes overwhelmingly yes. I mean...we wouldn't have heard of it if we didn't have teachers pushing for it. Even before I came in that sort of position at my school. I don't know what it is. Before that I had an ally. She was met with a lot of resistance even from admin. And...uhm...just because you know...admin said kids were too young no we are just going to talk about bullying. We are not going to talk about homophobia and all of that. So if it wasn't for a few of us pushing and being very persistently and honestly annoyingly to get this to happen...I don't think that it would.

Having homophobia continue to prevail in school spaces allows the heterosexual matrix to thrive without disruption or destabilization. An ability to interrogate how norms impose limitations of what Butler (2004) calls a “viable life” is needed in order for sexual and gendered lives to be

experienced and maintained. Furthermore, Lana gives voice to the structural barriers in the education system, which may encumber the prevalence of addressing gender and sexual diversity “if it wasn’t for a few of us pushing [for it].” In light of readings by Foucault (1978, 1984), ruling ideologies maintain hegemony within the education system and are legitimized by discourses which render normalcy. With attention to scholarship by Butler (1990, 1993), discourse produces misunderstandings of sex as part of a strategy to conceal and preserve continual power relations. The knowledge constructed through these ideologies reinforce power as certain groups have the privilege to create forms of knowledge and structure knowledge hierarchically to reproduce inequitable structures.

Richard also spoke to greater awareness of school policies made by the Ministry of Education:

There are several places in the board to contact. There are several places...I just think the ideal...the ideal is to have people who are knowledgeable otherwise there are staff who wouldn’t know where to seek...the comment made to me is that I just don’t know a whole lot myself. Uhm, but I think there is a certain percentage of as well who are willing to learn more. I think there is a smaller perception who just don’t know and would like to know more before they start...I think the Ministry could be doing more to actively say these are policies that must be in place. These are practices that must be place. Needs to be explicit. The biggest thing is that...these changes...need to be explicit on an elementary level rather on a level that includes elementary grades. Because a lot of the conversation is teenagers in high school which is understandable to a point but I think it’s time to take an administrative step to say this happens in kindergarten...let’s catch up. Unless there is direct pressure for school boards to advance, it’s not going to happen. When pressure comes from teachers who are at the root of it- it can work. It needs to be backed up in policy. Right now it’s backed up in the human rights legislation that’s come through the Ministry and certainly the standard of professional practice and certainly several ministry and provincial guidelines that enshrine gender identity and expression and enshrine gender presentation and shrine sexual orientation. But the ministry needs to be more blunt about how these are delivered and what kinds of policies and practices need to have. Certainly as it relates to younger kids.

Richard commenting on professional development opportunities that allow for teachers “who wouldn’t know where to seek [them]” but who wish to become more knowledgeable because of “not knowing a lot [themselves]” is indicative of how marginalized this subject matter is. It also highlights how gender and sexual diversity continue to be inadequately addressed in schools, which, as he suggests, requires a greater push on an administrative level to “actively say these



are policies that must be in place and these are practices that must be place” for the purpose of disrupting hetero/cisnormative values (Namaste, 2000). Richard identifies that a critical change needs to be taken on an administrative level that acknowledges the gender and sexual diversity of students, moving beyond the “the illusion that heterosexuals are the only people on the planet and are the center of all sexual practices” (Morris, 2005, p. 9). Britzman (1995) speaks to the silencing and marginalizing of LGBTQ students through policies and practices that promote and reinforce the privileging of compulsory heterosexuality in the education system. Shifting the hetero/cisnormative functioning in schools requires change--substantive change Britzman (1995) acknowledges--when both the internal culture and power structures are subverted and critiqued.

