

## Heteronormativity in Elementary Schools: The Hidden and Evaded Curricula of Gender Diversity

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### Abstract

The culture of elementary schools has a significant impact on a child's academic, social, and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, research indicates that most schools in the US tend to perpetuate a heteronormative culture which denies, silences, and stigmatizes children who display any atypical gender behaviour and/or are perceived to be lesbian or gay. The purpose of this study was to explore educators' beliefs about, awareness of, and willingness to confront heteronormativity. Results indicate that teachers want to embrace diversity broadly defined but 1) are fearful but willing, 2) recognize barriers, 3) desire more information and support, and 4) acknowledge the need to begin early.

**Keywords:** Heteronormativity; Elementary schools; Teacher perceptions; Atypical gender behaviour; LGBTQ; Students and families; Queer theory; Cultural theory; Book club methodology

### Introduction

Bullying, harassment and assault against lesbian and gay students (or those perceived to be) as well as children with atypical gender behaviours is prevalent. Researchers found that approximately 90% of LGBTQ-identified students had experienced harassment at school, and nearly two-thirds felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation [1]. According to Toomey, et al. [2], the present day culture of heteronormativity and heterosexism is often the origin of this violence toward gender nonconforming and LGBTQ students. Gender regulation, which frames norms and student interactions, places students who violate gender norms at risk for victimization. By normalizing and privileging heterosexuality through language and daily routines, as well as within the formal and informal curriculum [3-5], lessons are taught and messages are sent explicitly and implicitly regarding acceptable gender behaviours [6-8].

School environments that ignore or silence such topics can actually promote internalized homophobia, isolation, and oppression, resulting in physical, emotional, and psychological health issues for youth [9-11]. In fact, one third of all suicides in the United States are committed by individuals who identify as gay or lesbian. In 2011, Jamey Rodemeyer, at age 14, committed suicide as a result of ongoing bullying. Jamey's mother reported he had experienced discrimination, marginalization and violence since elementary school. Likewise, Larry King was 15 years old when a classmate shot him in his classroom after Larry asked the student to be his Valentine. These tragic events and many others highlight the urgency of this issue. Educators need more information on how to address bullying and harassment that is prejudiced by gender so that students are included *versus* excluded [5].

Despite recent legal advances, inclusion of gay issues and homosexuality in the classroom remains a controversial and stigmatized dispute in American education, especially at the

elementary level. With teachers, families, and community members mistakenly believing that primary schools are asexual environments, the topics of sexuality and gender are often monitored and avoided [5,12,13]. And yet, research indicates that children at the age of 3 or 4 years are aware of their gender and by the age of 9 or 10 become cognizant of their sexual orientation [3,4,9,14,]. However, in the everyday play and interactions of the "typical" elementary classroom, children learn that biological sex, gender, and sexuality are theoretically interwoven and connected, and, through limit-setting by their teachers and peers, they quickly learn what is "normal" and how they should "perform" to fit in two, distinct binary groups of boys and girls [2,15,16]. As a result, many bullying behaviours are acts of gender policing, and much of the aggression that occurs within student social culture can be connected to gender norms.

Conversely, teachers can provide opportunities for children to be fully included and appreciated which can reduce harassment and help children understand in the early years of schooling that there is not just one "right" way to be a boy or a girl [16]. School leaders and teachers play a key role in setting the culture of an inclusive school environment by teaching an inclusive curriculum and developing policies and procedures that do not perpetuate the binary gender system. Kothlow and Chamberlain asserted that professionally it is every educator's responsibility to create a school environment where children can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. Shields [17] added that educators must confront and disrupt unjust situations in schools. She claimed that educational leaders must earnestly find ways to overcome an aversion to differences and must work overtly to displace deficit thinking through actively forming meaningful relationships with all students. This imperative includes LGBTQ-identified students.

Mezirow and Taylor contend that school communities that provide a space where staff and students feel safe and respected support students' ability to be open to learning new worldviews. When educators help children learn about diverse perspectives, students become more tolerant and accepting of peers who do not represent the dominant culture (i.e. white, able-bodied, and heterosexual). Teachers

can create a culture where lessons and conversations reduce prejudice and minimize conflict between all children despite their gender identity or sexuality.

## Purpose of the Study

Discrimination, intolerance, and bullying of LGBTQ families, colleagues and students, or those with atypical gender behaviour, are often blatant in schools across the US. The problem is that many teachers often do not recognize heterosexist patterns, and, if confronted with these issues, they are too fearful or ill-equipped to challenge instances of homophobic discrimination [18]. This avoidance usually stems from fear of criticism from parents and administrators, lack of professional training, a non-inclusive curriculum, and/or their own negative attitudes about gender diversity or the LGBTQ community [5,19].

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs and attitudes of teachers regarding children, families or colleagues who identify as LGBTQ and/or who express gender atypically. Uncovering, understanding, and reflecting on society's attitudes toward the LGBTQ community can be a valuable step towards reframing viewpoints. Once society becomes aware of its biases and attitudes, understanding may result in tolerance and acceptance [16].

Prejudice and discrimination are rooted in the history of a culture and continue to be formed through the practices and structures of the institutions [20]. In order to disrupt a heteronormative climate, Kosciw and Diaz [18,21] recommended identifying five key areas of change within the school: 1) language, 2) safe zones, 3) comprehensive bullying policies and laws, 4) inclusive curriculum, and 5) training for staff. Teaching tolerance can never start too early [4,5,8]. With tolerance education, children learn about respect, diversity, and the differences of others in society [22,23]. Discussions can help children (and adults) dispel misinformation, confusion, and labels, and, instead, have a better understanding of and respect for the diverse cultures of others, including gays and lesbians [22-25].

The professional standards developed by the national board for professional teaching standards state that it is essential for all children and families to be welcomed and affirmed within the school. Embracing diversity in regards to sexual orientation, however, is one of the most challenging areas in standards implementation [5,24,25]. To address this issue of inclusion, teachers will need to find ways to address issues of heterosexism. In response to negative attitudes toward homosexuals and bullying in schools, training at the district level and within teacher education programs can begin to attend to the topics of gender fluidity and sexual orientation as part of a multicultural education curriculum [5].

From a review of the literature, it is evident that research and the curriculum does not adequately address elementary-age students, especially those who may be gender bending, transgender, or beginning to think about their own sexual orientation. Instead, most of the research is focused on LGBTQ youth at the high school level Griffin and Ouellet and to date, has centred on sexual orientation or school climates. Gender nonconformity and the norms of gender conformity that underpin heteronormativity have received limited attention [18]. Even when researching sexual harassment in the school setting, the focus has been primarily at the secondary level and, subsequently, the experiences of adolescents [13]. At the same time, simultaneous research reveals that children are aware of their gender as young as 3 or 4 old and by the age of 9 or 20 become cognizant of their

sexual orientation [3,4,9,14]. Yet, according to Renold [13], elementary schools are the "key arena for the production of and regulation of sexual practices and identities" (p. 416). Instead, discourses are enforced implicitly and explicitly within the culture. For example, same-sex families are often not represented in the curriculum studied, in the literature read, and even in the official forms used by schools (e.g., spaces for "father" and "mother"). The reality of Johnny having two moms or two dads is often not acknowledged resulting in these families frequently being disengaged and fearful their children will suffer consequences of bullying due to their non-traditional lifestyle (Kappus, 2015) [12]. As such, this research focused on the heteronormative practices and attitudes of educators in elementary school and on the neglected research area of preadolescents' experiences of different forms of sexual harassment and isolation.

## Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study was designed to provide a learning experience in which participants' active engagement, conversations, and reflections on dilemmas may be "troubling," providing a catalyst for transformational change. As such, transformative queer cultural theory (TQCT), a synthesized framework drawing on a combination of cultural, queer and transformative theoretical frames was used to analyze the data. Cultural theory provides a lens that aligns with the context of the classroom that typically reproduces society's cultural norms [26]. According to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, culture is the context of shared values, beliefs, customs, behaviours, and symbols that foster a sense of identity, comfort, and community among group members. Lindsey, et al. added to this by claiming that culture is all the shared characteristics of human existence, which include age, gender, geography, ancestry, language, history, sexual orientation, and physical ability, as well as occupation and affiliations. Schools are the microcosm of these diverse characteristics and are powerful instruments of "normalization." Although the culture of schools is abstract, Schein [17] clarified that it is a powerful source that results in victimization for those who do not conform to the language and behaviour patterns of the dominant culture. This power is dominance, with repercussions of racism, sexism, heterosexism, genderism, ableism, classism, religious oppression, and many other forms of oppression, leading to the marginalization of people and the perpetuation of social injustices. For gender-nonconforming youth or those questioning their gender or sexual orientation, a culture of heteronormativity can be harmful and even deadly.

Within schools, children learn through socio-cultural interactions with peers and adults what are considered to be acceptable behaviours in relation to gender (e.g. "boys just play rough," "pink milk is for girls"). Their perceptions about the popularity of various behaviours and what is reinforced in these social exchanges guide their behaviour [27]. According to Butler [28], however, children will naturally experiment and "perform" their own gender in an environment free of regulated expectations for behaviour. From this perspective, gender development is not linear but is in fact a dynamic and evolving process [3,4]. This very fluidity is inherent in queer research [29].

Nevertheless, sociologists have traditionally categorized sex, gender, and sexuality into separate variables that have distinct binary definitions. According to these "experts," everyone is born with a male or female body, and one's disposition in terms of gender and behaviour is either masculine or feminine, and sexuality falls into either a heterosexual or a homosexual classification. Constructed categories assume power over those who do not fit neatly into said groupings. In

contrast, queer theory uses counter narratives to deconstruct contrived binaries. "Queering" disrupts traditional frames by claiming that the categories of sexual identity and gender are actually socially constructed and reinforced by the dominant culture [5]. "With its post-structural roots and keen eye for deconstruction, queer theory can be described as a critical standpoint for tearing apart dominant ways of knowing about sex, gender, and sexualities". Instead, queer theory interrupts the cycle of "taking for granted" the existing norms from previous generations and clarifies that identity is in fact a cultural construction that is fluid and multi-dimensional [29].

According to Jagose, queer theory's most noteworthy contribution is its account of "how gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality and, furthermore, how the deconstruction of normative models of gender legitimates lesbian and gay subject-positions" (p. 83). Queering supports new understandings and fosters a climate where there is an expectation for teachers to intervene and challenge gendered assumptions, learning that labels have a damaging impact on children that are felt well into their adulthood. By questioning actions or words that suggest children should act a certain way based on their biological sex, teachers and school leaders can interrupt binary concepts of gender and help transform the school culture into an accepting, inclusive environment while confronting and interrupting heteronormative discourse and patterns [5]. To this end, Loutzenheiser and Macintosh suggested a need to "queer" the educational setting, allowing for the presence of complex identities (e.g. queer gender, queer sexuality), leading to a paradigm shift that would address issues within schools' overt and hidden curriculum policies and practices. These changes would address the culture of the school and help all children feel included, safer and more connected [2,18].

Transformational learning theory, proposed by Freire and Mezirow [30] and developed further by other theorists, is about changing the way one views the world through self-reflection. In transformational learning, the individual mediates and makes sense of personal experience through his/her own values, beliefs, and assumptions. When this meaning system is inadequate to accommodate some life experiences, transformational learning enables the individual to acquire new perspectives. Mezirow and Taylor explained there are three dimensions to transformative learning: 1) changes in the individual's views, 2) changes in the individual's beliefs and 3) changes in the individual's actions.

Learning is transformational if it results in a deep and lasting change, possibly a worldview shift. According to Stevens-Long, et al. [31], the combination of interactive learning and close relationships in a supportive and safe environment can provide a disorientation or "troubling knowledge" that can lead to the deep learning outcomes that are the foundation of the transformative learning process [22]. The first phase of that process, Stevens-Long et al. [31] clarified, is critical reflection through "disorienting" issues and critical questioning of assumptions along with the requirement for application of theory to practice (p. 184). A key element of transformative learning is for individuals to examine their existing beliefs, critically reflect on their assumptions, and then consciously make and implement plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds [30].

Through transformative learning [30], teachers can raise their consciousness and co-construct a new understanding of how cultural norms impact their students and, through a queer theory framework, challenge and disrupt current practices of heterosexism. Through this new awareness, people begin to question constructed norms of gender

while finding ways to be more fluid and inclusive within their thinking. Transformative learning can provide a vehicle for participants to have a new understanding of how cultural theory regulates children's behaviour, while queer theory opens up possibilities for change through questioning these standards, permitting the presence of multi-dimensional gender identities and performances.

According to Marshall and Oliva, school cultures are changing rapidly, and demographic and cultural shifts pose challenges to educators and policy makers. Shifts in student population are forcing teachers with a status quo perspective to self-reflect in order to learn how to service diverse populations and new issues. Schein [17] argued that, traditionally, culture was the stabilizer-a strong constant that is difficult to change. Instead, educators can view this constant as dysfunctional and encourage the development of a culture that is learning oriented, adaptive, and flexible. Rather than normalizing LGBTQ youth, educators, and families, a transformative approach challenges processes of "privileging and othering" based on conformity to normative gender and sexuality expectations. Shields [17] asserted that challenging heteronormative practices begins with the "need for overcoming our pathologies (a process of treating differences as deficits) of silence" (p. 117).

At the macro level, homophobia has been manifested throughout the history of Western culture. Because of this constructed prejudice, society stigmatizes LGBTQ community members who are out, while those who choose to be invisible endure isolation and oppression. Within major institutions, including schools, a heterosexist culture prevails through society's norms, explicitly and implicitly reinforced by adults and children. Students, families, and staff who are LGBTQ or who display atypical gender performance are marginalized, resulting in a negative impact on their emotional, social, and physical well-being. This study was designed to help bring awareness and action at the micro level.

## Methods

For this study, the researchers employed primarily qualitative research methods with descriptive statistics to triangulate the data. The structure and foundations of a book club promoted reflection and discussion among a group of elementary teachers about the sensitive issues of LGBTQ individuals, children with atypical gender behaviour, and the heteronormative culture of schools. Pre- and post-questionnaires generated statistics about the participants' attitudes and knowledge before and after the book club. Transcripts from the book club discussions, field notes, and artifacts from the participants' journals comprised the bulk of the data.

Dunjić-Kostić et al. [32] created the sex education and knowledge about homosexuality questionnaire (SEKHQ), using 32 true/false statements drawn from three previous studies (Alderson, et al. 2009; Harris, et al. 1995; Wells and Franken, 1987) (see Appendix A). Scores range from 0 to 32, the internal consistency reliability of SEKHQ indicates a Chronbach's alpha of 0.74, and the national average score is 14.42 (standard deviation: 4.98). The attitudes towards homosexuals' questionnaire (AHQ) was developed from three questionnaires used in earlier studies as well (Dunjić-Kostić, et al. 2012; Smith and Mathews, 2007; Morrison and Morrison, 2002; Herek, 1988) (see Appendix B). The AHQ consists of 20 statements regarding homosexuals, their lifestyle, and their social position. Possible responses range from 1 (I agree) to 5 (I disagree). The sum total possible score is 100 with a higher score indicating an increased tendency for negative attitudes

towards homosexuals. Reliability of the AHQ indicates a Chronbach's alpha of 0.92 and the average national score achieved on the questionnaire is 62.91 (standard deviation: 16.34).

