

INFORMING EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BASED ON THE
SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

By:

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2014

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I thank my husband, for his selfless support of my endeavor. While this doctoral degree appears to be an individual accomplishment, it was only acquired through his constant presence, love, and encouragement each step of the way. He was a witness to every challenge and every success in this long journey and for that, I share this achievement with him.

I am sincerely grateful to all my Dissertation Committee Members as well as the professors in the Curriculum, Teaching, and Teacher Education Program whose insight, wisdom, and suggestions were instrumental in completing this doctoral program and Dissertation. Also, I thank my cohort friends who provided momentum and laughs at just the perfect moments.

I especially thank Dr. Elizabeth Bondy, my Committee chair and advisor, for her guidance, patience, and faith in me. Her knowledge of and leadership in critical pedagogy led me to my dissertation topic. Her ability to ask the perfect probing questions that shifted an inchoate thought to a moment of clarity was astounding. She is by far the very best at transitioning an uncertain, anxiety ridden individual into a calm and confident state with one simple “Buffy” response. I will likely spend a lifetime trying to emulate that remarkable skill that I’ve grown so fond of.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, siblings, and friends, who never ceased to encourage me and believe that I could finish. Even in moments of self-doubt, they were my biggest cheerleaders and never wavered in their responses of “You will do this!” I appreciate your understanding when being holed up in the library meant missing special events and activities. I look forward to an open schedule where I am able to make up for lost time. I must especially thank my mother, who through her

representation of an intelligent, independent woman, serves as a role model and inspiration for my endeavors.

Last, but certainly not least, I thank my children, Derek and Raquelle, who joined our family during my time in the doctoral program. They have changed my life tremendously and brought me an immeasurable amount of joy. Their presence in my life pushed me to complete this doctoral program in hopes that one day this will make them proud and act as a reminder that you can achieve anything you set your mind to.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

INFORMING EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BASED ON THE
SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ STUDENTS

By

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August 2014

Chair: Elizabeth Bondy
Major: Curriculum and Instruction

Schools are meant to be institutions that provide a safe environment and positive experience for the students who attend. While this is true for most students, certain marginalized populations do not experience the same constructive experiences as their peers. This study examined the school experiences of one such population: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth. The purpose of this practitioner inquiry was to understand the perceptions of LGBTQ high school students about their school experiences in order to identify suggestions for educator professional development (PD). The research questions guiding this study were: *What are the school experiences of LGBTQ students? What suggestions do LGBTQ students propose to improve the school experiences of their population?*

The narratives of four high school students (a transgender female-to-male, a lesbian, a bisexual female, and a gay male) were gathered through interviews and focus groups. Several themes of discrimination and negative school experiences emerged. Through collaborative brainstorming, the participants developed several suggestions for improving the school experiences for LGBTQ youth through educator professional development with a strong emphasis on increasing the basic knowledge of LGBTQ

related topics. These suggestions included the use of LGBTQ materials as part of classroom resources, the creation of a possible mentoring program, and the incorporation of LGBTQ organizations into the school environment.

The study adds to the body of existing literature by providing explicit suggestions and recommendations by the participants rather than the researcher. The use of authentic and personal experiences of the LGBTQ participants led to a new perspective on how to battle the injustices sexual minority students must deal with within our high schools.

CHAPTER 1 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Introduction

Schools are institutions that reflect the beliefs, ideologies, and norms of the greater society in which they exist. Schools, therefore, can be establishments that perpetuate many of the preponderant views of the greater society. One of these views that is often woven throughout our society and school systems is heteronormativity, or the idea that heterosexuality is the norm and any non-heterosexual orientations are considered abnormal (Nichols, 1999). With more adolescents identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning (LGBTQ), it is important to address the heteronormative views represented in schools that often foster intolerance, heterosexism, and homophobia. This can lead to an abundance of negative consequences for LGBTQ students and their school experiences.

Pop culture (such as television shows, music, celebrities, etc.) has had a positive influence on the LGBTQ population through its increased presence of LGBTQ characters, inclusion of discussions and topics related to LGBTQ, and demonstrations supporting equality for LGBTQ students. Although socialization and mainstreaming of pop culture slightly increased awareness, acceptance, and integration of homosexuality in certain regions within our culture (where exposure to pop culture is more abundant), the minimal shift has not diminished the injustices and mistreatment present throughout the system (Calzo & Ward, 2009). Heteronormativity still affects all who do not identify as heterosexual and creates a binary system of “normal” heterosexuals, and the remaining “abnormal” individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

Scholars have documented that schools have become breeding grounds for more overt discrimination such as anti-LGBTQ language, victimization, bullying, and harassment (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011; Holmes & Cahill, 2003; Bart, 1998; Grossman, Haney, Edwards, Alessi, Ardon, & Howell, 2009). As a result, sexual minority students have encountered many educational disadvantages and obstacles in meeting success. The negative experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools must be uncovered, and improvements in instructional support and educational programs to enhance the experiences of LGBTQ youth are essential.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to understand the perceptions of LGBTQ high school students about their school experiences in order to identify suggestions for educator professional development (PD). This research emerged as a result of reading an abundance of quantitative survey-based research on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth and noting that recommendations and suggestions for improving school environments for this population were made primarily by the researchers themselves. The current study provided LGBTQ participants opportunities to reflect on their own personal experiences as a member of the LGBTQ population and to provide their own suggestions about how school environments could be improved.

I facilitated interviews and conversations about the school experiences of LGBTQ high school students and used the dialogue to gain insight into their perspectives. Furthermore, I collaborated with the LGBTQ students in an effort to prioritize topics and issues related to improving their school experiences and used their suggestions to inform PD that can be used by educators in the future. I envision that the

LGBTQ students who participated in this study have become empowered through the process of gaining a voice and platform to inform educators.

The research study is a practitioner inquiry employing a qualitative approach for data collection and data analysis. The purpose of my study is: 1) To describe school experiences, both positive and negative, of LGBTQ high school students through the use of personal narratives, interviews, and focus groups, and 2) To inform the practice of educators by having LGBTQ youth share suggestions for educator PD based on their personal experiences that addresses specific needs of their population. The research study aims to use the experiences and suggestions of LGBTQ students in a local community to affect the greater population of LGBTQ youth in schools. The use of such authentic experiences and suggestions by LGBTQ youth to inform educators in an effort to improve their school experiences takes a varied approach, from the current anti-harassment law-based solutions being implemented, to improving the school experiences of LGBTQ youth.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the research study and assist in connecting the phases of the process:

- What are the school experiences of LGBTQ students?
- What suggestions do LGBTQ students propose to improve the school experiences of their population?

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Before beginning the study and delving into the personal experiences of the selected participants, it is important to gain a broader view of the realities of LGBTQ youth, as reported in the current literature. There are an abundance of statistics and anecdotes that illustrate the myriad challenges faced by and consequences suffered by LGBTQ youth. Here, I review the major issues in educational environments that will be discussed throughout the study.

Hostile School Environments and Victimization

As most students enter high school, they begin a pivotal time in their lives where they will prepare for the transition into adulthood. High school can provide students with positive school experiences that will enhance their readiness for college and future careers. Unfortunately for many LGBTQ students, the high school experience is often profoundly negative due to adverse messages and actions linked to their sexual orientation. Schools nationwide have populations of sexual minority students who are subject to hostile school environments and increased risk factors based solely on their sexual identity (Grossman, 2002). LGBTQ students are subject to blatant prejudices due to the epidemic of homophobic attitudes and views present within schools (Fisher, Komosa-Hawkins, Saldana, Thomas, Hsiao, Rauld, & Miller, 2008). Consequently, many sexual minority high school students are at risk of experiencing lowered self-esteem, higher levels of depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, self-harm, verbal and physical harassment, isolation, poor academic performance, absenteeism, and higher than average drop-out rates (Almeida, 2009; Bart 1998; Espalage, Aragon, Birkett, &

Koenig, 2009; GLSEN, 2011; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011).

Verbal and Physical Harassment

A related element of the victimization is the verbal and physical harassment LGBTQ students must endure. The word “gay” has become “the epithet of choice to denote something bad, undesirable, or just different” throughout high schools across our nation (Holmes & Cahill, 2008, p.57). The systemic use of homophobic language has permeated the culture of high schools and leads those who identify with being gay to feel undesirable and ostracized. According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2012) National School Climate Survey, nearly 85% of sexual minority students have heard the term gay used in a negative way, and 92% felt distressed after hearing such homophobic language. Of even more concern, 57% of sexual minority students heard homophobic remarks from teachers or school staff. Overall, between 75-80% of sexual minority students have been verbally harassed using some type of homophobic term or threat (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; GLSEN, 2011).

Zach, Mannheim, and Alfano (2010) found that homophobic rhetoric is prevalent among students and staff in high schools, even surpassing racist language. The oppressive use of homophobic language by students as well as staff leaves LGBTQ youth feeling isolated and threatened as a result of their sexual identity. The likelihood of verbal threats and harassment becoming more serious is probable, as homophobic bullying can quickly transition from verbal to physical violence (Russell, et al., 2011).

As previously stated, it is not uncommon for LGBTQ youth to experience physical harassment and assault as an extension of, or in addition to, the verbal harassment.

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2012) recorded the following statistics regarding bullying of sexual minority youth in their National School Climate Survey:

39% of [sexual minority] students reported having been physically harassed within the last year. 18% of [sexual minority] students reported having experienced physical assault due to their sexual orientation. 60% of [sexual minority] students who reported being either physically harassed or assaulted did not report the incidents because they believed little to no action would be taken by school staff. The accuracy of these suppositions is confirmed by statistics within the study that show over one third of the students who did report such incidents involving physical harassment and assault said nothing was done as a consequence (p.20).

Given the prevalence of verbal and physical harassment towards sexual minorities occurring in high schools across our nation, it is no wonder that LGBTQ students question their safety and security and are fearful about engaging in school-related activities (Reis, 1999). Over half of LGBTQ students attending high school have reported feeling unsafe, with nearly 30% skipping either a class or a whole day of school due to these uncomfortable feelings. Research estimates that sexual minority students experiencing some type of victimization are three times as likely as other students to have missed school in the past month (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; GLSEN, 2012; Russell, et al., 2011).

Lowered Academic Achievement & School Involvement

It is the duty of schools and teachers to ensure environments where each and every student has an equal opportunity for success. Yet they are failing the LGBTQ population in many ways. As a result of experiencing ongoing harassment, questioning personal safety, skipping classes and school days, and disengaging due to lack of support, LGBTQ youth are suffering in their ability to succeed at the same level as their

heterosexual peers (Hansen, 2007; Reis, 1999). The negative school climates directly affect the school achievement of sexual minority students in several ways.

First, LGBTQ students tend to be less socially integrated due to high levels of emotional distress. This leads them to isolation and interferes with their ability to actively engage in the classroom (Russell, et al., 2011). Grossman (2009) describes how sexual minority students often feel a lack of human agency and sense of community within their schools which perpetuates feelings of isolation. Afraid of being tormented or ridiculed, many LGBTQ youth remain silent in classrooms and hallways and are far removed from extracurricular activities (Books, 2007; Reis, 1999). This disconnectedness increases the feeling of not belonging to or even being invisible in the school community.

Along with a decreased desire to participate in school activities, academic progress of LGBTQ students is greatly affected due to the victimization they encounter. LGBTQ students tend to fare worse on measures of academic achievement, have a higher likelihood of failing a class, have higher rates of school absenteeism, have higher drop-out rates and have less positive feelings towards teachers and schools compared to their heterosexual peers (Hansen, 2007; Pearson, Muller, Wilkinson, 2007; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Students who were more frequently harassed also had lower grade point averages and were twice as likely to report no plans of attending post-secondary education compared to those who experienced low levels of harassment (GLSEN, 2012). The victimization and silencing of LGBTQ students resulted in lowered grades, failure, and decreased opportunities for success in vocational and career development, which directly undermines their potential positions in our society (Russell, et al., 2011).