All elementary school teachers reported a need for greater support from an administrative level to bring about an awareness, and help to develop workshops related to effectively addressing gender and sexuality diversity in the classroom/school. Further professional development for teachers was a prominent finding for influencing change and dismantling barriers that prevent addressing LGBTQ issues and identities in schools. All ten of the participants felt that administration should take more of a leadership role in providing opportunities to learn more about these diversities through training workshops. When addressing further professional development opportunities for teachers, better conceptualizing gender and sexuality was commonly proposed as a viable prospect. This understanding is fundamental in order to better grasp the intersecting ways of complex identities, power, privilege, and oppression which can often be taken-for-granted. Teachers’ pedagogical decision-making as it relates to effectively addressing gender and sexual diversity is closely linked to professional development opportunities. These opportunities can help teachers with engaging in transformative teaching practices that allow for a shift in focus where new questions are asked and new strategies are produced for intervening with the hetero/cisnormative school culture.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter highlights participants’ reflections on their pedagogical decision-making in effectively addressing gender and sexual diversity. An analysis of the interview data revealed four prominent themes regarding teachers’ understanding the limitations of a hetero/cisnormative framework in conceptualizing the fluidity of gender and sexual identity categories, using

teachable moments to address gender and sexuality diversity in the classroom, as well as having lost teachable moments in disrupting the hetero/cisnormative framework, attitudes in limiting safe spaces in schools that allow for the expression of gender and sexual diversity, and finally, teachers' perceived need for further professional development to better attend to the current tensions in the education system as they relate to LGBTQ issues. The analysis of these themes were informed by the insights and understandings of theorists, such as Butler (1990, 1993, 2004), Britzman (1995, 2003), Foucault (1978, 1984), and Rands (2009), which helped to identify teachers' pedagogical decision-making in disrupting heteronormative and cisgender ideology that permeate the education system. With respect to teachers' understanding of gender and sexual diversity, a lack of congruency between gender, sex, and sexuality was perceived within the hetero/cisnormative framework. This particular framework was deemed to be incomprehensible in conceptualizing the issues of embodiment and representation as it relates to gender and sexual diversity. Additionally, teachers' use of teachable moments as part of their pedagogical decision-making to address gender and sexual diversity provided insight into how cisgendered and heteronormative ideologies can be dismantled or re-inscribed. While examining the ways in which elementary school teachers are working to create a safe space, it is important to consider how they are effectively addressing forms of oppression that exist in school, such as homophobia, which was shown to be reduced by the organization of a GSA among other ways. Focusing on teachers' reflections about their approaches to forms of oppression is useful in identifying whether their pedagogical decision-making recites subjectivities and reproduces the impression of compulsory heterosexuality. A need for further professional development is necessary in order to better inform teachers' pedagogical decision-making as it relates to effectively addressing gender and sexual diversity in a way that dismantles the strict, regulatory system. This analysis has created implications for future research which will be discussed in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### **Thesis Overview:**

This thesis sought to investigate the ways in which teachers construct and respond to addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms and schools through their pedagogical decision-making. It intended to generate greater knowledge about how teachers are constructing and enacting their pedagogical commitment to addressing gender and sexual diversity as a means to disrupt the hetero/cisnormative culture that exists in school. By using qualitative, semi-structured interviews with ten elementary school teachers in various public schools across Ontario, in-depth accounts of teachers' reflections gave insight into their pedagogical decision-making practices in addressing gender and sexual diversity in their schools. A queer and gender informed theoretical framework was used to inform this study as the purpose was to gain insight into elementary school teachers' pedagogical practices in unsettling the heteronormative and cisnormative nature of schooling to better address gender and sexual diversity. I consistently drew attention to elementary school teachers' pedagogical practices to discover if normalizing gender and sexual ideologies and inequalities were found that may limit effectively addressing gender and sexual diversity in the school system. I also paid attention to the ways in which teachers strived to dismantle broader systems of heteronormativity and cisnormativity for the purpose of better attending to students with diverse gender and sexual identities.

The importance of this research is reflected in the understanding that LGBTQ students do in fact exist in elementary schools (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Drazenovich, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2014), and evidence is found in challenging the broader systems of schooling through teachers' pedagogical commitment to gender and sexual diversity. It is important to interrogate the social and pedagogical practices in the education system that create injustices in order to explore and celebrate these diversities in a way that is not delimited by a hetero/cisnormative binary. This research, which seeks to investigate elementary school teachers' approaches to dismantling inequities within the education system, is certainly inspired by other studies that have generated knowledge about addressing gender and sexual diversity (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006, DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2014; Richard, 2015; Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013; Schall & Kauffman, 2003).