Using these two instruments, pre- and post-study data was gathered. Then, through a weekly book club format, a group of ten teachers had the opportunity, over a two-month period, to begin to examine the heteronormative culture of their schools through various lenses. The teachers were responsible for interpreting the text, for identifying themes, for sharing perspectives, and for co-constructing meaning along with the researchers. The book *Oddly Normal* by John Schwartz was chosen by the participants. Written from a parent's perspective, it focuses on raising a child who displayed atypical gender behaviour at a very early age and how Schwartz and his wife tried to protect their son from homophobia. The book reveals how they help him navigate a school system that continues to marginalize kids who need special understanding.

The underlying assumption of this study is that when teachers have the opportunity to read, reflect, discuss and understand the perspectives of parents with children who have nonconforming gender behaviours and/or the perspectives of children who are questioning their sexual orientation, teachers' awareness and knowledge will increase and that this acknowledgement would lead to action steps to confront heterosexism. This awareness makes "the other" seem less different, strange, or exotic, which can discourage stereotyping, ignoring or even intentionally silencing those who do not conform (Hawley, 2013). The following three questions framed this research:

- 1) To what extent are teachers aware of heteronormative culture in an elementary setting? (i.e. What are some indicators of heteronormativity and how do teachers view the consequences?)
- 2) How, if at all, can educators grow in their understanding of heteronormativity in an elementary school setting?
- 3) To what extent can educators help to disrupt heteronormativity at an elementary level?

As a model, Conrad-Cozart's [17] post-critical, participant observer book club format was used. Conrad-Cozart [17] found that this design helped get teachers involved with discussions about their profession while sharing their own truths, critiquing themselves, building on one another's lived experiences and formulating new perspectives without the goal of reaching consensus [33]. New knowledge and worldviews can lead to creative transformations in the classroom, thereby improving understanding and practices. Noblit, et al. contend that Conrad-Cozart used an essential element of postcritical ethnography: "the critique of self" (p. 40) (See Appendix C for copy of discussion questions).

In order to provide a climate of balance and comfort within the book club, the researchers actively recruited a convenient, purposeful sample of ten teachers who worked at the elementary level and who represented a range of ideologies regarding the topic of heterosexism and attitudes towards the LGBTQ community (care was taken to avoid outliers). All ten participants identified as female but reflected diversity in a number of other categories, including age (ranged from 24 to 56), ethnicity (six white, two black, one Latina, and one mixed race), and number of years teaching at various elementary schools (ranged from first year to 25 years of experience and from preschool to fifth grade). One volunteer acknowledged that she had two mothers and another had a sister who was a lesbian (Table 1).

| Participant Pseudonyms | Gender (self-identified) | Age range | Race             | Years Teaching Experience |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Alison                 | Female                   | 25-30     | White            | 5-10                      |
| Becca                  | Female                   | 20-30     | White            | 0-5                       |
| Brie                   | Female                   | 30-40     | White            | 0-5                       |
| Elaine                 | Female                   | 30-35     | African-American | 10-15                     |
| Irene                  | Female                   | 50-55     | Hispanic         | 20-25                     |
| Alex                   | Female                   | 20-30     | African-American | 0-5                       |
| Lorraine               | Female                   | 40-45     | White            | 10-15                     |
| Mika                   | Female                   | 25-30     | Mixed            | 5-10                      |
| Roberta                | Female                   | 30-35     | White            | 10-15                     |
| Shanna                 | Female                   | 25-30     | White            | 0-5                       |

**Table 1:** Participants' demographic information.

Trust was established in this participatory research model via multiple avenues: allowing a choice in books (*Oddly Normal* or *Raising My Rainbow*: adventures in raising a fabulous gender creative son by Lori Duron, establishing rapport and building connections within and among the participants, communicating appreciation, following group established ground rules, assuring confidentiality, and stating often that no opinion or perspective is unacceptable.

The book club met six times with participants completing the two questionnaires (i.e. SEKHQ and AHQ) at the beginning of the first book club meeting and at the end of the sixth meeting. During the fifth gathering, the book club members were able to Skype with author John Schwartz. And, for the last gathering, the participants watched the movie, *valentine road* [34], an HBO documentary film directed and produced by Marta Cunningham. This is an account of the death of Lawrence King, a 15-year-old boy killed by a male classmate whom King had asked to be his "valentine." The film raises tough questions about bias and violence directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender-nonconforming youth in K-12 schools; about the power of gender norms and the ways they are enforced; about the ability of schools to respond to the full complexity of students' lives, providing support to enable their success; and about the ways that schools and adults must support students in crisis before tragedy strikes [1]. Following the movie, participants engaged in their final discussion (see Appendix D for discussion questions).

In addition to these discussions, participants were encouraged to keep a journal. They were given a choice of using a hard copy journal and/or using live journal, a private blog that provided immediate feedback from fellow participants and prompted deeper discussion and insights between meetings. The researchers provided questions for meetings and journaling designed to promote critical reflection about their insights and/or reactions to the book as they read independently.

The participants' stories, connections, and beliefs were not created in a vacuum; rather, the group setting of the book club and all their lived experiences encouraged, restrained, or even policed their views. The researchers captured the participants' audio and written discourse

to share a story of this cultural influence. As such, data were coded by hand using coding schemes to identify themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of beliefs within the participants' answers (Gallman, 2013; Noblit, 2013). Connections were made and emergent themes were drawn from queer and cultural theory (Table 2) regarding

teachers' perceptions (i.e. morality and social justice) and their actions (i.e. open dialogues, mindful of parent information) in relation to the heteronormative culture of their school and reactions to the book and documentary. Collective pseudonyms to organize the themes within three distinct groups of teachers were utilized.

| Cultural Theory   | Queer Theory   |
|---|--|
| (Arias, 2009; Foucault, 1982; Kincaid, 2004; Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2001; Lindsey et al. 2003; Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002; Smith, 2002; Talburt and Steinberg, 2000; Ward and Schneider, 2009) | (Anzaldúa, 2007; Blasius, 2001; Butler 1993 and 1990; Jagose, 1996; Kumashiro, 2002; Levy and Johnson, 2011; Loutzenheiser and Macintosh, 2004; Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Meyer, 2010; Sears, 1999; Willis, 2007; Valocchi, 2005) [5,22,28,29,] |
| Social construction of norms  | Deconstruction of socially constructed norms   |
| More fixed and confined than fluid  | More fluid and multidimensional than fixed   |
| More covert and implicit than overt   | More overt and explicit than covert  |
| More exclusive than inclusive   | More inclusive than exclusive  |
| Hierarchical structure in the classroom (e.g. all-knowing teacher)  | Critical thinking is valued to question status quo   |
| Produces context of shared values, beliefs, and behaviours  | Questions context of shared values, beliefs, and behaviours  |
| Fosters acceptable sense of identity, comfort, and community  | Contradicts assumptions of identity, comfort, and community  |
| Claims stance of power and control, affirms dominant culture  | Challenges current notions of heterosexism   |
| Defines binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality; oversimplifies identity into discrete categories  | Disrupts binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality; allows queer to represent the myriad of identities that an individual embodies  |
| Promotes assimilation in order to gain access and citizenship; privileges heterosexuality   | Avows individuals the freedom to name themselves as a crucial component of agency and citizenship  |
| Sets parameters for curriculum standards  | Disrupts current paradigms and frameworks in educational setting   |

**Table 2:** Elements of cultural theory combined with queer theory.

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

## Findings

The book club allowed participants the time and space to collectively discuss their understanding of heteronormativity and its impact on the climate at the elementary school level. From session to session, the teachers became more comfortable and open in sharing their truths, intermingling stories of children in their classrooms with their own upbringing at home. According to Stevens-Long et al. [31], the combination of interactive learning and close relationships in a supportive and safe environment can provide a disorientation or "troubling knowledge" that can lead to deep learning outcomes that are the foundation of the transformative learning process. Through their discussions, it was evident that the teachers became more conscious of cultural norms and how these norms had shaped their own views and behaviours as well as the students' actions and discourse. Teachers acknowledged that heterosexism does indeed permeate our schools.