Need for Increased Support for LGBTQ Students

Overall, the research on LGBTQ students shows a clear need for their increased visibility and voice. The oppression and discrimination suffered by sexual minority students has created devastating effects on their ability to be productive students and empowered citizens. The labeling of non-heterosexuals as abnormal and the subsequent marginalization that takes place is best described by Kumashiro (2002) as making them feel “othered” and not quite belonging. Kumashiro describes how schools “need to be a place where otherness is embraced, where normalcy (cultural or sexual) is not presumed, where students will have an audience for their othered voices, and where the other will have role models” (2002, p.34).

Queer theory is the theoretical framework that buttresses this notion of being “othered.” Queer theory, emerging from Gay and Lesbian studies, aims to identify how categories of normalcy and deviance (as they relate to gender and sexuality) are socially constructed, how they operate, and how they are enforced (Halwani, Quinn, & Wible, 2012). With regard to LGBTQ students, the ability to enforce the notion of non-normative sexual and gender identities and behaviors as being deviant, and therefore worthy of social punishment, is largely influenced by the school administrators and staff. Administrators and staff can perpetuate the oppression of the LGBTQ students or help to diminish it through their modeled behaviors and explicit support.

Administrators and school staff are a major resource for providing the support and framework to bring visibility and voice to LGBTQ students. Current anti-harassment policies and laws are simply ineffective if they are not coupled with supportive staff and administrators who will follow through on consequences for offenders (Hansen, 2007). Schools must be diligent in executing zero tolerance for harassment and victimization.

According to GLSEN (2012), students feel more supported and safe when schools address issues publicly. Teachers can integrate discussions on respect and equality into the curriculum and can play an active role in raising awareness and combating homophobic language (Hansen, 2007). When school staff create awareness, provide consistent support, and develop strategies to improve the culture of the school, they are satisfying their responsibilities to make school a safe place for every type of student.

It is necessary, however, for educators to have access to proper training in order to advocate for sexual minority students (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008). Many teachers may be accidentally contributing to an oppressive culture, not realizing how their actions (or non-actions) hinder the progress of minority populations such as LGBTQ youth. Teachers and administrators can greatly impact the school culture through the behavior they model. Peer support will also generate improvement in the school environment for LGBTQ students. While support groups such as Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) are powerful catalysts at improving school cultures for LGBTQ students (Fisher, et al., 2008; Hansen, 2007), a combination of ongoing strategies, inclusive curriculum, and awareness will act as the catalyst for improvement (GLSEN, 2011).

Local Context

This study has been planned and situated as a result of considering much of the existing literature and available research on the topic of negative school experiences of LGBTQ youth. I intend to contribute to the body of research in existence by adding the narratives and views of a particular group of LGBTQ high school students in Miami-Dade County, Fl. According to Gates and Ost (2004), Florida ranks in the top five of all regions within the United States for having the highest population of gays and lesbians. As reported by www.safeschoolssouthflorida.org, 48 of the 58 high schools in Miami

Dade County have a registered GSA. This simply means the school has established that a GSA exists and that they have identified a staff member to act as a sponsor. The degree to which the GSA is active or effective is not monitored by a specific organization. Furthermore there is no information linking the GSA to a positive and safe school culture in which the GSA can flourish and be an effective resource for support. While the majority of high schools have registered GSAs, it is likely that the levels of support GSAs truly provide for LGBTQ students vary greatly.

Although the population of LGBTQ individuals is greater in Miami-Dade than in most other regions, I hypothesized that LGBTQ students living in Miami-Dade County would still experience many of the same discriminatory school cultures that have been identified in other studies from across the United States. LGBTQ youth in Miami-Dade are not immune to the risk factors and disadvantages that others experience across the United States simply because they live in a diverse region. They must also adapt to a heteronormative culture where they are often treated unfairly and are subject to harassment and discrimination. The diversity of the county has contributed to the presence of LGBTQ support groups for adolescence and young adults, but heterosexism and homophobia are alive and well. Unfortunately, the small social network of support groups and programs throughout the region has not fully transferred into the school settings, and many LGBTQ youth do not encounter the same level of support at home and at school as they do in the after-school programs.

Results from the GLSEN (2011) school climate survey revealed that even in locales where sexual minorities are more visible, curricular resources and representative literature were still extremely limited or unavailable within the schools.

This supports the notion that schools are generally not equipped to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth and improve the school environment for all students. It is my desire to implement a research study that will both describe the experiences of sexual minority students in my region as well as contribute to the development of school staff in meeting the needs of the LGBTQ population.

Current State of Our Schools

Due to the controversy and sensitivity surrounding the topic, studying and exploring the experiences of sexual minority students in schools is a fairly recent occurrence. As more students feel confident about exposing their sexual identity, researchers are able to more accurately calculate the prevalence of discrimination of these students and identify ways to combat the inequalities present. Each new study and recent contribution leads to a more realistic glimpse into the lives of sexual minority students in today's world. Whether socially constructed, or an innate human characteristic, an individual's sexual identity affects his or her visibility and voice in today's society, and especially as a youth in today's schools.

Several important research contributions within this field have shed light onto the lives of sexual minority students. Many studies have created large databases with tens of thousands of LGBTQ student participants completing surveys that detailed their school experiences and exposed the necessary changes needed to relieve the oppressive environments in which they reside (e.g.: Carter, 1997; GLSEN School Climate Surveys, 2011; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000; Reis & Saewyc, 1999; Remafedi, Resnick, Blum, & Harris, 1992).

GLSEN, founded in 1990, has worked diligently to identify and address issues of harassment, bullying, and discrimination within schools based on sexual orientation. As

a result, they began conducting a biennial national school climate survey in an effort to share the voices of sexual minority students across the country, identify ways to improve school climates for these individuals, and gauge the progress of schools over time (GLSEN, 2009; GLSEN, 2010; GLSEN, 2012). These National School Climate surveys, along with dozens of other research reports by the GLSEN research team have created myriad resources that document the bias present in schools.

Several bodies of research on the school experiences of sexual minorities have articulated the urgent need to improve the school climate for sexual minority students and have supplied explicit suggestions for doing so (e.g., D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Espelage et al., 2008; GLSEN, 2012; Hansen, 2007). Some of these suggestions include forming Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) and/or other support clubs for sexual minority students; increasing access to appropriate information associated with LGBT people, history, and events; advocating for anti-harassment and bullying policies for sexual minority students; and increasing the training and development for educators in order to create supportive and knowledgeable allies for sexual minority students (Holmes & Cahill, 2003; Huegel, 2011; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; Solomon, 2010). The Human Rights Campaign has launched a recent survey of over 10,000 LGBTQ youth in an effort to obtain the most current data. Their research indicates an immediate need for further implementation of laws and/or policies to protect LGBTQ students (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). The Student Non-Discrimination Act (Title IV) and the Safe Schools Improvement Act are two of the most recent laws proposed to prohibit schools from discriminating against LGBTQ students and to provide students and families with federal protection. Given the broad umbrella of anti-discrimination laws

such as Title IV, the impact solely on the LGBTQ population is rarely identified. Instead, the majority of the findings fall under the categories of “bullying” and “harassment” but the findings do not identify the reasoning behind such incidents. Furthermore, the broad parameters of the law muddle the specificity of the regulations that protect the LGBTQ community.

While funding at the state and federal levels is being provided to introduce these laws and other forms of protection into the school site, it is the job of educators and schools to enforce the laws and change the culture of schools. Aside from reactionary behaviors such as federal regulations and consequences for those who are guilty of harassment and bullying, it is the school’s job to create preventative measures. Harassment and discrimination at the school level will likely still occur if educators and school staff are not informed and do not know how to implement such protection.

Summary

The literature on the school experiences of sexual minority students acted as a catalyst to my study by reinforcing the need for specific narratives on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth in a large and diverse school district. This literature gave the sexual minority youth a voice in suggesting the kinds of knowledge educators need to support them within the schools.

Much of the literature on sexual minority students takes into account the narratives of LGBTQ youth in order to determine the prevalence of discrimination; however, I was unable to find literature where LGBTQ youth provide suggestions in remedying the current issues. Instead, the researchers and experts use the narratives and reports of LGBTQ youth to propose their own solutions to the problems or measure the efficacy of current efforts to address the issues. This study aims to address

preventative processes against the discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ youth through both narratives and the direct suggestions of those affected.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This study examined the perspectives of the LGBTQ high school students through several interviews and focus groups and allowed participants the opportunity to reflect on the responses and compare their experiences in order to develop suggestions for improving the school experiences of their population. The research questions that drove the work in the study are:

- What are the school experiences of LGBTQ students?
- What suggestions do LGBTQ students propose to improve the school experiences of their population?

Qualitative Research

This study is a practitioner study due to the direct connection I have to the classroom and my ability to enact change within schools as a result of the information I glean from the research. It is premised on my inquiry about how to make school a positive experience for all students, specifically marginalized students such as the LGBTQ population. Practitioner Inquiry provides practitioners the power to transform elements of the educational system as they act as both the researcher and the practitioner (Cochran- Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hopey, 2009). This research methodology is appropriate because I will use the suggestions provided by the participants to develop a PD plan using my own knowledge about effective PD.

Numerous studies used quantitative measures to collect data about the experiences of LGBTQ youth in the high school setting. While this data is valuable, I chose to use a qualitative approach in my study in order to gain a rich understanding of the perceptions of a small number of LGBTQ youth through their own narratives and anecdotes. Although fewer participants were involved in this study than in larger

quantitative studies, the experiences and voices of the participants depicted through interviews and focus groups highlighted the individual struggles faced by LGBTQ students with powerful and intimate effect.

Selection of Participants

During the initial steps of the research study, participants were recruited and selected through Sunshine Youth Services, a South Florida support center focused on supporting, empowering, and educating LGBTQ youth. The coordinator provided me with permission to present the study at one of the Rainbow Circle weekly meetings (a youth directed, open forum meeting). During the initial visit, I introduced myself briefly (to a group of about 20 individuals) but remained quiet, yet engaged. At the close of the meeting, I made a formal introduction and presented the study to the LGBTQ youth, explaining all the details as well as the commitment needed to be a participant in the study. The following was the criteria for participant selection presented to the youth participants: participants must identify as LGBTQ, must be between the ages of 14-19, and must have attended high school in Miami Dade County within the last school year. I provided my email information and telephone number and asked that any individual interested in participating or who had any questions related to the study contact me within the week. I also invited the individuals to inform any others who might be interested in participating but were not present that evening.

At the close of the week, I had eight individuals show interest in participating in the study; however several did not meet the qualifying criteria. Six participants remained and four were chosen according to aforementioned criteria, diversity (defined below), willingness to share their experiences and commitment to participating throughout the length of the study. I chose individuals who represented the different identifications of

minority sexual orientations (one lesbian, one gay, one bisexual female, and one transgendered female to male pansexual).

The participants only shared interactions through their involvement with the support group and they each attended different high schools within Miami Dade County. The support groups and events sponsored by the Sunshine Support Center had contributed to limited conversations amongst the participants in the past. Further description of the participants and their background will be provided in Chapter 4.

After affirming a willingness to participate and a commitment to follow through with all interviews and sessions, I returned to the Rainbow Circle the following week to give each participant a child assent script which described the expectation of the participants in laymen's terms. Each participant under the age of 18 was given an informed parent consent form and one participant (age 18) was given an informed student consent form. It was required that all forms be signed and returned before interviews began. In addition to the forms, participants were asked to bring in picture identification indicating birth date/age in order to ascertain correct ages were documented. Researcher notes were used to document age and no copies of identification were made to protect the participants' identities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Once the participants were selected and all forms were signed and collected, we began communication to plan specific dates for the interview process through phone calls, text messages, and emails in an attempt to find accommodating times for all individuals. Four dates were chosen for each individual to have four interview sessions and two dates were chosen for the group to meet together for reflection and collaboration. The individual interview sessions were approximately 45-60 minutes in

length and the collaborative sessions were approximately 60-80 minutes each. I

describe the data collection and analysis process in phases represented in Table 1-1 below.