Using qualitative, semi-structured interviews to investigate elementary school teachers' pedagogical engagement in schools, allowing for insight into the operation of hetero/cisnormative knowledges and practices, was an appropriate methodology for this specific research study. Teachers' reflections were rich with description (Patton, 2002), which gave rise to in-depth understandings of hetero/cisnormative discourses, and allowed the opportunity to interpret their perceptions and experiences in the context of their pedagogical decision-making. This study did not intend to generalize the findings to all elementary school teachers, but rather sought to generate deeper insight into the ways in which teachers are negotiating and engaging with hetero/cisnormative frameworks related to schooling. I used a snowball sampling technique of ten elementary school teachers because of its potential to gather populations with similar characteristics (Patton, 2002), allowing for the exploration of approaches taken in teaching practices regarding effectively addressing gender and sexual diversity.

The findings of this study revealed how elementary school teachers appear to understand the limitations in systems that work to categorize people, as well as the need to disrupt the hetero/cisnormative cultural codes, which delineate individual lived experiences. Better understanding gender and sexual diversity can help to uncover the ontological and epistemological limitations which pose a threat to LGBTQ students, requiring a disruption of established binaries that produce heterosexual domination (Renn, 2010). With respect to teaching practice, the participants appeared to recognize the potential for educational pedagogies that reflect transgressive properties to dissolve the traditional boundaries of hetero/cisnormative practices in school. In keeping with this, it is important that pedagogical decision-making practices within the elementary context continue to unearth the production of normalization (Britzman, 1995), and trouble the constructs and sanctions which privilege heterosexuality in education (Britzman, 2000).

Moreover, elementary school teachers were indeed aware of the threats LGBTQ students face in their everyday schooling in respect to discrimination and/or harassment. Working to create safe spaces in their schools was accomplished as a way of supporting LGBTQ-identified students, and having them feel safe regarding the expression of their gender and sexuality. The organization of a GSA within the teachers' school was commonly viewed as a measure of contributing to a less hostile school climate. To instill a safe and supportive school climate for

LGBTQ students, it is prudent that practices are put into place that disassemble gender and sexual binaries which work to create unsafe spaces for these students (Ferfolja, 2005; Jones, 2014; Litton, 2001; Maher, 2003).

In addition, all of the participants believed that further professional development was needed in order to apply effective anti-heteronormative and anti-cisnormative practices to better support educational outcomes for LGBTQ students. Allowing for further professional development opportunities will help in providing a more nuanced understanding about the complex interaction of gender, sex, and sexuality within education. Although gender and sexuality are found to be addressed in the pedagogical practices of the elementary school teachers, further development was believed to be necessary in order to better discover how discriminatory practices can be perpetuated or curtailed. Teachers can indeed work to dismantle heteronormative and cisnormative discourses in school, but can also perpetuate those discourses despite their intentions as DePalma and Atkinson's (2006, 2009) research reveals.

### **Limitations**

This research offers a partial understanding of how elementary school teachers are complicit in the reproduction of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, and how being a white, middle-class educator may grant certain privileges. In terms of both its sampling and focus on schools, this study is limited. Further research is still needed to address how intersectional issues related to both race and class are implicated in and complicate issues related to addressing gender and sexuality diversity in schools. It is important to examine schools from rural and suburban settings, as well as teachers with different identity categories, in order to generate further knowledge about this topic that takes into consideration a more intersectional analysis. Expanding the participant pool could give increasing depth to the research and allow opportunities for intersection of other markers of difference in conjunction to gender and sexual identity. The absence of diverse teacher voices limits the scope of the research study, and does not accentuate the struggles of these historically marginalized group of people.

This much needed focus demands consideration of different experiences, as well as intersecting relations of gender, race and sexuality, which can provide a broader representation and also address questions of intersectionality. Although these interviews provided valuable

insight into how teachers encounter, make sense of, and respond to diversities in their classroom/school, it is limited by the quantity of interviews conducted with each teacher, and the amount of time spent during these interviews. In addition, extending further interviews would be helpful in generating further knowledge about how elementary school teachers are supporting gender nonconforming and transgender students. Speaking to participant recruitment, specifically requesting teachers who have direct experiences with transgender students is necessary.

Although this study focused more on a queer theoretical framework, a regrettable limitation of this research is the lack of data that pertains to supporting transgender and gender/nonconforming children and youth in school contexts. Participants spoke largely about their experiences with LGB students and made few references to understandings related to diverse gender expressions and identities in their school. Moreover, because all of the participants who volunteered for this study had a vested interest in addressing LGBTQ issues, a more random sampling technique may have yielded a more diverse sample of teachers.