## Research question 1: To what extent are teachers aware of a heteronormative culture at the elementary school level?

Utilizing the book *Oddly Normal* as a stimulus for discussions, teachers in this study began to identify examples of heterosexism within this nonfiction story, within their own life experiences, and within their own school settings. None of the participants were familiar with the term heteronormativity, but within the first session, they began to share their awareness of indicators and consequences of this concept. For example, Elaine shared "I never thought of these issues (that Joseph encounters in elementary school) as a problem. Although sexuality is not necessarily a problem, it clearly can cause problems in your life." Irene chimed in, "Yes, this couple (Joseph's parents) was wonderful and supportive, but in our society we don't talk about these things. It reminds me of when I was little ... in my neighbourhood there was a friend who came out as gay. His parents kicked him out of the house when he was only 13 years old." Within the first two book club meetings, it was clear that the majority of the teachers began to develop an enhanced awareness of the heteronormative culture within schools. By acknowledging situations they had overheard and/or encountered, the teachers recognized how children want to classify peers in terms of gender-"Is that kid a boy or girl?" "What is a tomboy?" "Is she a Miss Prissy girl?" and, as participants shared their stories, others made connections to their own experiences.

Generally speaking, most of the participants also began to identify the relationship between heteronormativity and harassment. They

readily recognized examples whereby schools' very structures, procedures, and heteronormative policies are socially reproduced and, in the process, silence and marginalize students. According to do Mar Castro Varela et al. [35], such norms are so embedded in society that they are beyond most people's perception, causing adults and children to police each other without any intentional coercion from others. Brie agreed. "I think the bullying comes from the things we don't talk about that we should ... like if some kids ask why their classmate has two moms, it's very uncomfortable." Alex added, "we are so careful about

policing these things and making it (sexuality) sanitary and shutting it down. I wish I were better at addressing it when this topic comes up. No one wants to deal with these taboo topics. That's how they want to solve the problem of homophobia ... by silencing the topic." Table 3 provides specific insights that participants shared through their discussions, through reflections in their journals, and through reactions to the book *Oddly Normal* and the documentary *Valentine Road* [34].

| Indicators   | Consequences   |
|--|--|
| "In <i>Oddly Normal</i> , the parents tell Joseph, 'You can't play with Barbies.'"   | "These parents edit his personality, but these feelings will come out in a negative way, and Joseph will learn to hate himself." |
| "I find myself thinking a lot about gender roles, heteronormativity and language."   | "Every day I notice at least once something that divides children."  |
| "I loved that chapter when Joseph talks about a Martian family. He says the Martian family will come and find him and says, 'Then I won't feel so alone.'" | "You know there are those Martian children out there that don't feel like they belong."  |
| "One of my student cries, 'but I'm not gay.'"  | "I worry he is feeling internalized homophobia."   |
| "Kids target and bully other kids like Michael Morones (who was harassed for his fondness of My Little Pony and tried to commit suicide)."                 | "I bet there is a higher rate of depression because these kids are picked on more in school."                                    |
| "I hear teachers calling boys 'go-getters' and girls 'aggressive.'"  | This language reinforces the notion of binary gender roles.  |
| "This boy in my class doesn't fit in with the other boys because of what he chooses to play at recess. He likes to play with other girls' hair."           | "He is more isolated, and I wonder if he is more lonely and depressed."  |
| Parents assume (that) because we read about bullying and LGBTQ students that we are talking about sex.   | The notion that gay=sex is reinforced for students and perpetuates these misconceptions.   |
| Topics dealing with gay themes or atypical gender behaviour are not shared and are even avoided in the schools.  | Students are excluded or harassed because teachers are afraid to overtly address the issues.                                     |
| "Parents object to us bringing up topics surrounding the gay community because of their religion."   | But teachers and students socially reproduce these norms, further reinforcing the topics as banned and restricted.               |
| "In Mexico, when I lived there, the boys were so cuddly. They would sit on each other's laps. That doesn't happen in our culture."                         | If boys behaved this way here, they would be teased and bullied.   |
| Teachers stopping students' behaviour that may be perceived as atypical gender behaviour so they will not be made fun of (i.e., boys holding hands).       | Educators send a message that this behaviour is taboo and perpetuate heterosexism and homophobia.                                |
| Note: Table 3 includes direct quotes from the participants and statements that are a synthesis of conversations.   |  |

**Table 3:** Teachers' awareness of indicators and consequences of heteronormativity at the elementary level.

### Participants on a continuum of action

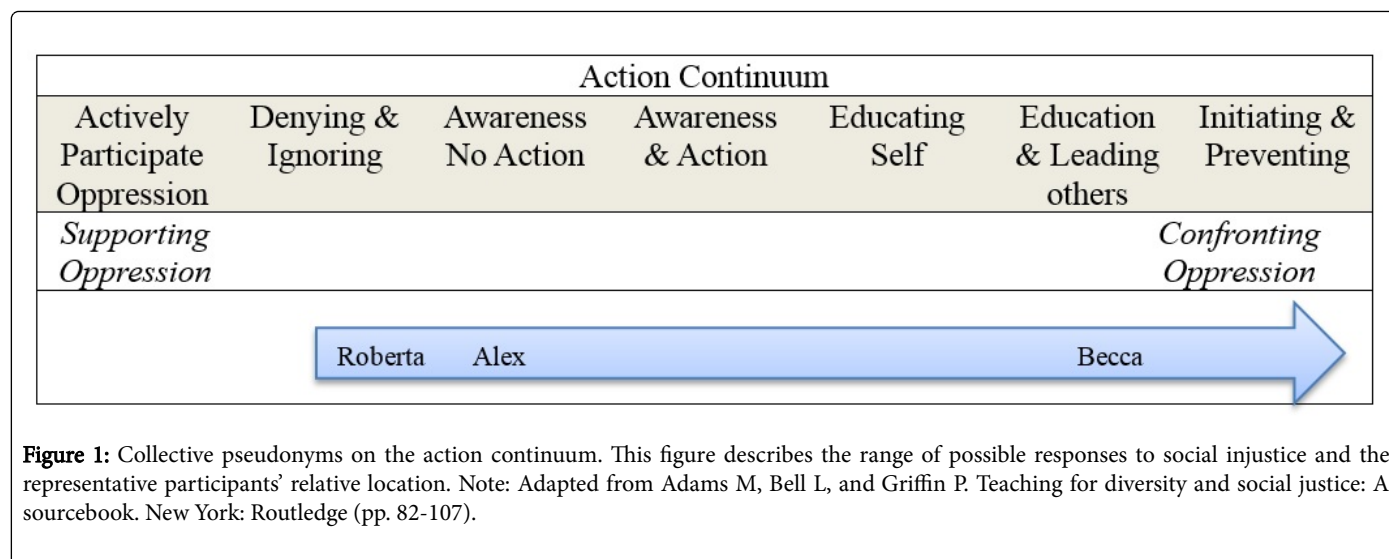
To address the needs of all children within schools, including those who are traditionally marginalized (e.g. children with atypical gender performance), educators need to be able to confront issues of oppression. Adams, et al. proposed that people range from actively participating in oppression (e.g. using pejoratives) to confronting oppression (e.g. utilizing gay themes in curriculum). Using their scale for this study, the researchers identified three teachers-Roberta, Alex and Becca-as collective pseudonyms for groups of participants. Figure 1 visually represents the relative locations of the representative figures on the continuum.

"Roberta" represents 2 of the 10 participants (herself and Mika) who fall within the early stages of the continuum. They have some awareness of heterosexism but face obvious barriers that prevent them from acknowledging possible consequences and initiating action to

disrupt heteronormativity. Roberta's group recognized a few heteronormative practices and dialogue within their school settings but were unsure of its influence. They also expressed reservations and reluctance in addressing sensitive issues and instead shared how it might be counterproductive:

I don't think we can talk about these taboo topics in elementary school. Won't it make it worse? I'm not sure we should make a big deal of the issue. I think it is more valuable to address homophobia when it becomes a problem. It might hurt the person at the time, but they overcome it. I see no reason to address the issue beforehand. Maybe that is wrong (Mika).