Table 1-1. Phases of the Study

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Focus</i>
One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual Interviews (4 each) <p>Over the course of two months</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To garner individual narratives about his/her life as a LGBTQ high school student
Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborative Sessions (2 with all participants) Questionnaire <p>Two weeks after the interview sessions completed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To reflect on similarities and differences across all participants To determine possible suggestions for educator PD
Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data Analysis Reflections Written Report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To analyze data, reflect on research questions, and plan next steps

Phase One: Individual Interviews

The interviews all took place in a private conference room located at the Sunshine facility. The interviews were semi-structured in nature with pre-planned questions in place (Appendix A). However, it was necessary for me to be responsive and allow for flexibility within the dialogue. I asked probing and clarifying questions as needed and provided moments for the participants to elaborate as they chose. The goal was to provide as much clarity and insight into the lives of the participants as possible. Certain topics were not planned for in the initial interview question set. However when I realized the topic held significant importance to the participants, I adjusted the conversation to allow for this interchange to take place.

During the individual interviews, the participants were prompted to share their high school experiences as LGBTQ youths and they revealed personal narratives according to their perceptions. While the interviews took place, true names were used. When the interviews were transcribed, each participant's identity was protected through a coding process using abbreviations. Pseudonyms were used for the final report.

Before beginning each and every interview session, participants were read a disclosure statement identifying the consequences of sharing any information that constitutes as abuse and were asked to refrain from using any third party names and/ or identifiers. Each participant was made aware that if any reports of abuse were shared, I would have to report such abuse to the authorities and confidentiality would be compromised. At the conclusion of the study, no reports were made that caused confidentiality to be compromised.

Data collection took place through recording and transcribing of all interview sessions. In addition to recording the interviews, I took notes in a journal on key words, ideas, and phrases that stood out as they spoke. This allowed them to speak freely without my interruptions and allowed my own thought processes to be recorded.

Interview Four of the individual interviews was specifically for me to revisit any dialogue from Interviews One through Three that was vague, unclear, or piqued my interest further. I also conducted member-checking during Interview Four (a process by which participants are actively involved in the data analysis, provide feedback, and assure validity of the statements made throughout the interview process) (Creswell, 2008).

Phase Two: Collaborative Sessions

The collaborative sessions also took place in the private conference room at the Sunshine facility with all four participants present. During the two collaborative sessions, scripts were used to facilitate the conversations (Appendix B). However the participants had greater freedom in their interactions and the discussions were more organic. I used a pre-constructed organizer for them to identify specific themes as well as major issues/topics as the conversations unfolded. I facilitated brainstorming activities to discuss possible solutions or plausible ways to address the issues. The participants were advised to speak from the perspective of a student wanting to inform an educator. At the end of Collaborative Session One, we compared notes and conferred about what we agreed was the most important information to be shared and why. At the end of Collaborative Session Two, we used the information we gathered from Session One and developed suggestions for improving the school environments for sexual minority students. Allowing the participants to discuss and prioritize the issues, knowledge, strategies and suggestions for PD was at the core of this study.

I took notes throughout the process and asked the participants to do the same (if they needed to), in order to recall their thinking while others in the group spoke. I also wrote notes on the whiteboard located in the front of the conference room and we used this as a reference throughout the collaborative conversations.

All of the conversations and interactions during the collaborative sessions were recorded and transcribed. In addition to the transcriptions, notes taken throughout the collaborative sessions were kept for reference during data analysis.

Phase Three: Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed by using recursive abstraction and coding with the transcriptions from the interviews and the collaborative sessions. Recursive abstraction is a qualitative analysis technique whereby the data is summarized repeatedly in order to develop a dense, rich understanding of large data sets. Coding is a technique where the researcher looks for emerging themes in the data (Creswell, 2008). I followed the six major steps of recursive abstraction and coding is inherently a part of the process.

These steps include: 1) Transcribe the interviews and highlight everything of interest (partial sentences or phrases) in the transcriptions, 2) Transfer the highlighted data into a table and group the data by question, 3) Paraphrase the data to make it manageable, 4) Combine questions on similar topics to create themes, 5) Code the remaining responses, and 6) Look for patterns in the responses and return to original transcriptions to validate the meaning (Polkinghorne & Arnold, 2014). I chose to use both the original transcriptions as well as my journal notes from the interview sessions and collaborative sessions to validate meaning in the last step of the process.

As I analyzed the data, I looked specifically for recurring emotions, events, concerns, and ideas all connecting back to my original research questions. During all conversations that involved interactions with educators, I also coded actions/reactions of educators as being beneficial or detrimental. Throughout the process, I made certain to keep the meaning and sense of the participants' original comments in mind.

Phase Three: Reflection

The last phase of the study was reflection of the process. This included both reflections by the participants as well as by me as the researcher. The participants were asked to provide detailed feedback through a questionnaire focused on the effects and

impact of sharing their stories and creating the professional development suggestions (Appendix C). The questionnaire was given to the participants at the close of the Second Collaborative Session and they were told they had one week to return the questionnaire via electronic mail or traditional mail. All of the participants chose to complete the questionnaire at the facility and returned it before leaving.

My own reflection was based on how a PD plan for future use with educators would be developed using the data I gathered from this study. Using my own knowledge of the tenets of effective PD, coupled with the suggestions made by the participants, I began creating broad strokes of PD based on this study. The framework and description of the possibilities of this PD are described further in Chapter 5

Subjectivity Statement

As a school improvement specialist in the Office of School Improvement (OSI), Miami-Dade County Public Schools, I currently influence the professional development of multiple educational stakeholders through my training of district instructional coaches who work directly with teachers and through my direct facilitation of PD with administrators. My work has given me the opportunity to shift PD away from the “sit and get” workshops of the past and to shape PD that will be job-embedded and impactful. Fortunately, as I craft agendas for institutes and PDs, I have opportunities to speak on behalf of students who have been marginalized and lack a voice. I am able to include measures and strategies in PDs that will directly benefit those students.

Far too often schools focus primarily on the sub-groups represented on the state exams (ex: black, white, Hispanic, English Language Learners, Economically Disadvantaged, etc.), leaving large pockets of unidentified students who are

unsupported and struggling to succeed. In response to this, I incorporate practices in my PDs that shed light on greater equity issues related to other marginalized groups who are suffering both academically and socially, yet are not identified as a tested subgroup.

After working nearly a decade as a teacher in a high poverty, low socio-economic school, working as a literacy curriculum support specialist in the Education Transformation Office (a regional office supporting the lowest performing schools in the district), as well as my current position as a school improvement specialist, I obviously bring experiences and biases to this study. I am aware that my driving passion has been giving those who have been silenced a voice, and providing opportunities for educators to reflect on their practice and identify how they may be contributing to the marginalization of particular populations.

Throughout the entire study, I remained aware of my biases, and attempted to refrain from language and questions that indicated my own stance both as an educator as well as a proponent of creating visibility for marginalized students. During the interview and collaborative sessions, I made every effort not to direct the participants towards blaming schools or staff members for any injustices. I also sought clarification when responses were unclear or if there was opportunity for misinterpretation. I made every effort to silence my emotions and reactions to the narratives of the participants in an effort to remain neutral and professional as a researcher. Although it was difficult, I remained mindful of my ability to influence the responses of the individuals through my facial expressions, words, and replies, and refrained from representing any particular opinion on any subject matter related to the study. It is my belief that I was successful in

remaining impartial throughout the course of the study, and was therefore able to garner the participants' authentic experiences, beliefs, and feelings about their school experiences as members of the LGBTQ population.

Summary

Overall, this study takes a proactive stance in addressing the needs of a small population of sexual minority students within our schools today. My hope for the study is that it will add to the existing body of research by developing suggestions for PD for educators grounded in the authentic life experiences of a selected group of marginalized students. The students' and their voices will be given a platform that may be representative of many other sexual minority students across the nation and I am optimistic that this small group of LGBTQ students will have the opportunity to be empowered through recognition and visibility.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Introduction

My very first visit to the Sunshine Support Center was the night I went to recruit participants for my study. I recall walking in, being greeted with a smile, and being asked to sign in, either as a LGBTQ community member or as an ally. I gladly signed my name on the ally sign-in sheet and was directed to the Rainbow Meeting room. As I walked into the meeting, young people were engrossed in conversation, so I quietly made my way to an open chair within the circle and took in the surroundings.

I noticed a list of topics, each in different handwriting, on a white board at the front of the room. It was later confirmed that the topics were chosen and written by the youth group members as they arrived, and the conversations were facilitated by adult volunteers from the LGBTQ community.

Next to the list of topics were the words “Group Norms.” The norms were premised mostly on respect and equity of voice. As I sat down to join the group, I was tossed a small stuffed animal that indicated I “had the floor” (one of the norms facilitating the conversations). I briefly introduced myself and tossed the stuffed animal to the next person with his hand raised to continue the discussion. The discourse was insightful, daring, funny, profound, troublesome, and at times hopeful.

That night, I was introduced to a compassionate community whose mission was to provide support and safety to its members. I was also introduced to the realities of what happens once the members leave the confines of that building. The conversations and topics illuminated the journeys of the LGBTQ members outside of that support center, journeys that included daily doses of fear and injustice. Robert, Jean, Lisa, and

Dawn were among the handful of members who shared pieces of their journey that evening, and who later approached me with a willingness to share their entire story. After thoughtful consideration, Robert, Jean, Lisa, and Dawn were chosen to be the participants in this study. Below I provide a brief description of the participants and their backgrounds in order to set the stage for the discussion of their experiences in high school.

Who is Robert?

A freshman in high school, 15-year-old Robert describes himself as “a regular kid” who likes to listen to music and hang out with his best friend (R1). Robert came across as introverted and shy and had a solemn demeanor that he later confirmed might be a symptom of his depression (Robert was diagnosed with depression by his doctor in middle school after experiencing suicidal ideation). While Robert views himself in general as being a normal high school student, he was able to articulate some major distinctions between himself and many of his peers. He described the moments when he began realizing he didn’t feel the same way that most boys his age felt:

I would start thinking to myself I don’t really see anything interesting in girls that men are finding. I wasn’t really into anything as to breasts or vaginas or anything but when I looked into a man I would find that sexualness that other men would find towards women. There was this one presentation at school about bullying and one of them was about bullying against LGBT students and I was thinking at that moment, oh my gosh, I really am gay.

Robert had this realization around the age of 11. He was able to admit to his mother that he was gay shortly after confirming his identity with himself. Robert’s mother was very supportive of him and shared her desire for him to be happy, regardless of what others might say or think. Unfortunately, while Robert found solace at home with his supportive mother, his experiences in school were full of obstacles and heartache.

Who is Jean?

Born Jeanelle, Jean is a 14-year-old freshman in high school. Biologically female, Jean identifies as a male, that is, a transgender Female to Male (FtM). He was born in California, and has moved several different times throughout his life, including locations such as Ohio, Spain, and his current home in Miami. Jean describes his mother as half-Columbian, half-Chinese, and his father as “very White to say the least” (J1-1). Jean has three brothers and describes his family as very liberal, intelligent (both of his parents attended Ivy League schools), and open to many different ways of thinking. Jean described himself by saying, “I really like art; I consider myself a very artsy person. I love fashion, like photography a lot; I’ve been sketching lately and doing some paintings here and there; and I like to consider myself a very spiritual person” (J1-1).

Jean began by making sure I understood the difference between his sexual orientation and his gender identity:

I identify as pansexual, meaning that gender and gender identity and sex are not a barrier for me when it comes to relationships; it’s more of a mental and emotional connection before it becomes physical, and I’m going to go ahead and throw in gender identity; I identify as FtM transgender meaning that I am biologically female and I identify as male, yeah. I’m not transitioning currently but I plan to in the next couple years when I am older. (J1-2)

Very articulate and informed for his young age, Jean expressed a clear delineation between gender identity and sexual orientation. While the terms *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *queer* (which encompasses Jean’s identity as pansexual), represent sexual orientations, being transgendered represents discontinuity between a person’s biological gender and the gender with which he or she identifies. Over time, I understood Jean’s gender identity to be a greater factor of discrimination than his

sexual orientation, although they are so closely related that oftentimes the lines get blurred.

Jean shared that he always felt a bit awkward in his own skin and although he knew his parents were open and accepting of the LGBTQ community (Jean's older brother is openly gay), he still felt uncomfortable telling his parents about his identity and sexual orientation and waited until "it was absolutely necessary." Over time, Jean has become increasingly confident in his identity. Jean is very open about his identity in school and even met with teachers the first week of high school to request he be called "Jean" instead of "Jeanelle" as well as to be referred to with male pronouns. Jean also made the administration at the school aware that he would be using the men's restrooms and locker rooms. State law provides Jean (and all transgenders) the right to use facilities in accordance with his gender identity. Jean's parents have advocated for Jean to have equal rights in school and have played an integral role in making sure he is treated as fairly as possible.

