

THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG LESBIANS, BISEXUALS,
AND GAYS

MASTER OF EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the high school experiences of nine members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) community. It describes how heterosexuality, homophobia and heterosexism were endured by these youth in the secondary school setting between the late 1990's and early 2000's. In this qualitative study, data were collected through a single focus group discussion and eight interviews. Several themes emerged: the difficulties gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth face in high school; their relationships with teachers and administrators; and recommendations for improving the high school experiences for these youth. All participants noted that change is possible and has indeed happened in educational settings, but call for more attention to and implementation of effective policies to introduce LGBTQ issues. The findings are supported by literature produced by nongovernmental organizations, policy analysts, and researchers.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Description of Research Study

In this qualitative research thesis, I examined the lived high school experiences of young lesbians and gays, and of one bisexual woman. The data were drawn from one focus group discussion and eight in-depth interviews, as well as supporting documents. Participants were self-identified members of the LGBTQ community, and ranged from 19 to 28 years of age.

Background

Heterosexuality, homophobia, and heterosexism are constants in the lives of lesbian, bisexual, and gay students within the secondary school environment. Harassment and violence - including verbal, physical, and sexual abuse - occur on a daily basis within the confines of the school setting (Human Rights Watch, 2001; McCreary Centre Society, 1999; Schrader & Wells, 2005). Human Rights Watch (2001), the McCreary Centre Society (1999), and Schrader and Wells (2005) describe a multitude of violent acts against people who are perceived to be members of the LGBTQ community. As well, acts of harassment include name-calling in teacher-free zones (Human Rights Watch, 2001) and stalking (Wells, 2005). Students of the LGBTQ community are often deprived of support systems, role models, and the guidance needed to live healthy lives. Many students adopt coping strategies to shield their sexual identity in order to survive within the stereotyped heterosexual world and to avoid threats as well as harmful encounters with homophobia (McCreary Centre Society, 1999; Tsutsumi, 2004). This “closeted” behaviour can be stressful for gays and lesbians and dropout rates and rates of attempted suicide are alarmingly high among LGBTQ youth (McCreary Centre Society, 1999).

This thesis focuses on heterosexism and homophobia as these issues relate to teacher-student and peer relationships, and the potential for bringing queer issues to the forefront in education.

Key Terms

‘Homosexual’ refers to a person who is emotionally and physically attracted to a person of his or her own gender (Bishop, 2003; Project of Planned Parenthood of Toronto, 2004).

‘Heterosexual’ refers to a person who is physically and emotionally attracted to the opposite sex (Marcus, 1995).

‘Gay’ refers to a man whose birth sex is male, and who is physically and sexually attracted to another man (Project of Planned Parenthood of Toronto, 2004).

‘Lesbian’ refers to a woman whose birth sex is female, and who is physically and sexually attracted to another woman (Project of Planned Parenthood of Toronto, 2004).

‘Bisexual’ refers to either women or men who are physically, emotionally, and sexually attracted to both women or men, but not necessarily at the same time (Project of Planned Parenthood of Toronto, 2004).

‘Transgendered’ is “a self-identifying term for someone whose gender identity or expression differs from his/her physical gender and traditional gender roles” (Project of Planned Parenthood of Toronto, 2004, p. 190).

‘Closeted’ refers to people who hide their true sexual identity and only share their feelings in a safe environment, perhaps with friends, support groups, or family (Marcus, 1995).

‘Out’ refers to people who are openly living with their sexual identity, sharing their true selves (Marcus, 1995). In this research, the person may self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

‘Homophobia’ is used to recognize language such as slurs and behaviour such as verbal and physical violence directed towards the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate how high school experiences have shaped the lives of a selected group of young lesbians, gays, and one bisexual woman.

Research Questions

I am interested in how high school experiences have shaped the lives of young lesbian, bisexual, and gay adolescents. In particular, I pursued the following questions:

- What difficulties did gay, bisexual or lesbian youth face in high school?
- What relationships did gay, bisexual and lesbian youth have with teachers and administrators in high school?
- What are gay, bisexual and lesbian youths’ recommendations for improving the high school experience?

Limitations

This qualitative study does have a number of limitations. These include the following: (a) limited racial diversity among the informants (all are Caucasian); (b) a limited sample of the LGBTQ youth in that participants are currently attending university; (c) only lesbians, bisexuals, and gays are represented in this research, so the sample is not necessary not representative of the wider LBGTQ community; and (d) parents/guardians, siblings, and educational staff are not interviewed, even though their experiences would add to this study.