I think it is human nature to classify people into categories, male and female, or assume they are like us-heterosexual. We have done this throughout time. It's like a comfort thing (Roberta).



**Figure 1:** Collective pseudonyms on the action continuum. This figure describes the range of possible responses to social injustice and the representative participants' relative location. Note: Adapted from Adams M, Bell L, and Griffin P. Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook. New York: Routledge (pp. 82-107).

The collective “Alex” embodied characteristics similar to slightly over half of the teachers (6 of 10: Alex, Elaine, Irene, Shanna, Loraine, and Brie) who had a more heightened awareness of the consequences of the heteronormative cultures within their school settings. They were more at ease discussing topics from the book and readily identified germane circumstances. It was evident in their questions and participation that they were trying to think through these issues and to learn how they might approach and address them in their classrooms and schools.

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

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

Alex then commented on this teacher’s story, “It’s not about your reservations, it’s about theirs, and you don’t know what to do.” Elaine agreed, adding “Kids don’t understand why there is discrimination. All they know is what their parents say. I had a little boy in the beginning of the year that was crying, saying, ‘But I’m not gay, I’m not gay.’ And you know he had to have been influenced at home because he was that upset about being called gay.” Other participants in Alex’s group also experienced confusion and anxiety about not knowing appropriate, affirming language associated with the concepts of heteronormativity versus cultural norms. One teacher, Brie, wrote in her journal:

I find myself thinking a lot more about gender roles, heteronormativity and language. Every single day at least once, at school, I notice something that divides children based on perceived gender and reinforces the notion that kids should act a certain way based on the organs on their body. For example:

- Rosters of classes with an even number of boys and girls
- Pink and blue folders, names tags, cubbies, pencils
- Saving the bigger slice of pizza or the extra cupcake for a boy
- How does this division make our students feel? Obviously the list goes on.

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

You can’t just talk about race during black history month. There is no such thing as one social justice issue because they are all interconnected. But I don’t want to tell them, so I ask questions to help them make these connections themselves. That way, they own it. For example, we were listening to the song, “Same Love”, and there is a line in there that says, “We fear what we don’t know.” The kids were all like, “Yeah, that’s just like with Black people and Latino people. White people were scared of them.” They were coming up with the connections on their own.

Becca also shared a story of how her students’ reactions illustrated the active influence of cultural theory and how acceptable social norms framed their responses. When she presented *King and King* [36] -a story where a prince falls in love with a male page-she asked the students to make predictions using the title and cover illustration of two men looking at each other.

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

Arias [33] reminded us that, although culture is abstract, it creates a powerful force shaping how people think, act and behave. Becca was keenly aware of this impact on her students’ perspectives and their decisions to regulate where and with whom these topics could be discussed. Becca’s passion for social justice was distinct within her journal entries and animated participation at book club sessions. There was no doubt she would continue to be a leader on the far right of the Action Continuum to confront oppression.

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

After the first book club session. Alison, also an outlier, began to implement regular classroom lessons introducing gay characters. For example, based on a true story about a penguin family living in New York City's central park zoo, Alison shared the story Tango makes three Richardson and Parnell in one of her small group lessons. The two male penguins cuddle and share a nest like the other "straight" penguin couples, but they want to be parents. A zookeeper helps out by giving them an egg in need of nurturing. Alison shared, "I couldn't believe how the kids were so accepting of talking about these issues." As a result, she was becoming more at ease with finding ways to confront heteronormative practices through gay literature.

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

A social justice leader is defined as a person who underscores moral values, justice, and equity and remains conscious about the impact of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability on schools and students' learning. Shields [17] agreed, stating that social justice leaders engage students in moral dialogue challenging existing beliefs and practices. Becca and Allison, in the researchers' view, are social justice leaders who undoubtedly have made ripples within their classrooms that continue into the halls and into other areas of the school. Transformative learning is taking place.

## Research question 2: How, if at all, can educators grow in their understanding of heteronormativity at the elementary school level?

### Quantitative Data

According to the quantitative findings, positive changes in teachers' attitudes were found in all the teachers. In addition, data indicated an increase in the participants' knowledge of the LGBTQ community. Figure 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the participants' scores on the *Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire* and the change results. A score of 20 indicates the most positive attitude toward homosexuals. The average score on the questionnaire pre-book club was 28.8 and post-book club was 23.9. The change result was -4.9. Ninety percent of the participants (all but participant # 2 who remained the same) scored lower on this questionnaire, indicating a more positive attitude towards the LGBTQ community post-book club. And, although some teachers began at relatively the same spot, changes ranged from 0 and -1 to -11 and -12 indicating larger difference in their attitudes.

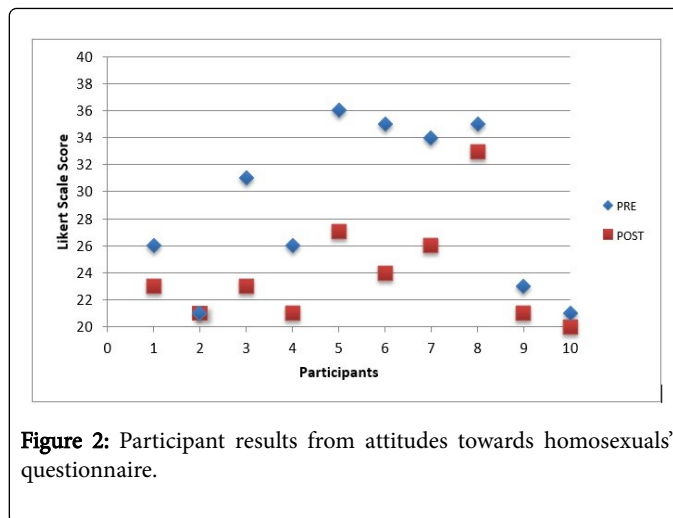


Figure 2: Participant results from attitudes towards homosexuals' questionnaire.

On the second questionnaire, the *sex education and knowledge about homosexuality questionnaire* (SEKHQ), book club participants expressed their opinion on the validity of various statements (32 represented the score with all correct answers). As Figure 3 reveals, the teachers' scores indicate increased knowledge about homosexuality after the book club. The average correct score for the group pre-book club was 21, or 65.6%. After the book club concluded, the average correct score was 25.7% or 80%, with a change result of 4.7% or 15%. Ninety percent of the participants scored higher on this questionnaire, indicating that post-book club participants gained more knowledge about the LGBTQ community. Most changes in scores ranged from +1 to +7.

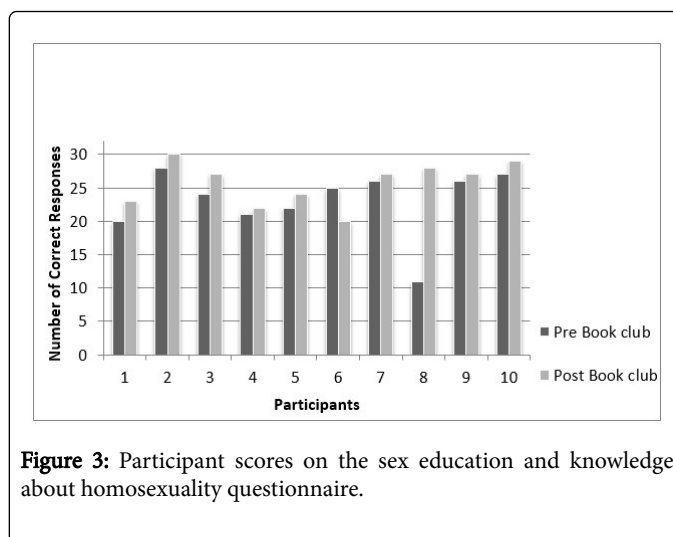


Figure 3: Participant scores on the sex education and knowledge about homosexuality questionnaire.