Who is Lisa?

From the moment I spoke with Lisa, I viewed her as a very confident young woman who carried herself with pride. An African American with beautiful long braids and a vivid smile, Lisa was outgoing and made several jokes during the Rainbow Circle that generated outbursts of laughter. This was precisely why I was so shocked to learn that 18-year-old Lisa, a senior in high school, was still "in the closet," a term that refers to the nondisclosure of sexual orientation. Lisa has known she was attracted to females since the fifth grade, yet only a couple of Lisa's close friends and confidants from the LGBTQ community know that Lisa is a lesbian. She essentially represents herself as two different people, one at the support center and a different one at school and home.

Part of the reason Lisa has yet to come out of the closet to her family and schoolmates is her fear of rejection:

I am the youngest of my mom's three kids. I'm the only girl, so you know, how is that gonna feel for my mom to find out her only girl, her princess, is a lesbian. I feel like she'd probably be devastated. She's always called me her princess and I just feel like her views of me would be totally torn away and I'm just not ready to tell her, and man, I don't know when I will be. And my brothers too, I know they'd probably have some things to say. Oh and at school, yeah, forget it, that's a whole other story. (L1-3)

Lisa has never had her father in her life and feels as though that is the catalyst for her mother's approach to parenting: never show weakness and always appear as a strong woman. It was clear that Lisa interpreted her sexual orientation as a weakness, and she linked this to why she struggled with telling her mother. While Lisa dreams of a day when she can disclose her sexual identity proudly, she feels intensely that her current reality does not allow her that freedom. Throughout our time together, she often referred to her exit from high school as the doorway to freedom and expressed hopes that it will lead her to being open about her sexual identity. Until then, Lisa claims that staying in the closet provides peace of mind that she desperately needs in order to graduate.

Who is Dawn?

Dawn is a sixteen-year-old sophomore in high school. Dawn is currently dating a young man, also a sophomore at the school she attends, but Dawn identifies as bisexual. In fact, her current boyfriend is her very first boyfriend after two other relationships with females. She was able to date her attraction to both girls and boys back to early elementary school where she recounted a fairly equal amount of childhood crushes on both sexes. By the beginning of middle school, she comfortably identified as being a bisexual.

Dawn's petite frame and feminine apparel were a stark contrast to her love for skateboarding and wrestling. In fact, Dawn is the only female wrestler on her high school team and was proud to share that she has won several times in her weight division. I didn't have to guess whether or not Dawn was open about her sexual orientation because the large rainbow colored "Kiss Me! I'm Bisexual" button pinned on her backpack seemed to give it away. I was surprised however, to find out that her openness is more prevalent at school rather than home. At school she describes herself as an advocate for the LGBTQ community and speaks up as often as possible. At home, it is a different story.

It's almost this unspoken thing. I know [my mom] knows, but she won't come out and ask and I'm not gonna come out and say it. My stepdad tells her though, I know. And she's not stupid and she's even asked my little sisters if they like boys in front of me and says, "It's okay whoever you like, ya know" as if I don't know what she's doing. But I know if she knows for sure she'd tell my grandma and that would be too much for [my grandma] to handle (D1-3).

As for the pin, Dawn explained that her mother works two jobs and doesn't even see her get home from school, therefore making it easy to hide. She stays busy helping to raise her two younger sisters and spends the rest of her time with her friends. Her focus remains on trying to do well in school, regardless of who she happens to be dating.

School Experiences of LGBTQ High School Students

We began the interviews getting to know one another. Robert, Jean, Lisa, and Dawn all described their personal characteristics as well as their home lives. Of even greater importance to this study were the experiences of these individuals in the high school setting. My first research question (*What are the school experiences of LGBTQ students?*) became the focal point for the majority of our time spent together. As the

interviews shifted to questions about their school environment, the negative impact of their sexual orientations and gender identity on the quality of their lives as high school students became tangible. The interviews were fluid as the discussion covered various effects of their sexual orientations, but four major themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) Flying under the radar 2) Experiencing discrimination, 3) Avoidance, and 4) Increased emotional and mental stress.

Flying Under the Radar

Each participant was asked to describe the similarities between his/her school day and the school days of his/her heterosexual peers. Jean answered, "I still show up five minutes before the bell rings, I go to all my classes, I go to lunch, and the dismissal bell rings and I leave." Lisa laughed and stated, "I don't think we really have any similarities other than the fact that we go to our classes," while Robert simply murmured, "Nothing." It was a disquieting introduction to the way the LGBTQ students view their school day. They consistently described themselves as being completely disconnected from the rest of the school population and community with very little in common with their heterosexual peers. Other than the general events of the day, the LGBTQ youth felt as though their experiences were in complete isolation from the spirit of the rest of the school.

This was largely the result of the LGBTQ youth's desires to "fly under the radar," or go undetected. For many reasons, including not being identified as LGBTQ, not being judged, or not being harassed, the participants all made conscious daily efforts to avoid bringing attention to themselves or stand out in any way. This was at times a very difficult feat, especially for Jean, who consistently had to correct teachers and staff after being misgendered. This also proved difficult for Robert, who states, "I would get teased

a lot for I guess acting gay and I wouldn't even notice it...I want to act straight enough for them to not call me those things, so I would do my best to make sure they didn't notice me" (R2-3).

Time and time again, the participants used the phrases "just getting by," "hide" and "go through the motions" to describe their daily experiences. Lisa was often in fear that others might recognize traits that indicated her lesbian identity and attempted to go unnoticed. Lisa describes her day to day emotions:

It's tiring because I feel like I'm living a double life, like a strict double life, like I can't be myself in no shape, form or fashion when I'm at school... it's like I have to be someone to fit in so that I can just go through the motions of the school so I can just pass on by. I want to blend in and I want the day to hurry up and rush. When it's the end of the day, I feel glad I got through another day. And sadly, that's the truth (L2-4).

While many other high school students are trying to find ways to stand out and be popular, the LGBTQ youth were unified in their desires to get through the day unscathed and keep their focus solely on the tasks of school.

As a member of the boys' wrestling team, Dawn is the only one of the four participants who is actively engaged in a sport or extracurricular activity. For Jean, Robert, and Lisa, this wasn't due to lack of interest. Rather they feared what it might mean to extend the day even further and risk being noticed, discriminated against, or avoided. When asked if she would like to be a part of the school community, Lisa responded, "I know for a fact that if I was straight I would probably be the girl that plays sports and goes to the football games and wants to be homecoming queen, but that just ain't ever gonna happen" (L2-2).

Unfortunately, the opportunities that were missed as a result of wanting to fly under the radar were plentiful, and had a pronounced impact on both their social experience as well as their academic possibilities.

Experiencing Discrimination

A likely cause for wanting to go unnoticed and fly under the radar is the discrimination that each participant has faced as a result of being a member of the LGBTQ community. Each participant revealed numerous cases of being discriminated against by both peers and school staff.

Experiencing discrimination from peers

According to the participants, the schools' no tolerance rules, intended to combat bullying, had very little influence on how some high school students treat the LGBTQ population. Each participant claimed to have been a victim of verbal harassment and name calling at least once or twice a week. "If a week went by and I didn't hear the word 'faggot' or 'booga' [a derogatory term used for homosexuals] it was amazing...that like, never happened" (Robert, R2-4). For the LGBTQ youth, name calling became a commonplace event, in some cases warranting a dirty look or a quick rebuttal but often times they would simply ignore the comments. The choice to ignore the homophobic and transphobic slurs was related to the students' perception of a general lack of action taken by staff and administration when such incidences were reported. The participants felt the slurs were so frequently used that staff and administration would probably be unable to manage the multiple offenders. Each participant also reported that he/she witnessed homophobic or transphobic behaviors or slurs by a student go unchallenged by a nearby school staff member, leading to an overall belief that little would be done to address these issues.

Less overt discrimination such as whispers and laughter in the hallways between classes or in the locker rooms was a daily concern as well. For Robert, getting changed in the boy's locker room was very uncomfortable after many occasions where the other boys would yell at him to make sure he wasn't looking in their direction. PE also became a trying time for Jean, specifically after he requested to use the boy's locker room to change and was forced to use a private teacher's restroom until he received clearance from the administrative team.

Dawn described having the most difficulty when she began dating her current boyfriend because her schoolmates were used to seeing her with her previous girlfriend. She reported that their comments included, "This girl can't make up her mind what she likes," "She's such a faker," and "Oh look, the gay girl decided to be straight today" (D2-5). She described feeling as though her sexuality and who she was dating were the only things people noticed about her instead of how "smart, independent, or funny" she was.

Even though Lisa was still in the closet, she experienced discrimination when her peers suspected she might be a lesbian. One day after she walked a couple of blocks away from her home to wait at the bus stop with a lesbian crush, she was approached by several classmates at the start of a Civics class:

"Did you get on the bus with that gay girl? Are you all together? Are you gay?" and I was so freaked out I stopped breathing and I was like, "No, no, I don't know what you're talking about; that's just my neighbor, my next door neighbor," and they're like, "then why did your brother get on the bus stop after you? Why did you get on with her?" I felt like I was in an interrogation room; I didn't know which way to look and just hoped the teacher would step in. She didn't say a word. (L2-5)

After that incident, Lisa struggled with stares and looks in judgment of her being around another lesbian girl and possibly being a lesbian herself. This only validated her fears of coming out of the closet, and she became even more reclusive. She lived in

such fear of being “found out” that she consciously stayed away from anyone in the LGBTQ community.

In many cases, the level of discrimination the LGBTQ youth faced on any given day was the greatest factor in the quality of their day and affected how they were able to perform academically. Jean talked about how discriminatory behavior towards him affected his ability to stay focused on school work:

When I’m singled out or discriminated against, whether it’s in a malicious or completely oblivious way, it’s not fun; it’s like turning the lights off if you were happy or something, and then just completely shutting down, doing your best through at least the rest of the period, the next five minutes before your next class and then trying to get everything back together in those five minutes that you have walking through the hallway and getting to your other class and being able to get your head in the game. (J3-4)

Jean had to consciously pull himself out of a negative tailspin after each and every discriminatory act took place. It was an ongoing battle to “not let others win,” and to make sure that he stayed in control of his own thoughts and actions. This might be even more difficult for other LGBTQ youth who are more vulnerable and who are easily influenced by the actions and words of others. In any case, the thought and energy required to focus and recover from discriminatory acts would eventually disturb a focus on academics.

Experiencing discrimination from school staff

The participants did not experience discrimination solely from their peers. In fact, each participant told stories of specific instances where the staff were overtly discriminatory in either their actions or their words. While each of the participants was able to identify certain staff members who were very supportive of the LGBTQ community (mostly school social workers, school counselors, and GSA representatives), they perceived the rest of the staff as outright discriminatory,

indifferent, or bystanders. One day Robert shared information with a teacher that he had been bullied and harassed by one of his homophobic peers. Three days later, nothing had been done and Robert left school midday in disbelief at the lack of disciplinary action or corrective measures. He explained,

I feel like the amount of strings that I've had to pull and the hardships I've faced when it came to trying to explain... it's like having someone call another student a "faggot" in front of another teacher and them not understanding until you say, "It's like calling someone the N word," and even then, nothing is done. I was unbelievably pissed. So I just left and honestly I had no desire to ever come back. (R3-4)

When I asked the participants to recall an event or experience in high school that would have a lasting effect on them, the majority of the participants told stories associated with suffering discrimination. When prompted to share specific incidents, all but one of the participants began with a story about experiencing discrimination by a staff member. This led me to believe that while experiencing discrimination from their peers was impactful, the discrimination by staff members was perhaps the most harmful.

In particular, Jean recalls a time when his teacher referred to him as "it." The teacher said to another classmate, "She's overthinking it" (referring to Jean), who quickly quipped, "It's actually *he's* overthinking it" (correcting the teacher's misuse of the pronoun *she*). In a very matter of fact way, the teacher responded, "Ok, how about *it's* over thinking it!" Jean recalls this day as one of his worst thus far in his high school career.