### **Implications for Future Studies**

The findings of this research highlight the need to raise elementary school teachers' knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ students and issues as they continue to experience marginalization. The elementary school teachers who volunteered for this study demonstrated a commitment to creating safe spaces for all, and recognized LGBTQ students as a group that is vulnerable to exclusion in both teaching practice and the curriculum. In regard to the acronym, transgender was under discussed in this study in comparison to other identities. Students who identify as queer and questioning were also not addressed by the participants, which may speak to the need for further professional development to better understand different ways of being for the complexities that they possess.

Using teachable moments as a way to address gender and sexual diversity warrants questions that incite discussion about how elementary school teachers can perpetuate or disrupt heterosexist and cisnormative practices in schools. What warrants further questioning is how gender and sexual diversity can be generated through professional development opportunities that provide teachers with the necessary skill and knowledge to better attend to the current

tensions within the school system. In conjunction, it is important to better understand how teachers' privileges may work to create barriers between themselves and students and the effect of such barriers. As detailed in DePalma and Atkinson's (2009) research, when presenting teachers with the opportunity to grapple with their own experiences and understandings related to gender and sexuality, new ways of thinking critically about inequalities begin to emerge. Although not detailed in this study, it is prudent for further research to investigate how transgender or gender nonconforming students are being supported in the education system and explicitly in terms of pedagogical decision-making as it pertains to the curriculum. In light of the findings, the aim of this research was to generate knowledge about the possibilities for addressing a queer and gender complex understanding of gender and sexual diversity in elementary schools. More research is certainly needed as it provides critical insight into further understandings about disrupting normative ways of schooling and the ways to better equip teachers to navigate heteronormative and cisgendered privileging in schools.

Scholarship that continues to focus on LGBTQ issues within the elementary context will be necessary in order to gain a deeper understanding of the complicated work for disrupting hetero/cisnormativity in kindergarten to grade eight schools. This specific scholarship needs to give voice to more elementary school teachers who are informed about gender and sexual diversity and the experiences undertaken by LGBTQ children and youth. Specific action needs to disrupt marginalization occurring in the classroom and the broader school environment (Snapp et al., 2015). The elementary school teachers in this study lend valuable insights into work that is being done in primary schools, and the work that still needs to be sought after for a just education. This research argues for more transformative queer pedagogies and gender complex approaches in order to counteract heteronormativity and cisgenderism in the education system. (Britzman, 2002; Gorski et al., 2013; Mayo, 2013; Sinkinson, 2009).

All of the participants in this study push for further professional development as a means to better support and serve LGBTQ students. Further research that documents the provision of professional development and LGBTQ supportive curricular interventions is much needed, and has the potential to enhance and further develop our understanding of how best to support teachers in addressing gender and sexuality in the school system. Because most of the elementary school teachers suggested greater emphasis on administrative support for addressing

LGBTQ issues in education, it may be valuable to explore administrative views through similar research questions proposed in this study. Administrative support was seen as a vital role in helping to decrease forms of oppression that exist in schools, such as homophobia, and creating change in educational settings. Providing this leadership focus may be advantageous to explore for the purpose of examining how administrators are conceptualizing, grappling with, and responding to issues surrounding LGBTQ students in schools. This research suggests that a more comprehensive framework is needed to question how to effectively address gender and sexual diversity in a way that exposes the limitations and possibilities of anti-hetero/cisnormative discourses in elementary schools and how teachers in classrooms can be better supported in this very important pedagogical endeavour.



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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

#### *Interview Guide*

Introduction

My background/Research Intent

Country of Origin

Current Grade Teaching

Teaching Experience

What experiences have you had working with children who identify as LGBTQ or gender-nonconforming?

Why were you interested in taking part in my research study and how does it relate to your own experiences as an educator?

Self-Identification

Definition of Terms

School Context

Can you tell me more about your school, including the population, etc?

What is your school like?

Are you aware of LGBTQ students and teachers and students from same-sex families at your school?

What is school like for these students? To what extent do you think they feel supported at school? Please explain

Does your school have explicit policies that address the needs of LGBTQ students or are you aware of specific policies for these students?