### Qualitative findings

By actively engaging each other through conversations, shared experiences, and reflections about "troubling" day-to-day dilemmas and observations, teachers can grow in their understanding of the heteronormative culture within their schools and begin to identify the cultural norms that have an impact on students' choices and behaviours. Brie, from Alex's group, questioned, "Who sets the limits on what we can talk about? I thought about it all week with my boyfriend. Are we just conditioned to believe there is someone



controlling our words and actions? Are we putting the limits on ourselves?” Likewise, Alison noted in her journal:

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

Challenging the status quo is difficult for teachers, but this discomfort is what Kumashiro [22] contended enables transformative change and learning to occur. Building a new schema provided most of the participants the ability to understand and even use queer theory within their daily interactions. Understanding from whence they came and how their life experiences have shaped their thinking, assumptions, biases, and actions enabled this type of transformative learning.

In Figure 4, the movement from left to right that these participants made on the Action Continuum is represented by Roberta, Alex and Becca. The comments are indicative of statements made at earlier book sessions and statements at later meetings. The arrows represent the researchers’ analysis of the amount of growth each group made in terms of understanding of heteronormative indicators and consequences and action steps discussed or achieved in the two months.

### “Roberta’s” baby steps

In Roberta’s group, growth, though small, was unmistakable. In the first book club session, Roberta shared that one of her students had two mothers. She explicitly stated that she was concerned about discussing this, stating that raising this topic (i.e., lesbians) might “make it worse” by making the students aware of their classmate’s atypical family. She continued by asserting, “I don’t think it’s an issue for the girl,” unaware that avoidance sends powerful cues. By the fourth book club gathering, she began thinking out loud about approaching the topic. She seemed to ask rhetorically, “Which is better, to share or not to share about [the student’s] two moms?” By the fifth book club session, Roberta acknowledged that she was considering a potential action step to support her student with two moms. She thought maybe she could start by sharing a story about different families in classroom. Roberta asked her fellow participants,

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

Laughing, in a supportive tone, Elaine responded, “It’s (having two moms) pretty much the same. She has two parents. She wakes up, eats breakfast with her moms, and goes to school.”

Roberta and Alison seemed to struggle, however, with this transition from a cultural theory perspective to queer theory. Both believed that the defined roles of male and female were important for children and that this idea of allowing gender to be fluid or allowing children to explore their gender performance might result in more harm than good.

I like being a girl and I want to be able to express that freely. What would happen if we take away those labels? Wouldn’t that be confusing for the children and take away their identity? Are we doing more harm (to the students) when we use generic terms? How do we embrace who we are?

Even though they held on to cultural norms, both teachers were open and honest with their feelings and did acknowledge the need for addressing these issues of heteronormativity, but struggled with their own biases and perceptions.

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

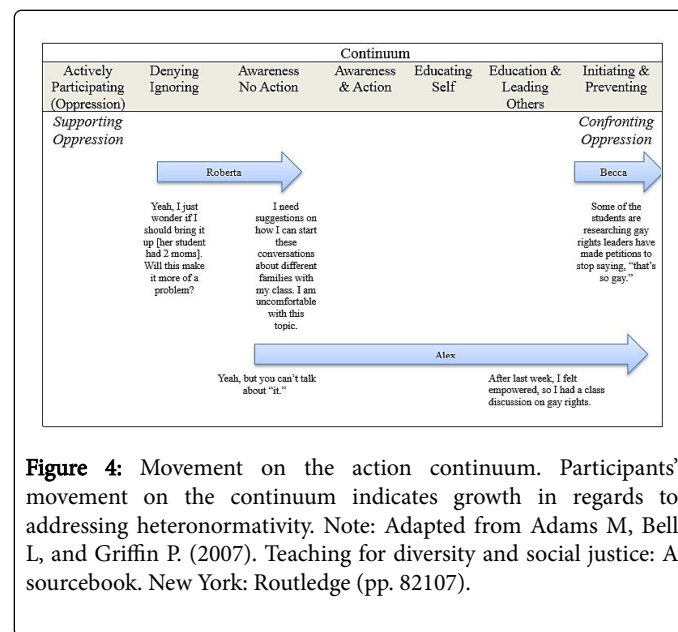


Figure 4: Movement on the action continuum. Participants’ movement on the continuum indicates growth in regards to addressing heteronormativity. Note: Adapted from Adams M, Bell L, and Griffin P. (2007). Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook. New York: Routledge (pp. 82107).

### “Alex’s” leaps and bounds

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

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

By the end of the book club, Alex viewed herself as an advocate, stating “We have to rise up, that’s what we have to do” and “There has to be a paradigm shift in the school system. We have to realize something is wrong. I have become a lot more aware of the gender roles we assume unconsciously because of the heteronormative rules we embrace since early childhood.”

Participants reacted to the teachers from Oddly Normal who had difficulty with Joseph’s atypical gender behaviour. Elaine shared, “I feel

angry at people in education for not being smarter in their words and actions. It is an embarrassment to everyone in our profession.” Brie shared her newfound insight about addressing and confronting heteronormative practices:

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

Brie also described a recent situation with a colleague while discussing another teacher at her school. She wrote about how disappointed she was when one of the teachers asked her, “Is that teacher, uh ‘you know?’” She was implying that he might be gay. Brie stated that her whole view of this teacher changed. She lost the respect for her that she formally possessed. Brie asserted, “I don’t want to miss any of these opportunities but rather initiate dialogue that helps others see their own prejudices.” Each of the teachers within Alex’s group talked about feeling freer and becoming keenly aware that taking steps to address heterosexism was their social responsibility as educators of children.

### “Becca’s” steady progress

Becca and Alison, the outliers, moved the least due to the fact that they were already at the far end of Adams, Bell, and Griffin’s Action Continuum. But since the book club initiation, they considered more action steps to use queer theory in their approach within the classroom to confront oppression and heterosexism.

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

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

talk about race, and segregation is the result.” After the last book club meeting, Becca and Alison reflected in their journals about ways in which they had grown over the past two months:

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

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

In Table 4, teachers’ views and stories are shared, illustrating their awareness and growth in understanding the power of constructed norms and how queer theory can reframe their perspectives. As a result, safer, more welcoming classrooms and schools can be fostered where it is the expectation to intervene and confront heterosexism and challenge anyone who makes assumptions about gender roles.

|         | Cultural Theory                    | Participant’s Awareness   | Queer Theory                                 | Participant’s Awareness  |
|---------|------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Process | Social construction of norms       | <i>“I struggle in my kindergarten class. The boys like the boys, and the girls like the girls. They want to hold each other’s hands. But I don’t know what to do, so I just say ‘no one can hold anyone’s hand.’”</i> | Deconstruction of socially constructed norms | <i>“I explained to my kindergarteners (that) boys can and do skip.”</i>                            |
| Process | More fixed and confined than fluid | <i>“My 5th graders say to me, ‘Help me find a girl book’ or ‘Girls can’t play rough sports.’”</i>   | More fluid and multidimensional than fixed   | <i>“I look at gender on a continuum, a spectrum. I liked to climb the trees with my brothers.”</i> |