I started to cry and ... the whole classroom went silent and everything, so all eyes were on me and then having my teacher turn around and be like, "You can't be so sensitive about these kinds of things," and blaming it on me for getting upset about it, like you're the one who just referred to me as "it." I didn't know that I had as much worth as a computer on your desk and having to deal with that made me hurt, like beyond belief. I was

shocked, I was hurt, I was angry, I was aggravated, I was frustrated, I was devastated; I was confused. (J3-2)

Jean did not interpret the use of incorrect pronouns or being misgendered (using “ma’am” instead of “sir” or being directed to the wrong bathroom) as discriminatory when it occurred as an honest mistake and corrective action was taken. He explained, “I understand that people are going to make mistakes, and that’s ok. If I correct them and they fix it, I don’t see a problem with that at all” (J3-5). Jean considered staff refusing to use his requested name or asking him inappropriate questions about his gender and biological sex as discriminatory. Jean wondered, “Is this normal? Like are these teachers going around asking other students about their genitals or what medications they are taking? Exactly how do they think these questions are remotely appropriate?”(J3-4).

Other instances of discrimination by staff members occurred as a result of perceived public displays of affection (PDA). Dawn shared how on several different occasions she was the victim of harassment by staff members who would threaten her with disciplinary action for being near her girlfriend:

Nine times out of ten they’d tell me that I can’t be doing that kind of stuff (holding hands) in school; meanwhile five other hetero couples just walked past us holding hands and they didn’t say a word to them. It was like, ok, yeah, I get your message. When you say we can’t be doing that you mean because we’re gay. And that was for everything. If we sat too close on the bench, if we had an arm around each other...one time a security officer told me I needed to separate from my girlfriend while we were eating lunch and I swear we were sitting the same distance as every other kid in the cafeteria. No lie. (D2-5)

Dawn and her LGBTQ friends termed the staff reaction to LGBTQ PDA as “No homo love.” Any time LGBTQ students would see another LGBTQ couple showing PDA or in close proximity of one another, they would alert each other with the phrase to

ensure they did not get in trouble by staff members who might be close by. On the contrary, Dawn believed heterosexual couples rarely, if ever, received threats of consequences for PDA.

Overall, the participants collectively shared a message that staff members were generally apathetic to LGBTQ students' experiences of being discriminated against or alternatively that they played an active role in the discrimination. While analyzing the data, I coded every anecdote that involved a staff member's actions or words as *detrimental*, *beneficial*, or *neutral* to the school experiences of LGBTQ high school students. The results demonstrated that 58% of the words/actions of staff members included in this study were detrimental in varying degrees, 8% neutral, and 34% were beneficial. Guidance counselors, school social workers, mental health employees, administration, and the GSA sponsors were responsible for the majority of the beneficial interactions that took place, with a few instances of classroom teacher support. Included in the staff members whose actions and/or words were coded as detrimental were classroom teachers, custodians, cafeteria staff, and athletic coaching staff.

Avoidance

As I examined the data and developed the themes, it became clear that patterns of avoidance were evident in each of the participants' narratives. Two distinct categories of avoidance were identified: Avoidance of the LGBTQ person and avoidance of LGBTQ related topics and materials.

Avoidance of the LGBTQ person

Each of the participants shared his or her struggles in creating and maintaining friendships within the high school community. Dawn shared that after quite a bit of time feeling lonely she was finally able to integrate into a clique within the last few months of

this study. Jean and Lisa were able to develop one or two friendships that they valued. Robert shared that he remains isolated from his peers for the majority of the school day. All of the participants shared a common link, however; they all felt a perceptible sense of avoidance from their heterosexual peers at certain points throughout their high school career.

According to the LGBTQ youth, heterosexual students avoided proximity with them during classes, in the cafeteria, at assemblies, at sporting events, and any other location where students congregated. In cases where it was crowded, such as the cafeteria during lunchtime, heterosexual students would squeeze into tables with other heterosexuals as an alternative to sitting at an empty table with LGBTQ students.

Robert describes how he had a difficult time getting other students to work with him in class:

At the beginning of the year there was a pattern between me being myself and not being able to find people who were willing to sit near me or work with me in a group. I had to try really hard to not act like myself so they would be comfortable enough to do a project with me. I hate working in groups or with partners, because it's like, so obvious that everyone is trying to find someone else to work with (R2-3).

The participants shared different reasons why they believe they were being avoided. Dawn believed that heterosexual girls did not want to work with her because they were afraid of being the object of her attraction. One day during class she was asked to pair up with a heterosexual girl, and the girl whispered, "No, I don't want to be with her; she might like me; she likes girls." This was just one of many occasions where Dawn was avoided by other girls because they believed she would become attracted to them and/or attempt to date them.

Jean believed his transgender identity simply confused heterosexual students and made them leery of getting near him or engaging in conversation. Jean would hear students whispering and asking questions about his identity when he walked into a room. Jean knew that many times students were unsure whether he was a girl or a boy, and they did not know how to address him. Both Jean and Robert perceived male heterosexual students to be the most fearful of befriending them for fear of being labeled as gay.

After the rumors that she was a lesbian became public, Lisa began experiencing specific instances of being avoided as well. In her walks through the hallway with her best friend, a heterosexual female, other heterosexual students would call to her friend, “Oh, come here... just you though; don’t bring her,” or they’ll text her, “Why do you hang out with her?” They were avoiding Lisa and requesting that her friend do the same.

The general consensus of the LGBTQ youth was that avoidance by their peers was a result of lack of awareness and knowledge. The participants believed that the avoidance was caused, in part, by fear of the unknown. “In a way they’re treading new water,” Jean explained, “and they need time to realize that just because it’s something new, doesn’t make it something bad.”

Avoidance of LGBTQ topics or materials

There was a clear void of any LGBTQ topics or materials being used within the students’ schools. While the participants reported seeing signs, posters, and banners displayed for events such as Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Women’s History Month, Red Ribbon Week and “every poster you can imagine for sporting events or dances” (R,cs2), they never saw any advertisements for events or meetings related to the LGBTQ community. “Yeah, we have the no bullying posters up, but it’s not like,

specific to us (LGBTQ youth),” explained Lisa, “and plus, they don’t pay attention to it anyways.”

Even Jean, whose school appeared to have the highest functioning GSA of all the participants, reported that communication regarding events or meetings was kept rather private within the LGBTQ community. Keeping communication regarding GSA events or Pride activities purposefully furtive or secretive perpetuates the idea of heteronormativity that prevails in our schools.

In addition to the scarcity of public announcements or advertisements promoting LGBTQ events, relevant topics and curricular materials in class were avoided. “You never see a gay leader or someone who is gay who did something great, or even celebrities who are gay really brought up” (Robert, 3-2). Lisa shared the sentiment, “Oh no, even in my anatomy class where they’re talking about sex, it’s always about male-female, it’s just understood that that’s what it should be” (L-cs2).

Dawn recalled a time when the topic was brought up in her class:

This girl, who I think was a lesbian or maybe bisexual started talking about her girlfriend, but nothing sexual or anything, just like something about their relationship and the teacher flipped out. He was like “Oh no, you can’t be talking about that stuff,” “you can’t be bringing that up in a classroom,” and it was like, you know it would not have been anything if she said “boyfriend” and not “girlfriend” and he was just totally uncomfortable and cut it off. And of course all the other kids were chiming in and saying stuff to her after that (D, 3-4).

Dawn’s story represents how the responses of teachers can influence the responses of students. By modeling the behavior which made LGBTQ topics seem taboo, the teacher set the tone for the students to follow suit and take part in discriminatory behavior.

None of the participants were able to recall any curriculum or textbooks that explicitly stated any information about LGBTQ topics. The only person to report inclusion of LGBTQ topics in the curriculum was Jean. He clarified, however, “That was only one time, and that was because it was a current events type class and we were allowed to bring in newspaper articles and someone chose an article on gay rights and marriage equality that week because it was in the news” (J, 3-3). The overwhelming perception by the participants was that the invisibility of LGBTQ topics and materials within the schools was a reflection of *their* invisibility in the schools.

Increased Emotional and Mental Stress

This theme resulted from the culmination of all the negative school experiences the participants endured on a daily basis. As a result of hoping to get through the day unnoticed, being openly discriminated against, and feeling as though they were being avoided by peers and staff, the participants were naturally left feeling an overabundance of stress, with side effects ranging from headaches to diagnosed depression.

When facing overt discrimination or expending energy and time trying to keep their sexual orientation a secret, all of the participants felt the added stress of being a non-heterosexual high school student. Jean described it as “another weight to carry on your shoulders and it’s something that most straight sex-gendered people don’t have to deal with, and solely because I’ve got LGBT in my bio that adds another however many pounds onto my shoulders” (J, 2-3). This “added weight” was discussed throughout the course of the interviews and the collaborative sessions.

For Robert, the added weight of trying to combat the daily homophobic slurs and feelings that he was never going to feel “normal” sent him into a spiral of depression that landed him in the hospital on two different occasions. “I just didn’t feel like I wanted

to live anymore. I felt like I was just never going to be happy and I wasn't normal and I wouldn't find another person like me, and that was it. I would get so down and I couldn't stop the feelings" (R, 2-1). After receiving treatment, Robert feels like he has more control over his emotions but admits that he still has days when he dreams he doesn't have to deal with his homosexual identity.

As a result of trying to fight rumors that she is a lesbian, Lisa admits that she constantly feels paranoid and this prevents her from being able to focus while in class. "Times when I wouldn't care what people are saying, now I'm always trying to hear them, because I'm thinking they're talking about me" (Lisa, 2-2). Others also shared feeling paranoid in certain situations where they felt threatened or felt the likelihood of discrimination was high.

While high levels of stress are common among high school students, LGBTQ students have added stressors as a result of their sexual orientation. When I asked Jean about how his day is different from his heterosexual peers, he demonstrated the extra stress that he might experience as opposed to his heterosexual peers:

[a heterosexual student might be thinking] "Oh, my grandmother's feeling very sick; I wonder if she's ok," and having a student like me where it's just like, "My grandmother is really sick; I wonder if she's ok. I wonder if I'll get called a 'faggot' today in the hallway. I really do hope that nobody messes up my pronouns today because that's going to kill everything" (J, 2-2).

The participants described the feeling as having to undergo the "constant pressure...that every high school student experiences and then just having more piled on top of that" (D, 2-4).

In general, the participants experienced many negative responses about who they were as people and this added stress started to have an effect on their self-esteem. The LGBTQ youth used words such as "repulsive," "disgusting," and "gross" to

describe how other students viewed them and how, over time, these views have had a profound impact on their self-image. High school is a formative time in the production of self-image, and it is unfortunate that LGBTQ youth receive such negative input about their identities.

Summary

The participants in this study had an opportunity to share their experiences individually with me so as not to be influenced by each other as I attempted to understand their high school experiences. Although they did not have access to what the others shared, their emotions and thoughts were often eerily similar and the experiences mirrored one another on more than one occasion. The themes *Flying Under the Radar*, *Experiencing Discrimination*, *Avoidance*, and *Increased Emotional and Mental Stress* emerged distinctly from the casual banter that took place about being a high school student today. The next phase of the project, the collaborative sessions, proved to be even more transformative.

Informing Educator Professional Development (PD)

The second part of my data analysis was focused on answering the second research question: *What suggestions do LGBTQ students propose to improve the school experiences of their population?* During the collaborative sessions, my plan was to determine recommendations that emerged and develop the final list of proposed suggestions. I did not anticipate the power of the collective process that led the participants to create suggestions. The process that connected the individual sharing of school experiences and the collective creation of suggestions for PD was distinct and deserves to be illuminated. The following graph, Figure 4-1, indicates the phases of the

collaborative process that occurred as the individual participants convened to discuss their school experiences.