How do you see yourself as a teacher supporting LGBTQ students?

What support is provided for teachers in your school for helping them to address homophobia and transphobia?

Curriculum/Teaching Practice

Can you talk about what you understand about gender and sexual diversity? What do these terms mean to you? How do you define them and what the issues are that need addressing in schools?

How do you go about addressing gender and sexual diversity topics in your classroom? What about explicitly addressing homophobia, heterosexism and transphobia?



What resources have you used to respond to gender and sexual diversity in your own teaching practice?

Can you describe the students' reaction to including LGBTQ/gender non-conforming content in the curriculum?

What is your intent with including such representation in your teaching practice, meaning what do you hope is the take-away message your students learn?

What teaching practices have you used or know of, that can work toward resisting and interrogating stereotypes?

To what extent do you feel comfortable in discussing these topics in the classroom?

Have you ever encountered a time where you felt uncomfortable or experienced a challenge when talking about these topics in the classroom? If so, how so? If no, why not?

Have there ever been any concerns related to addressing these topics in your class (e.g., from colleagues, students, parents)?

How would you describe your sense of preparedness either academically or personally to teach about gender and sexual diversity?

In your opinion, does the current curriculum fairly and adequately attend to gender and sexual diversity? Do you perceive any bias in the curriculum?

Based on your teaching experience, please discuss if you feel that there is a need for change in the education system?

Please explain any recommendations for change that you would make, or like to see, for a more inclusive curriculum for LGBTQ/gender non-conforming students?

## Policy

What facets of the Ontario Curriculum, the Ontario Teacher's Professional Standards, and Ontario Legislation are you aware of that supports teachers addressing gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms and schools?

Do you believe that greater emphasis is needed by the school or administrative level to make teachers aware of these policies to protect and/or support LGBTQ/gender-nonconforming students?

## Final Thoughts

Are there any thoughts or experiences that you would like to expand on, or discuss that we did not touch on in the interview?

Is there any feedback that you would like to suggest about this topic that would be useful for me to be aware of or that you feel I should pursue further in my research?

## APPENDIX B: Letter of Information and Consent



**Project Title:** Investigating Teachers' Approaches to Gender and Sexual Diversity in the Education System

**Study Investigators' Names:** Wayne Martino (Principal Investigator), PhD, Education, University of Western Ontario and Jordan Gentile (Co-Investigator), Education, University of Western Ontario

### **Letter of Information**

#### **Invitation to Participate**

My name is Jordan Gentile and I am a MA candidate at the University of Western Ontario. I am writing to invite you to participate in my thesis research project, which is a qualitative study that investigates teachers' approaches to gender and sexual diversity in the classroom/school. There is a need to learn more about how LGBTQ students are being supported at the elementary school level. Your participation in this research project will make a significant contribution to this field of knowledge about teachers' approaches to LGBTQ students and the practice to improve school climates for these students.

#### **Purpose of the Letter**

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research.

#### **Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how teachers are approaching gender and sexual diversity in their classroom/school. This study will explore teachers' understanding and experiences with gender and sexual diversity as it is framed within their own teaching practice. The aim is to learn more about how gender and sexual diversity is being addressed in schools and what is needed to best support teachers in this work.

#### **Inclusion Criteria**

Those invited to participate must be working educators within Public elementary schools in the province of Ontario, Canada.

#### **Exclusion Criteria**

This study seeks to investigate teachers' approaches to gender and sexual diversity in the classroom/school and is open to all teachers who are interested in talking about this topic as it relates to their practice. If you are unwilling to be audio-recorded during the interview you may not partake in this study.

### **Study Procedures**

Data from this study will be collected through semi-structured interviews with myself, Jordan. The interview will work to explore how teachers understand, make sense of, and respond to gender and sexual diversity in the classroom/school. Each interview will last approximately 45-to-60 minutes and will occur at a quiet location of your choosing. A follow-up interview may occur if you wish to expand on or revise a statement made in the interview. There will be maximum of 10 participants taking part in this study.

### **Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no overt risks or harms as a result of participating in this study. You are free not to respond to any question and to withdraw from the study at any point. You will also be able to edit the transcript of the interview as you see fit as such information disclosed will be at your discretion as the participant.