|         |  |  |   |   |
|---------|--|--|---|---|
| Process | More covert and implicit than overt  | "We love covering up uncomfortable situations. But do you think it causes more of an issue to bring it [gay issues] up?"   | More overt and explicit than covert   | "Maybe when we bring up these issues (i.e., two moms) in our classroom, we create familiarity and comfort. Like when you go to a new country and see McDonalds."  |
| Process | More exclusive than inclusive  | "But don't the boys need that bond to say 'ewww, girls?'"  | More inclusive than exclusive   | My student said, "I think it's so crazy that gay people don't have the same right as straight people." I was like, "yeah!"  |
| Process | Hierarchical structure in the classroom (the teacher all knowing)  | "But it might make it worse-to not label kids boys and girls? I think as a teacher I would deny them their identity."  | Critical thinking is valued to question status quo  | "People say they don't see color, but who does that benefit when we don't celebrate differences but try to ignore them?"  |
| Outcome | Produces context of shared values, beliefs, behaviours   | "I think we create categories and classify people. We have always done this throughout time, people are more comfortable with those like-minded."  | Questions context of shared values, beliefs, behaviours   | "It reminds me of the single sex classes. The research makes sense, but now being in this book club it makes me question this concept of gender. Are we assigning gender or allowing people to choose?" |
| Outcome | Fosters acceptable sense of identity, comfort, community   | "Like when you are younger, you are not thinking in sexuality terms."  | Contradicts assumptions of identity, comfort, community   | "I find myself complaining after the fact (of hearing homophobic comments). I want to change and be part of the dialogue-not the silence surrounding these 'uncomfortable' topics."                     |
| Outcome | Claims stance of power and control, dominant culture   | When my family (2 moms) went through customs and filed a 'family card,' the woman stopped us and asked, "How are you a family?" I wanted to cry. She directed, 'No, redo it.'"                       | Challenges current notions of heterosexism  | "I felt empowered after our last book club, and I told the kids that gay people are now fighting for their rights."   |
| Outcome | Defines binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality; oversimplifies identity into discrete categories               | "This sounds naive, but I love being a woman. I was raised to be proud to be a woman. Tons of little girls want to do girlie things."  | Disrupts binaries of sex, gender, and sexuality; allows the term queer to represent the range of identities | "After reading an article on using the terms 'boys and girls,' I say to my students, 'Whoever needs the girl bathroom, go.' They seemed confused, but I'm trying."                                      |
| Outcome | Promotes assimilation, which enables individuals to gain access and citizenship and privileges heterosexuality | "In the documentary, Lawrence is blamed, stating he shouldn't have worn make-up to school. 'He brought it [killing] on himself.' This is like blaming the rape victim. Where are Lawrence's rights?" | Avows individuals the freedom to name themselves as a crucial component of agency and citizenship           | Wouldn't it be great if just like the Mexican tradition of Quinceañera, you had a day as a gay person to just come out and announce you are gay?"   |
| Outcome | Sets parameters for curriculum standards   | "I have a student with 2 moms. I wonder if I should bring it up in class, or is it better not to share?"   | Disrupts current paradigms and frameworks in educational settings   | "I read The King and King, and the kids started writing their own books: The Prince and Prince. Yep, two princes falling in love."  |

Table 4: Cultural and queer theory, processes and outcomes.

### Research question 3: To what extent can educators help to disrupt heteronormativity in the elementary level?

#### "Roberta" and the sound of silence

Roberta seemed to be working through her own biases and misconceptions. It was evident, however, that she was still very uncomfortable with approaching heteronormative topics in her classroom. She shared that she had known a colleague who had gotten in trouble for speaking about a political issue. "We just have to be careful what we say." By the fourth book club session, however, Roberta had shared, "I think it would be good for kids to be exposed to books about healthy blended families. I think there are hurdles for children when there is adoption or homosexuality involved. If just one kid asked

Joseph (from *Oddly Normal*) about why he had his party at build-a-bear, it might have changed their prejudices."

Roberta and Mika did not appear to be ready to take action. They still questioned if bringing up the topic and disrupting the "silence" would be more of an issue- "draw attention" and have a negative result. "Would this make it worse?" One of Mika's final statements in book club, however, was, "I think people are allowed to have their personal beliefs, but regardless you have a social responsibility. You have chosen a profession where all kids need love and attention, and we have to accept anyone who comes in the building." Roberta and Mika talked through ideas of how to disrupt heteronormativity but were still hindered by their own internal conflicts and fears of confronting the status quo. "I never felt like I could bring it (gay issues) up or even discuss the topic if a student brought it up. I'm still not sure."

### **“Alex” is teetering on the brink of action**

Some participants, including Elaine, wondered aloud when reflecting on the matter of evading these topics, “Do our students have to sacrifice who they are within the schools because of this (silence)?” Others shared how they were ready to take steps to confront and disrupt the heteronormative environment at their schools. This movement and reframing of their views demonstrated transformative learning as they made a paradigm shift in their understanding of how cultural theory can at times be confining and queer theory can be fluid and inclusive.

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

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

- I am the kind of person who always tries to challenge myself to see the other side of an argument or viewpoint. But in this situation, being hush hush on this topic (heterosexism), I can't see the other side. I want to help others understand this now. I know I can't go in yelling and screaming my mission. There is a difference to being aggressive and being assertive in your approach. These conversations I need to have with co-workers are terrifying especially when you are not in a position of power. I know these exchanges make some people uncomfortable and often we don't want to cross that line. But this is what we ask of our kids; “Be brave, try” and we need to ask it of ourselves in order to promote equity for all our students.

Three of these six teachers were actually taking initial action steps within their schools while the other three were discussing strategies they hoped to employ to disrupt the heteronormative culture, moving along the action continuum. For example, Shanna described holistic approaches to creating safer classrooms and a desire to continue to foster an environment where topics came up organically. At one of the last book club sessions she shared, “I want things to change. I want adults to be different in 10 to 15 years. The only way I can do this is to start with these children.” Irene agreed, writing in her journal:

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

Elaine agreed. Advocating dialogue regarding differences, rather than imposing some set of shared norms, allows a culture that not only

embraces LGBTQ families, staff, and children but also supports a climate of inclusiveness to a myriad of identities.

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

### **“Becca’s” ripple effect**

Becca and Alison, the outliers, used a cycle of transformative thinking and learning within their classrooms to foster a climate of acceptance and prevent oppression. By openly discussing and “questioning” controversial topics waves were made throughout the school. Becca was proud and pleased when she overheard her students confronting their peers for using the pejorative “that's so gay” or other homophobic remarks. She deeply believed that the power of peers sharing these views would spread and expand her ripple.

Alison likewise explained that she too had begun to really think about her choice of words in the classroom and was committed to breaking the silence and leading systemic change.

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

### **Action steps**

In summary, teachers provided several suggestions and ideas of how to begin to disrupt heteronormativity at the elementary classroom with six of the ten teachers sharing action steps they had taken or planned to take (Table 5). Actions ranged from responding to heteronormative comments to leading research projects with their students about gay rights. Two participants introduced conversations about gay rights in their classrooms, and one teacher was planning a discussion about diverse families (i.e. two moms or two dads). Although these educators shared their concerns and fears and many were at different points along the action continuum and not all immediately ready to initiate action, each of them expressed the desire to take action to confront anti-gay harassment and reflected an enhanced sense of themselves as change agents.

### **Barriers to disrupting heteronormativity**

Moving beyond the atmosphere within a specific school, participants addressed a common theme: the need for a supportive school culture. The existing heterosexist school climate, lack of training and resources on LGBT issues, personal beliefs and discomfort, and fear of parental and community opposition to displays of support were viewed as obstacles to confronting heteronormative issues. The teachers also expressed feeling constrained by lack of outside (i.e. principals, colleagues) support. This feeling of being alone became an internal barrier of apprehension and immobilization (Elaine).

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

**Table 5:** Teachers' suggestions to disrupt heteronormativity.

Shared, "You do need an organization or a group behind you, feeling like they have your back." The participants assumed there would be backlash from their leaders, parents and community members if they overtly addressed these topics of gay rights, gay parents, or books with LGBTQ characters. Because topics surrounding gender and sexuality are taboo, the teachers were hesitant and worried others would judge them. Shanna shared how the children have learned to sanction each other based on perceived gender roles (e.g. "Ewww, put down the blue milk, you are a girl") while Lorraine, shared how people outside the classroom influence students' behaviours and reinforce societal norms:

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

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

I'm not upset about being in trouble. But I wish the principal had stood up to this parent or let me explain that the article was not about sex. It was about children who are bullied in schools every day. It doesn't matter if the parent even disagrees with the gay lifestyle;

children are harassed for being perceived to be gay. This is about social justice and oppression, not about one's beliefs.