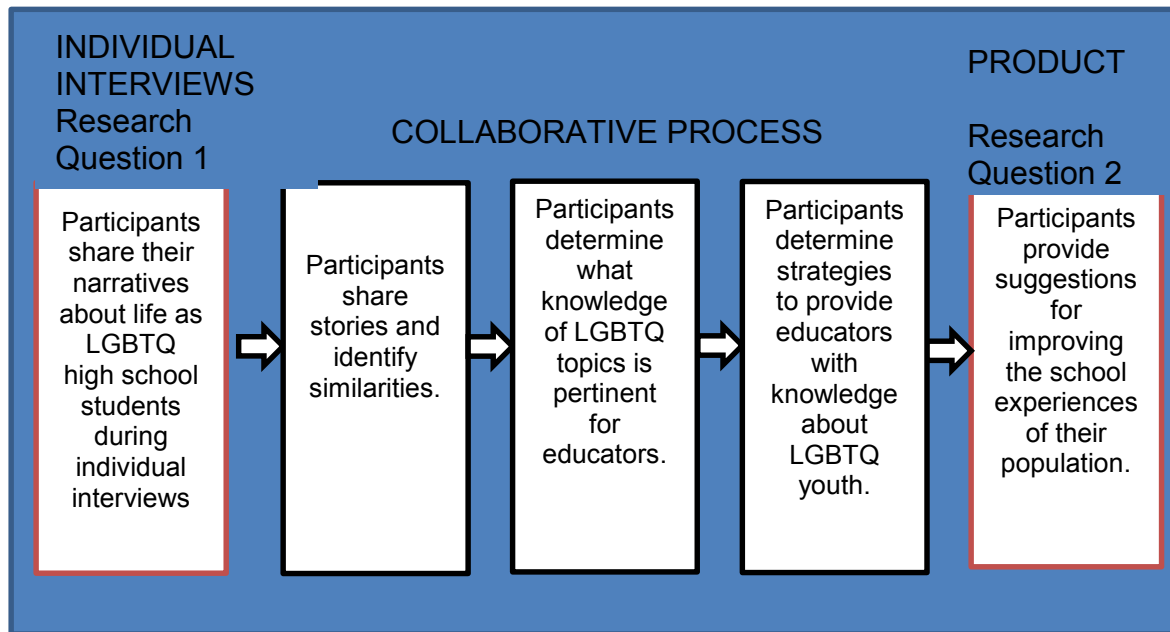


Figure 4-1. Collaborative Process

Identifying Similarities

The first step in the collaborative process of developing suggestions for improving school experiences for LGBTQ youth was to provide a forum for the LGBTQ youth to make comparisons and recognize the myriad similarities in their experiences as sexual minorities. While individually they differed in several ways, the school experiences they revealed were surprisingly parallel. This became the catalyst for many conversations about why so many similarities in the negative experiences of LGBTQ youth existed and why they have not been addressed at schools in a more strategic manner. Each participant addressed his/her concern on the matter. As Robert explained:

It just makes me wonder, ya know, I'm experiencing this, and you too, and so, how many others have the same thing going on, and if so, why hasn't

there been some kind of a bigger change? Maybe if it was broadcasted, because I honestly felt like I was on my own for so long.

Robert's concern was echoed by many of the other participants. While the support center had been an outlet for many LGBTQ topics, it had not been as focused on the school experiences as the interviews conducted in this study. Through collaborative dialogue, the participants justified their perceptions of heteronormativity and homophobia present in their schools and they validated their emotions surrounding their school experiences. Recognizing the similarities of stories across participants led to a sense of unity and made the students more passionate about the next step in the process: determining the specific knowledge of LGBTQ topics to be shared.

Determining the Necessary Knowledge

The next step in the process occurred when the participants began to discuss why certain instances of discrimination were taking place in their schools. They concluded that neither students nor staff were knowledgeable of LGBTQ topics and, therefore, were ill-equipped to make sure school was a safe place for sexual minorities. In the eyes of the participants, students and staff were likely unaware of how harmful their behaviors and words were to LGBTQ youth. The participants assumed the good will of students and staff and thought about what topics, if shared with educators, might have a positive influence on the future experiences for LGBTQ youth. The following table is a summary of the topics that the participants identified as priority topics and the reasoning behind each.

Table 4-1. LGBTQ Knowledge

Knowledge	Why is it important?
LGBTQ Terminology	Educators are not aware of the different LGBTQ terms, including but not limited to what may be offensive to sexual minorities and what is considered appropriate.
LGBTQ Laws and Policies	Educators may not be aware of the anti-discrimination laws and policies currently in place to protect the rights of the LGBTQ population and therefore do not uphold these policies in the field of education.
LGBTQ Statistics	Educators should be knowledgeable about the statistics of LGBTQ youth, including but not limited to prevalence, school achievement and dropout rates, victimization, and suicidal ideation and/or attempts in order to cultivate support for LGBTQ youth.
LGBTQ History & Current Affairs	Educators should be aware of the history of LGBTQ, including but not limited to the Gay Rights Movement, Pride activities, and leaders in the LGBTQ community in order to create and promote visibility for the LGBTQ population.

Strategies

The third step in the collaborative process was choosing which strategies could best be utilized in order to transfer the aforementioned knowledge of LGBTQ topics to educators. The group was able to collectively agree on three strategies to use for imparting knowledge to educators: Reflection on current knowledge and practice, the use of authentic narratives of LGBTQ youth, and the application of knowledge gained.

Use of reflection

The group's first strategy of reflection was decided on after Jean began to share his opinion on how to make connections.

We need to make some major comparisons here. I think they need to see it compared to race. We don't choose to be gay just like you don't choose to be black. That means that maybe comparing our struggles with the struggles people go through with regard to racism would open their eyes; maybe talking about sexism and women's suffrage even. These are important because by comparing it to other topics that are more out in the open and that are more a part of what we hear about in schools, they'll realize how little they know about us. (J, cs1)

Jean and the other participants agreed that educators may be more receptive to knowledge when they can compare it to something they already have a firm understanding of. It may be presumptuous to assume that all educators are knowledgeable about Black History or Women's Suffrage; however, there are far greater instances of acknowledgement of these topics in high schools than there are references to LGBTQ topics. Educators could then make comparisons between the topics they currently incorporate and LGBTQ issues. This would require considerable reflection on their part.

Other participants agreed that the knowledge educators receive about LGBTQ topics should start with reflection. The logic behind this was best described by Lisa: "They need to think about what they do know, to be able to realize the huge gap in what they don't know." In other words, educators should have time to reflect on their current knowledge of the four identified topics: LGBTQ terminology, LGBTQ laws and policies, LGBTQ statistics, and LGBTQ history and current affairs. This will help pinpoint the starting point for building knowledge of LGBTQ topics. This reflection would act as the gateway to delivering the knowledge needed to make progress. Reflection was also considered to be a strategy that could be used not only in the beginning, but throughout the process. The participants described this as: *reflection on what I currently know*, *reflection on what I am learning*, and *reflection on how I am applying the knowledge*.

Use of authentic narratives

Another strategy that participants were adamant about incorporating in order for the transfer of knowledge to have an impact was using the authentic stories of LGBTQ youth. Due to ethical considerations, I was unsure whether or not LGBTQ youth would be allowed to work alongside educators during PD; therefore, the participants were

asked to think outside the box in making sure the personal connections and anecdotes could still be incorporated. Dawn shared her ideas:

So even if we (LGBTQ youth) can't actually be there, there's other ways. What if we wrote, not typed, but like our handwriting, wrote our stories down so they could be read. We could even record ourselves telling our stories or maybe saying the numbers (statistics). I think if they were to hear it from us (LGBTQ youth), it would make them think twice. Like, they're not just reading it or whatever, but...I guess...I'm saying there's like a face to go with it" (D, cs1).

Dawn's ideas sparked conversations about why the personal connections were necessary. Robert believed that talking about LGBTQ youth as numbers was not as impactful as talking about LGBTQ as people. The group agreed that personal narratives, such as the ones they shared in their interviews, might create an emotional response and could be the change agent influencing educators to be more aware of the students they affect on a daily basis.

Application of the knowledge

"If the educators are more aware, of say, the kids in their classes, then maybe they start to notice kids that they didn't notice before; like maybe they...notice that there is a LGBTQ kid in their class" (Lisa, cs2). Lisa's comment sparked ideas about what it might look like for educators to apply the knowledge they are gaining as they are learning it. For example, Robert asked, "So what if they could...try stuff out in the class...or maybe share out, or even, like test the waters with visiting the GSA or even seeing if there is one" (R, cs2). The participants agreed that applying new ideas in teachers' classrooms was an important part of transforming the climate of schools.

The group was able to articulate that being able to immediately apply the knowledge back in the school environment might be an enlightening experience. If educators were able to apply the knowledge and begin to implement changes in their

practice, they would also be able to monitor the impact of those changes. Engaging in this sort of practitioner inquiry might enable teachers to solidify the new knowledge gained and improve their practice.

Suggestions for Improving the School Experiences of LGBTQ Youth

The very last step in the collaborative process was considering all the information that had been discussed and determining suggestions for educators to improve the school experiences of LGBTQ students. The conversations continued when I posed the question, “Ok, so let’s say the educators have the knowledge...now what?” The participants erupted with ideas and suggestions during the initial brainstorming. Under my facilitation, the group collectively agreed on several suggestions for improving the school experiences of LGBTQ youth. The following are their suggestions for steps that would follow the development of educators’ LGBTQ knowledge: 1) Provide LGBTQ inclusive curriculum, 2) Initiate/follow through with protocols for discrimination, 3) Increase representation of LGBTQ activities, 4) Create an ally program to include teachers and peers through the GSA.

Provide LGBTQ Inclusive Curriculum

The participants were aware that sexual orientation may not be an appropriate conversation for every content area. However, they felt as though many opportunities were being missed to represent the LGBTQ community. “Just like you happen to mention a famous author who lives with his wife, can’t you find a famous author that happens to live with his husband or partner?” (J, c-2). Dawn felt as though the sheer inclusion of these types of minor details could make a difference along the way. “The more people are seeing it and hearing about it, the less taboo it becomes; that’s the way it goes” (Dawn, c2). If teachers step out of their own comfort zone to provide LGBTQ

topics as part of the curriculum, this will begin to increase visibility for the LGBTQ community. The more students and teachers talk about it transparently, the less taboo it is.

Protocols for Discrimination

Schools all have anti-discrimination laws in place, yet many schools lack a detailed protocol to be used for specific situations. The participants reported that this often leads to varied responses depending on which staff member encounters the offense. The participants all agreed that a school-wide information session is necessary in order for every teacher and student to be provided with exactly what consequences will take place in any given discriminatory situation. This would go beyond reading it in the school handbook, but would also allow for the students and teachers to have discussions and ask questions if needed. “When everyone is on the same page, and I know that it doesn’t matter who I go to, they’re gonna help me, it makes a difference. Why should this teacher let someone get away with something and another teacher writes a referral?” (Lisa, c-2)

The overall reasoning behind school-wide protocols was twofold: to battle inconsistencies in disciplinary procedures and inform students about their rights. Jean stated, “I know my rights because I have supportive parents who are there to help me, but what about others who don’t? They still need an outlet to get that info” (c-2). Creating a plan that would produce consistent practice in response to discrimination would shed the fear or hesitation LGBTQ students have about reporting discriminatory acts.

Increased Representation of LGBTQ Activities

Suggesting increased representation for LGBTQ activities echoes the sentiments of including LGBTQ topics in the curriculum to increase visibility and decrease taboo. The participants all agree that walking down the hall and seeing a poster or sign for a GSA meeting or for Pride week would be refreshing and reassuring. The more opportunities for LGBTQ youth to see representations of their identities, the less likely they are to feel marginalized and disconnected from the high school community.

The participants all agreed that an increase of visual LGBTQ symbols and imagery will add to the collage of diversity generally present in high schools. When such representation is absent, it appears that the people who identify with that orientation are absent as well, and we know that not to be true.

Creating an Ally Program

The participants agreed that an ally program (spearheaded by the GSA, depending on the efficacy), including both staff members and peers would be beneficial in supporting LGBTQ youth. “We are used to going to each other for support. We do that here, and sometimes we can do that with the GSA, but sometimes we need an ally (someone from the straight community)” (Robert, cs-2).