### **Possible Benefits**

While you may not directly benefit from participating in the study, it is hoped to generate knowledge that will allow educators to better understand gender and sexually diverse students in the classroom/school and respond to their unique needs. Furthermore, participation in the study will allow for the opportunity to reflect on your own teaching practice which will help to further personal and professional development.

### **Compensation**

No compensation will be provided as a result of participating in the study.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to this study. You reserve the right to refuse participation, refuse to answer questions during the interview process, as well as maintain the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time without any penalty.

### **Confidentiality**

The data generated from this study will be kept confidential. Participants' names and schools will not be disclosed and will be concealed using pseudonyms in all of the transcripts collected from the interviews. Likewise, the geographic location will not be disclosed in any of the research documents. Data will not be shared with school administration or school board at any time as well. Audio-recordings of the interviews will be kept in a password protected file on the researcher's personal computer and will also be encrypted. Representatives of The University of

Western Ontario's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

### **Publication**

If the results of this study are published, your name will not be used. If you would like to receive a copy of the study once completed, please send an email to me that expresses your interest and provides a contact number. Direct quotes will be used in the dissemination of this research if you decide to check "yes" in the checkbox on the consent form.

### **Contacts for Further Information**

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me via email or by phone. Moreover, please feel free to contact me if you have any further questions about participating or would like further clarification about the research project.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Wayne Martino via email [REDACTED] or by phone [REDACTED] or The Office of Human Research Ethics [REDACTED], email: [REDACTED]

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact:

Dr. Wayne Martino (Principal Investigator)

Faculty Advisor in Education

University of Western Ontario

[REDACTED]

Jordan Gentile (Co-Investigator)

Master's Student in Education

University of Western Ontario

[REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Jordan Gentile, MA Candidate, University of Western Ontario

E: [REDACTED] C: [REDACTED]



## Consent Form

**Project Title:** Investigating Teachers' Approaches to Gender and Sexual Diversity in the Education System

**Study Investigators' Names:** Wayne Martino (Principal Investigator), PhD, Education, University of Western Ontario and Jordan Gentile (Co-Investigator), Education, University of Western Ontario

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to take part in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that, by signing, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own records.

**Participant:**

---

Name (please print)

---

Signature

---

Date

**Person Obtaining Informed Consent:**

---

Name (please print)

---

Signature

---

Date

Do you agree to have direct quotes be used for the dissemination of this research? Check yes or no.

Yes  No

## APPENDIX C: Ethics Approval Form



Research Ethics

### Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Wayne Martino  
**Department & Institution:** Education\Faculty of Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 108526  
**Study Title:** Investigating Elementary School Teachers' Approaches to Addressing Gender and Sexual Diversity in the Education System

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** November 01, 2016  
**NMREB Expiry Date:** November 01, 2017

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Western University Protocol		2016/10/17
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Email	2016/10/31
Letter of Information & Consent		2016/10/17
Instruments	Interview Guide - Received September 22, 2016	

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Ethics Officer, on behalf of Dr. Riley Hinson, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

Ethics Officer: Erika Basile \_\_\_ Nicole Kaniki \_\_\_ Grace Kelly \_\_\_ Katelyn Harris \_\_\_ Vikki Tran  Karen Gopaul \_\_\_

**APPENDIX D: Curriculum Vitae****Jordan Gentile**

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**EDUCATION**

Bachelor of Arts (Hons.)  
Brock University, 2010-2014

Bachelor of Education  
Trent University, 2014-2015

Master of Arts  
The University of Western Ontario, 2015-2017

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**AWARDS RECEIVED**

2013-2013 Promising Choices Bursary  
2013-2014 Harrison-Thompson Bursary Trust  
2014-2015 The Frederick and Lois Helleiner Teacher Education Bursary  
2014-2015 Student Access Guarantee (SAG) bursary  
2015-2016 Continuing Admissions Scholarship

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**RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

**Investigating Elementary School Teachers' Approaches to Gender and Sexual Diversity in the Education System**, Western University, London, Ontario 2017  
Advisors: Drs. Wayne Martino and Jenny Ingrey

- Interviewing Elementary School Teachers
  - Transcription and data analysis
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**COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

Game On-Group Mentoring for Big Brothers, 2016-2017  
Fundraiser Volunteer: Cure for Cystic Fibrosis at Brock University, 2010-2012

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