At the same time, Lorraine reminded the group of the need for balance. The teachers want and need to support their students' new attitudes and understandings while finding ways to respect and not antagonize families. The clash between cultural norms and queer theory is real.

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

A few teachers mentioned religious and personal beliefs (e.g. literal interpretation of the Bible) as reasons for not being able to address heterosexism within the elementary setting while others articulated their feelings of frustration regarding a lack of knowledge about how to begin to address these topics of heteronormativity:

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

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

We are trying to shape them as humans who are accepting of other people and understanding that everyone is different and diversity is okay. But it's frustrating because they go home, and their parents say, "No, diversity is not okay and you are White so you are going to date

White people, and you are a girl so you will date a boy.” I don’t remember teachers or anyone talking about these tricky topics, interracial couples or homosexual relationships. I don’t have anything to pull from. I don’t have the necessary schema (LGBTQ issues) (Shanna).

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

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

These barriers, both internal and external, possibly discouraged and inhibited full transformation within some of the participants (i.e. Roberta’s group). Beyond the need for their own introspection, educators need support from school leaders, colleagues, and the community. The analysis of data from the qualitative study indicates that the majority, 90% of the participants, experienced transformative learning. Quantitative data affirmed that positive changes in the participants’ attitudes, and increased knowledge about the LGBTQ community, demonstrated growth in awareness and acceptance. By providing an opportunity to co-construct new knowledge surrounding the power of cultural norms and the freedom of queer theory, the participants can continue to challenge their own misconceptions and the status quo within their schools. With continued opportunities to reflect and grow as professionals, all these educators can become the Beccas and Alisons of their school, making ripples within the walls of their heterosexist institutions.

## Concluding Discussion

Through the evasion of topics (e.g. lack of gay characters) and policing of gender behaviour (i.e. the reification of stereotypical images and the perpetuation of traditional language), heteronormativity prevails in the discourse and policies of schools. According to Meyer, supporting children who feel marginalized is a matter of life or death. When will the tipping point be reached that there is too much violence and bullying in terms of gender harassment? School staff and teachers have tolerated for too long the exclusion of LGBTQ youth, families, and staff as well as children with atypical gender performance. Schools are at least partially responsible for defining what is considered normal. If school leaders and educators do not address issues of hegemony, they are allowing the continuation of oppression and marginalization of children with LGBTQ families and friends as well as those who do not fit the socially constructed norms for gender roles. School leaders and educators can take steps to disrupt the heteronormative equilibrium and deconstruct the institutional homophobia that dismisses the legitimacy of these children.

Heterosexism and genderism creates obstacles to cultural proficiency in schools. Little attention has focused on the importance of teachers in combating bias, especially in the elementary setting. Kosciw and Diaz argued that the problem is that many teachers often do not recognize many of the heterosexist patterns within schools and, if confronted with these issues, are too fearful or ill equipped to face matters. The findings of this study validated that there is a need for comprehensive, long-term strategies to change heteronormative schools into inclusive and accepting environments for all children and

families. Some teachers are willing and open to take the steps necessary to begin this transformative process, but they need support, tools, and leadership.

According to Vaught and Castagno, in order for teachers to be effective with diverse students, it is crucial that they first recognize and understand their own worldviews; only then will they be able to understand the worldviews of their students. Additional, Vaught and Castagno (2008) discovered that teachers’ awareness alone did not lead to empathy. Instead, a reinvention of meaning in which understanding how culturally constructed norms can lead to oppression is needed. Within this current study, the researchers assert that transformative learning enabled the majority of these teachers to move from heightened awareness to understanding the need to remain fluid and then to action steps that confront heteronormative oppression.

All of the teachers within this study were clear, through their stories and conversations, that a culture of homophobia and heterosexism was unacceptable and potentially harmful for students, colleagues, and families. The teachers voiced their concerns and expressed a desire to protect their students. As one teacher stated, “Bob Marley always says, ‘Love the life you live. Live the life you love.’ It is true, we need to help everybody (including students with atypical gender performance) be happy.” This statement and the research aligns with GLSEN’s 2012 study, *playgrounds and prejudice: Elementary school climate in the USA*, that found a majority (83%) of elementary school teachers believed they were obligated to ensure a safe learning environment for gender nonconforming students and those with LGBTQ parents. Yet only one of the participants in this current study, previous to the book club sessions, had begun to address this social injustice within her elementary school. The other participants acknowledged that homophobia, as an abstract concept, is wrong, yet the majority of them had fallen into society’s expectation of policing topics of non-normative gender behaviour or sexuality and subconsciously reproducing social inequities. As one teacher shared,

I struggle in my kindergarten class. The boys like the boys, and the girls like the girls. They want to hold each other’s hands. But I don’t know what to do, so I just say, “No one can hold anyone’s hand.”

Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe found empirical evidence suggesting that homophobic beliefs have a direct impact on a teacher’s conceptual understanding of gender behaviours and roles, especially in regards to cross-gender interests. Hermann-Wilmarth and Meyer [5] noted that many teachers could not conceive that subjects of gender and LGBTQ issues were appropriate for elementary-age children and thereby silenced these topics. Research from this current study, however, holds evidence that attitudes toward the LGBTQ community can change through professional development that provides an opportunity for participants to learn from each other and to develop a new understanding of how cultural norms control how people behave, respond and interact (i.e. cultural theory).

For example, one teacher eagerly asked, “Where do I start? I have grown up in a heteronormative culture. I don’t know how to address it in my classroom and make it more open.” Meyer [5] shared that many teachers feel inadequate in terms of the skills necessary to deal with antigay violence and harassment. This finding aligns with Kosciw et al. [18] study in which they found fewer than 10% of school staff indicated a high level of competence to address LGBTQ issues but almost 90% of teachers stated they would like more training. Likewise, in this current study, the majority of the teachers indicated a lack of knowledge regarding how to address this topic but a willingness to

learn. One participant commented, “We had diversity training where we talked about race and religion. When do we talk about gay issues?”

The educators’ questions tended to be about process, rather than information or lessons per se. They wanted to develop ways to support students’ receptivity to these issues and a process to acquire support from administrators and respond to parents who express concerns. Teachers encountered students who struggled with their parents’ perceptions of and negative attitudes towards the LGBT community and classroom discussions. As such, teachers need guidance on how to respond to students, families, and community members if and when these topics regarding gender and sexuality are addressed in the classroom.

Lack of training produces ambiguity on how to effectively handle sexual minority harassment. The literature reviewed acknowledged that school training on LGBTQ issues has been shown to create a more welcoming school climate for LGBTQ parents and their children and for all students [18]. Wolfe contended that universities must start with teacher education programs to help teachers begin to have the tool necessary to be advocates and allies for all students. This help is particularly critical for children who potentially do not have supportive families. Without training, the multidimensional aspects of sexuality and gender presented by LGBTQ students create a sense of fear, and often backlash, in the traditional school space. Professional development on gender identity and LGBTQ issues in the elementary school setting should be available to all teachers.

Lai and Solomon [4] asserted that it is never too early to start teaching tolerance of sexual orientation and sex. When teachers provide an environment where children feel safe to participate in discussions, they help to dispel misinformation, confusion, and stereotypes, which leads to a better understanding of the diverse culture of gays and lesbians. Wolfe explained that the goal of teaching about issues regarding gender is not to influence children’s preferences on how they perform gender or their interests; rather, these lessons are critical to educate and generate tolerance. With tolerance and acceptance, educators can facilitate an environment that is free of persecution, homophobia, and oppression. If educators create this type of climate, children will be better equipped to live in the diverse, multicultural society that will exist throughout their adult lives.

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