The participants developed the suggestion by imagining that allies would be recruited and paired up with members of the LGBTQ community. LGBTQ members would have a different outlet of support, aside from their own community. The allies could be used for different purposes throughout the year but would act as a support system in times of need. “Sometimes I wish I could go to a teacher and talk to them but I don’t really know how they’d react, but if I knew I had a specific person who was my

'ally' it would be different story" (Jean, c-2). The participants also believed that heterosexual staff and peers who were able to support LGBTQ youth would in turn become advocates for the LGBTQ movement to fight heteronormativity and homophobia.

Summary

Overall, conversations from the participants during the individual interviews as well as the collaborative sessions brought about an astute awareness of the difficulties they face and the potential for progress. The interactions also brought feelings of hope and excitement for the prospects of LGBTQ students. The LGBTQ youth all had an opportunity to respond to the experience of being a part of the study in the questionnaires. When asked "What impact has this experience had on you?" the participants reported:

(R-q) I've learned so much that I am going to take back to my LGBTQ group at my school;

(L-q) I got to see the perspectives of others in my shoes and I can't believe I learned so much from them;

(J-q) I feel more involved in the community and I'm excited about the potential this study has. I feel a bit more comfortable knowing that future generations may not have issues as severe as mine because certain people care and are willing to make a change;

and

(D-q). It showed me that LGBTQ students will make a huge impact on educating the straight community on LGBTQ tolerance. It has made me see a possible brighter future.

Robert expressed his appreciation for my interest in conducting this study: "it was pretty cool that you took the time to do this for us, and that you actually care. I wish you were my teacher!" (R-q). Informing educators through professional development might increase the chances that Robert has an opportunity to encounter an educator similar to

myself in the future, who indeed cares and is interested in making school a positive experience for him. Furthermore, his perception of me caring about him because of my willingness to listen to his story can easily be replicated by teachers who act as a mentor or support for LGBTQ youth and have ongoing communication with them.

The other participants had equally profound feedback in response to the question “What is your overall reaction to the study?”:

- (J-q) Wish we could keep going and see what comes of everything. It would be cool to see the reactions of teachers and then see what happens if teachers actually learn something. I also would think it would be cool if we could talk to other LGBT students who maybe get the good results from all this, then I can see how I made a difference too!
- (D-q) I didn't know what to expect but it was awesome. We had some conversations that will stick with me. And I think I was lucky to get picked and to be able to share my life with others who are so similar and to give the teachers what they need to know (instead of the other way around).

The responses of the participants indicated a powerfully positive reaction to the study. The participants were listened to and were given opportunities to be innovative in their vision on improving the lives of LGBTQ youth and as a result, they have shifted their perspective on their sphere of influence.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Summary of the Study

The purpose of the study was to describe the school experiences of LGBTQ high school students through the use of their own narratives and to inform the practice of educators by giving LGBTQ youth the opportunity to collaborate and create suggestions for improving the school experiences for their population. The driving research questions in this study were: 1) *What are the school experiences of LGBTQ students?* and, 2) *What suggestions do LGBTQ students propose to improve the school experiences of their population?*

Through the data analysis process, four major themes emerged that revealed the school experiences of LGBTQ youth: 1) The LGBTQ youth described the feeling of flying under the radar and were focused on going undetected throughout the school day 2) The LGBTQ youth shared numerous anecdotes related to experiencing discrimination from both their peers and school staff 3) The LGBTQ youth felt avoided by their peers and felt as though staff members avoided LGBTQ-related curricular material and topics, and 4) the LGBTQ youth expressed a distinct increase in emotional and mental stress as a result of their sexual identity.

During the collaborative phase of the study, the LGBTQ youth participated in a comprehensive process that resulted in specific suggestions for educators with regard to improving the school experiences for their population. At the forefront of their suggestions was the desire to impart knowledge of LGBTQ terminology, laws and policies, statistics, and history and current affairs in a strategic manner that would require educators to reflect on their practice and apply the new knowledge gained.

In addition to imparting specific knowledge to educators, the youth made several recommendations: 1) Educators should provide all students with LGBTQ inclusive curriculum in an attempt to combat heteronormativity 2) Protocols should be developed to be used as a response to discrimination, and these protocols should be consistently implemented by all staff and students 3) LGBTQ events and activities should be represented in the school to create greater visibility for the LGBTQ population, and 4) Schools should create an ally program that would solicit peer and staff allies to be paired with LGBTQ students for ongoing support and care.

The interviews and collaborative sessions shed light on the experiences of LGBTQ students and provided the opportunities for youth to use collective efforts in identifying suggestions. The suggestions offer sexual minority students' perspectives on how school experiences might be improved through educator development and action. In this chapter I will further develop a proposal for appropriate professional development infused with suggestions from the LGBTQ youth.

Contributions to the Literature

This study aimed to add to the body of existing knowledge on the topic of school experiences of LGBTQ youth. In many ways, this study supported previous research that established the prevalence of negative school experiences for LGBTQ youth. The four themes which emerged from the data in this study (Flying Under the Radar, Experiencing Discrimination, Avoidance, and Increased Mental and Emotional Stress) mirrored many of the reports on school experiences of LGBTQ youth (Almeida, 2009; Bart 1998; Espalage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2009; GLSEN, 2011; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011).

The data from the participants in this study expressed clear evidence of a disconnect from the school community, similar to the reports of disengagement, isolation, and non-participation in school-related activities reported in the literature (GLSEN 2011; GLSEN 2012; Reis, 1999; Russell, et al., 2011). This study, along with many others, demonstrates how discrimination, homophobic views, and heteronormativity can contribute to an overall separation of LGBTQ youth from their peers and the school environment.

Other consistencies between this study and the existing literature include high levels of victimization leading to an increased likelihood that the participants would skip classes or school (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; GLSEN, 2012; Russell, et al., 2011), greater risks of lowered self-esteem, higher levels of depression, reduced academic performance, and suicidal ideation (Almeida, 2009; Bart 1998; Espalage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2009; GLSEN, 2011; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). Each of the participants in this study provided a multitude of victimization reports, and in some cases, this led to leaving the class or the school for a period of time, which in turn had an effect on the student's grades. Also reported were incidents of suicidal ideation, ongoing diagnosed depression, and feelings of low self-esteem and self-worth. The participants explained how their sexual orientation and/or gender identity contributed to an increase in paranoia as well, a feeling extensively included in the reports of the school experiences of LGBTQ youth in the existing literature (Almeida, 2009; GLSEN, 2011; GLSEN, 2012; Russell, et al., 2011).

The literature that focuses on how to remedy the negative school experiences for LGBTQ youth is frequently fueled by recommendations determined by the researcher after examination of the identified issues. The recommendations for schools often include successful implementation and follow up of anti-harassment policies and laws through supportive staff, an increase in public address of LGBTQ topics, access to proper training for educators, and inclusion of LGBTQ related curriculum (Hansen, 2007; GLSEN, 2011; GLSEN, 2012; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008).

The recommendations for improving the school experiences of LGBTQ youth in the existing literature are very similar to the suggestions provided by the LGBTQ youth in this study. Two major differences are apparent in this study: 1) the source of the recommendations, i.e., in this study the recommendations come from the youth rather than the researcher, and 2) the explicit suggestions for what constitutes proper educator training (these are provided in depth in this study but are limited in the existing literature). Although many studies recommend “proper training” for educators, there remains a void in identification of what “proper training” would entail. With vague explanations of the type of training necessary to move educators toward creating safe spaces for LGBTQ youth, execution of those recommendations is challenging. This study differs in its identification of what knowledge and information should be included in a proper training for educators. In fact, this study states that building knowledge through strategic trainings or sessions should be the precursor to implementing any further suggestions.

Overall, the results in this study yielded similar findings to much of the existing literature and led to increased support and confirmation of the effects of the negative

experiences of LGBTQ youth. As the research continues to confirm the need for increased awareness of LGBTQ topics and action to prevent harm, further studies are needed to gauge the success of implementation of suggested recommendations. As a result, researchers can hone in on the most effective strategies and communicate these strategies to practitioners.

With consistent findings about the negative school experiences of LGBTQ students across many studies, including this one, it is likely that transferability of the suggestions provided would be beneficial in multiple contexts. While schools have varying levels of needs and differ vastly in their stages of development for supporting LGBTQ students, transitions in providing awareness of the LGBTQ population may be under way. Compared to the history of educational institutions, garnering support for the LGBTQ population is a rather recent occurrence and schools will likely benefit from research that guides and drives the process of addressing and resolving issues related to the LGBTQ community.

Implications for Practice

The reports of the school experiences of the LGBTQ youth who participated in this study may be a reflection of what other sexual minorities encounter in their schools as well. If it is indeed educators' responsibility to protect the health, safety, and welfare of all their students, we are failing. In particular, the LGBTQ population is clearly not protected from bullying and harassment. While the narratives of the students involved in this study were an overwhelmingly powerful tool for identifying the need for change, it is the change itself that will be the focus of the implications for practice in this section.

Findings related to the second research question revealed specific suggestions for improving the school experiences of LGBTQ students as proposed by the

participants. Explicit suggestions believed to have the greatest potential impact on improving the experiences for their population were identified; however, the students insisted that prior to implementing the suggestions educators needed to have access to LGBTQ-related knowledge. Imparting LGBTQ knowledge will be at the core of informing educator PD. In fact, the other suggestions – providing an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum, developing protocols for discrimination, increasing representation of LGBTQ activities, and creating an ally program – could act as follow up implementation to what has been gained from the PD, or as a guiding set of recommendations to use as next steps.

While I facilitated the conversations, the LGBTQ youth were ultimately responsible for the ideas and suggestions that came as a result of the collaborative sessions. As the conversations evolved, the students continuously came back to identifying the need for more knowledgeable staff as a predecessor to any other action. This was indicative of their ability to identify and attack the root of the problem. I firmly agree with the LGBTQ youth that the greatest barrier to improving the school experiences of any marginalized population is the lack of knowledge about that population.

In my current position as a school improvement specialist in the district, I have the opportunity to craft agendas for PD for both instructional staff as well as administrators across the district. I have opportunities to directly inform educators using the findings from this study. Specifically, I plan to use the findings in this study to create PD that will be used in conjunction with our partnership with the Division of Student Services (DSS) and administrators. My colleagues in the DSS work directly with

students who are identified in the Early Warning System (EWS) as having low grade point averages, higher dropout rates, high absenteeism, etc. in high schools across the district. These individuals work directly with identified students to determine the cause of the issues and collaborate with administrators and teachers to assist in supporting the students. PD crafted by using the findings of this study will be an integral tool for all stakeholders in supporting the LGBTQ population when they are experiencing hardships. The following section is devoted to outlining the components of effective PD.

Creating Educator PD

The participants identified the following topics as composing an essential foundation for educators: LGBTQ terminology, LGBTQ laws and policies, LGBTQ statistics, and LGBTQ history and current affairs. The first step in any effective PD is to clarify the desired outcome: To develop educators' knowledge of LGBTQ-related topics such as terminology, laws and policies, statistics, history, and current affairs. For the purpose of this study, the working title of the PD will be "LGBTQ Education." Once the title and outcome have been determined, the development of the sessions should be guided by the tenets of effective PD: content, duration, coherence, active learning, and collective participation (Desimone, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

Content

The content or subject matter of the PD has been broadly defined by the participants; however, additional elements must be recognized. For instance, it is important to determine the relevance for the person attending the PD. While this may seem obvious, some educators may interpret the small number of LGBTQ students in their school as a reason this type of PD would be irrelevant. On the contrary, if there is

even one identified LGBTQ student within the school or the possibility of a LGBTQ student attending the school in the future, the content is indeed relevant as teachers must ensure the safety and welfare of every student.

Another component of content is differentiation. Just as students require differentiated instruction, adult learners require the same considerations. In a PD focused on LGBTQ topics, there will likely be a range of prior knowledge, and it is imperative that this is acknowledged and that scaffolding of the instruction is embedded in the process.

Duration

While there is no exact specification for what constitutes sufficient duration, it is generally agreed that PD should be extended over time and include at least 20 hours or more of contact time (Desimone, 2009). If the LGBTQ Education PD follows the outline proposed by the LGBTQ youth, the topics are clearly defined and build upon one another and can be used in that order. The LGBTQ youth were unrelenting in their insistence that educators have time to reflect and apply the knowledge to their practice. A PD that would elicit thoughtful reflection would require time between sessions for teachers to process the knowledge and reflect on the implications for practice.

Considering the need for sufficient duration, perhaps the PD could take place throughout the course of the school year, meeting once a month for two hours, totaling 20 hours of face-to-face time at the close of the school year. In addition, there might be informal meetings, emails, or even a support blog.

One recommendation for the LGBTQ Education PD would be to use the first four of five sessions to build the knowledge base of the educators using the topics provided. The remaining five to six sessions could be used for collaboration, follow up support,

strategy building, and opportunity to apply the knowledge and report the findings within the cohort. In addition, the participants could lead and present practitioner inquiries based on improving the school experiences of LGBTQ youth as a culminating activity in the PD.

Coherence

Coherence refers to the alignment of the PD with participants' goals and the goals and policies of schools and districts. The LGBTQ Education PD would be undoubtedly aligned with the needs of schools because the sessions would be based on building knowledge of one population of student learners and identifying strategies to improve the school experiences of that population. Educators are generally expected to have pedagogical stances that are inclusive of supporting social development. Along with facilitating academic progress, the knowledge provided within this PD would support the social development for LGBTQ and other students.

In addition to alignment, a coherent PD should be created to expand upon the knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and assumptions of the participants. Bearing this in mind, the first session of PD should allocate significant time for reflection on current knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and assumptions of the participants related to LGBTQ topics. As a result, participants will be able to set goals based on the knowledge they hope to gain from the sessions.

Active learning

In order for active learning to take place in the LGBTQ Education PD, the majority of the conversations must be participant-led. This means the PD reserves the majority of the time for participants to be actively engaged in conversation and collaboration. The key to assuring participant-led conversations are fruitful and

productive is to facilitate conversations. The expert/provider of the PD should act as a facilitator and not merely a presenter.

One of the strategies the participants in this study recommended for the PD was to include the authentic narratives of LGBTQ students. These could be incorporated throughout the sessions for greater impact. For example, if the session on LGBTQ statistics was coupled with authentic narratives of LGBTQ students, this could act as a catalyst for participant-led conversations regarding their reactions to the information and the implications for practice. There are multiple ways to guarantee participants are engaged in meaningful conversation throughout the process.

In order for participants to feel safe publicizing their knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and practice in response to the activities they take part in, there must be specific norms in place. In the next section, I will discuss how the careful, collective creation of a positive culture in the sessions will enhance the level of participant contributions.

Collective participation

A positive culture is built on recognition that we all have different perspectives, and each person can make a valuable contribution to the learning of the group. A PD based on building educators' knowledge of LGBTQ topics will require a shared understanding that the topic can be sensitive and that individuals must be willing to learn and grow through the process. Participants should collectively decide on norms to adhere to throughout the entire PD that will facilitate collaborative conversations.

Whether the participants are learning about LGBTQ terminology, laws and policies, statistics, or history and current affairs, a variety of opportunities should be made available for the adult learners to engage in conversations about the information

and communicate their understanding with others. As previously stated, the LGBTQ participants in this study believed that reflection should not occur in lock-step fashion, but should be fluid and ongoing throughout the course of the PD, even between the sessions. Collective participation would mean that the cohort of educators support one another in their growth as learners and depend on each other as they begin their journey to improve the school experiences of LGBTQ youth.

Next Steps

This study had an overwhelming impact on me as a practitioner scholar and my own desire to improve the school experiences of LGBTQ youth. As a result of the suggestions provided by the LGBTQ youth study participants, I have begun to develop a framework for a productive PD course that can impact the practice of current and future educators. Through my work with these youth, I was introduced to several organizations whose primary goal is to communicate and educate the public on gender and orientation. One specific organization has developed a course for leaders in the community to assist in implementation of a proposed professional development program based on gender and orientation education. The course requires an established action plan and framework of a PD educating the community on LGBTQ related topics, i.e., the plan presented in this study, and the organization provides the content expert to assist with delivery.

My immediate goal is to utilize the resources from the aforementioned organization and develop a concrete plan for the implementation of the proposed LGBTQ Education PD. My long term goal is to continue the work of increasing visibility and improving school experiences for LGBTQ students. I also plan to designate time for

ongoing reflection and growth of my own knowledge base in an effort to fight oppression of any marginalized group.

Concluding Thoughts

I chose the topic of this research as a result of a perceived challenge by an undisclosed author who discounted many LGBTQ studies due to the bias of the non-heterosexual researchers involved. My goal as a practitioner scholar (who happens to identify as heterosexual) was to support and add to the body of knowledge demonstrating the negative school experiences of LGBTQ students. I anticipated participants would share their difficult journeys and perhaps provide insight into ways schools could improve the environment for their population. I was prepared to encounter participants who were struggling in school as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. What I gained from conducting this study was an immeasurable breadth and depth of knowledge related to the needs of LGBTQ youth and a firm understanding of how I might assist in alleviating the monolithic issue of homophobia present within our schools.

I am hopeful that moving forward, more LGBTQ youth will be given a platform on which they can speak about their experiences and improve visibility for their population. I also hope that educators are prepared to take responsibility for many of the injustices that continue to take place and are willing to take corrective action to prevent further harm to the LGBTQ population. Ideally, the students' suggestions and the proposed PD can be used to improve the school experiences of LGBTQ youth.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: INTERVIEWS ONE-FOUR

Note: At the start of every interview, participants will be directed to not use any third party names or identifiers such as school names or specific locations. Also, participants will be reminded that if any names are used and any abusive behavior is reported, the researcher will be required to report the behavior to appropriate authorities and confidentiality will be compromised.

All interviews will be semi-structured. Questions will be mostly open ended with probing and clarifying questions added as necessary for the purpose of the study.

Interview One:

Introduction: As you know, I am here because I want to know what life is like for you in high school. I want to try and gain a clear understanding of your experiences. We'll start today with getting to know one another, and then I'll begin to ask you some questions about your sexual identity and your beginning school experiences. Before we begin, I want to go over some terms we'll be using throughout the interview sessions so that we are all on the same page. Sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning) will be referred to as SO. The word *discrimination* for the purpose of this study will refer to being treated in a way that is worse than the way people are usually treated. When we talk about the school environment, we will be talking about inside the classroom, in any area on the school campus, and/or at any school related function on/off campus. When we talk about school experiences, we're talking about anything that has happened to you within the school environment (with ANY person within the school environment such as students, staff members, parents, etc.).

Please remember not to use any specific names or anything that might be a strong clue as to who you are talking about. Also keep in mind that there is a difference

between discrimination and abuse. If the discrimination is severe it may constitute abuse. If I am made aware of abuse and you have identified the abuser, I will have no choice but to report this to authorities in order to protect you. Please remember to only speak about things that have happened to you directly and not what you have heard about or read about. I will also remind you all that everything we say here should remain in this room and be kept confidential. I encourage you to remain respectful to one another.

Finally, I want to remind you that I want to try and gain a clear understanding of your experiences. We all have good experiences and bad experiences in school. I am not “hunting” for your experiences with discrimination but I also don’t want you to feel you need to hide them. I simply want to understand what school is like for you and why.

Guiding Questions:

- 1) Please tell me a little about yourself in general (such as your age, your grade, your background, your family, etc.).
- 2) Please tell me about your sexual orientation (SO). How/when did you determine your sexual identity? When did you know you were not heterosexual/straight?
- 3) How did that make you feel?
- 4) Does your family know your SO? Friends? School mates? Teachers?
- 5) When you think about your time in high school, name a time when it felt like a really great day. Why? What happened?
- 6) Again, thinking about your time in high school, name a time when it was a horrible day. Why? What happened? **remind students to be cautious of using names/identifiers*
- 7) Talk about what you like the most about being in high school.
- 8) Talk about what you dislike most about being in high school.
- 9) What one thing that has happened to you during your time in high school has had a lasting effect on you (meaning you’ll always remember it). This can be positive or negative, or both. **remind students to be cautious of using names/identifiers*
- 10) Have you ever felt different than others while in school? If so, why?
- 11) Did anyone treat you differently because of your SO? **remind students to be cautious of using names/identifiers*
- 12) Have you ever been discriminated against in the school environment? When? What happened? Why? Describe. **remind students to be cautious of using names/identifiers*

Interview Two:

Today I'll be asking you many questions about the similarities and differences of life as LGBTQ student in high school and life as a straight student in high school.

Guiding Questions:

- 1) How do you think your school day is the same as a straight student's school day?
- 2) How do you think your school day is different from a straight student's school day?
- 3) Is there any time in high school when you wished you were straight? When? Why?
- 4) Do teachers/staff treat LGBTQ differently than straight students? How? In what way?
- 5) Do you ever feel like you have to hide who you are? Why? Why not?
- 6) What is your relationship like with other students who are straight? Other students who are LGBTQ?

Interview Three:

Today I'll be asking you how your school environment might be improved for LGBTQ students and asking for suggestions on how this could be accomplished.

Guiding Questions:

- 1) Is there anyone at your school who has supported you or other LGBTQ students? How? What did they do/say? (Be careful here to describe their actions without creating an identifier.)
- 2) Do you think teachers support LGBTQ students in any way? If so, how?
- 3) What should happen in your school that would make life easier on you as a LGBTQ student?
- 4) What do you wish would change at your school?
- 5) What could administration do to make life better for LGBTQ students?
- 6) What could teachers do to make life better for LGBTQ students?
- 7) Describe the perfect school for you as a LGBTQ student. What would it look like/feel like/sound like?
- 8) What do you wish teachers knew about LGBTQ students?
- 9) What do you wish other students knew about LGBTQ students?
- 10) If you could pick one thing you'd want teachers to understand about you, what would it be?

Interview Four:

This interview will be used as a tool to be responsive to specific comments made in previous interviews. I'd like to review some of your comments from the previous interviews, and I have a few questions for you. This time will also be used for any further comments you'd like to share about being a LGBTQ high school student. This is your

chance to share any other stories or experiences that you were unable/unwilling to share in the previous interviews or that came to you as a result of reflection after one of our interview sessions.

APPENDIX B
INTRODUCTORY SCRIPTS FOR THE COLLABORATIVE SESSIONS

Collaborative Session One, Introductory Script:

This session will be used to summarize our interview sessions and begin conversations about what we think are the topics we would like educators to be aware of. We will also summarize the best ideas we discussed with regard to improving school for the LGBTQ population.

Collaborative Session Two, Introductory Script:

In this session, we will outline your suggestions for schools in order to improve the environment for LGBTQ students. This outline will represent your voices and will be a valuable tool for improving the school experiences of future LGBTQ youth. This session will be where we make final decisions about the content of the professional development. That is, I will ask you to review what we talked about in our last session and use those conversations to decide on what suggestions you want to give for educators.

APPENDIX C OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE

The participants will be given the questionnaire at the closing of the second collaborative session. The participants will have the option of emailing or mailing their responses back to me within one week from the date it was given. The participants will be encouraged to complete a response to each of the questions as honestly and thoroughly as possible. The following is a list of the questions that will be included in the questionnaire.

- 1) Describe your initial reaction to the study.
- 2) What influenced your decision to take part in the study?
- 3) What impact has this experience had on you?
- 4) Describe your overall reactions to this study.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah Robertson Chatel graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Florida Atlantic University in 2003. She went on to teach in elementary schools in both primary and intermediate grades. Her association with the Lastinger Center and the National School Reform Faculty led to an increased interest in improving the culture of schools in Miami Dade County through the facilitation of professional learning communities. In 2009, Sarah graduated with her master's degree from the Teacher Leadership for School Improvement (TLSI) program through the University of Florida. As a result, she continued her work as a teacher leader within her school and the district and provided extensive professional development opportunities for educators. During her doctoral program, Sarah began supporting educators in low performing schools as a curriculum support specialist. Towards the end of her doctoral program, she began working for the Office of School Improvement with a focus on facilitating professional development for instructional and administrative leaders across the district. In August 2014, Sarah graduated with her Doctor of Education in the Curriculum, Teaching, and Teacher Education (CTTE) program from the University of Florida. She plans to use the knowledge gained in her doctoral program to better support teachers and administrators in meeting the needs of marginalized students across the district.