Personal Ground

As a married heterosexual woman conducting research in the LGBTQ community, I relied solely on the expertise of my participants. Being a long-time ally of the LGBTQ community, I have always realized the need to challenge perceptions of LGBTQ issues in education as well as the representation of these issues in the wider community. Additionally, I came to recognize the need to incorporate gender-neutral language in education and the importance of deconstructing the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality, including the idea that every person should marry a person of the opposite sex (Herdt & Boxer, 1993).

Prior to this research I looked at my own biases. For instance, I expected that most of my participants were not 'out' in high school. I thought of bullying, violence, and the lack of support within the high school setting to be reasons for the participants not to come 'out'.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is intended to provide a foundation for understanding the challenges faced by members of the LGBTQ community, especially in educational settings. Specific information regarding queer theory, homophobia, language, curriculum content, abuse, as well as the possibilities for change, are examined and discussed. Furthermore, I discussed the importance of the inclusion of queer theory within the secondary school curriculum as well as in classroom materials. Britzman (1995), among other researchers in this area, advocated deconstructing gender stereotypes in education, and argued that much can be learned from other social movements in education, including anti-racism education.

Queer Theory and Invisibility

Koerner and Hulsebosch (1996) discussed how, in Western culture, students are perceived in terms of their gender. With the very rare exception of those born with ambiguous sexual organs, every student is categorized at birth as being male or female, with a heterosexual orientation usually assumed as the norm.

LGBTQ students who do not fit stereotyped gender roles can be silenced, and become invisible within the educational institutions they attend. In this vein, Nelson and Robinson (1995) assert that in many Western countries individuals feel pressure to fit into the gender category assigned to them at birth. There is often little room for sexual minorities. Filax and Shogan (2004) state that if society assumes that gender automatically means female or male, stereotyped images will be further entrenched in society, including in educational settings. If society understands gender in a neutral way, by attributing a certain set of rules to sexual identity, then youth might feel they have more freedom of choice, which could allow 'coming out' to be a positive experience.

Gay Youth in School

Homophobia and Language

Homophobia has the potential to escalate into harassment and violence in schools. Published testimonies of students speak to the verbal and physical attacks they encounter on a daily basis. Students report that verbal and physical abuse can occur in un-monitored 'teacher-free zones,' or pass unnoticed in the classroom in the presence of teachers (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Some students go to great lengths to ensure their safety at school, from late arrival to skipping the first morning class altogether. Compelled to be on constant alert, gay and lesbian students are often under greater stress, which may well pose a risk to their health. Perhaps as a response to this stress, alcohol, drug abuse and suicide attempts within the LGBTQ community are on the rise (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Based on data generated by the 1999 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (as cited in Human Rights Watch, 2001), lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are nearly three times as likely as their heterosexual peers to have been assaulted or involved in at least one physical fight in school, three times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school, and nearly four times as likely to skip school because they felt unsafe.

Language and Curriculum

Curriculum content is often heterosexual in nature, and filled with heterosexist language, often leaving LGBTQ students on the sidelines of the educational institutions they attend (Koerner & Hulsebosh, 1996). La Fontaine (1994) writes about the need to incorporate sexual diversity themes in the curriculum. She argues that homosexuality needs to be discussed at a much younger age, and that schools should provide their students with knowledge about sexual minorities. Herr (1997) shares the testimony of one young lesbian, Elise, who describes her

elementary school experience. She felt invisible in the curriculum, given the non-existence of role models like her. She went from being a gifted student in elementary school to a drop-out in high school, a change which she attributed to the challenges associated with her lesbian identity. In her health class, a mandatory subject in her high school, she recalls seeing only two lines referring to homosexuality, although there was plenty of information on safe heterosexual sex.

Hidden Curriculum

Not all learning takes place in the formal classroom setting. Hemmings (2000) identified social lessons passed on by students in the “hallways, lunchrooms, and other corridor spaces” (p. 1) as hidden corridor curriculum. These lessons can be destructive, and “are often hidden from view by school personnel who cannot or will not address their consequences” (p. 1). This observation supports the Human Rights Watch (2001) assertion that

Each day, most gay youth walk into their schools wondering what they will have to face taunts, food thrown in the face, lewd mockery in the locker room, being slammed ‘accidentally’ against lockers during the change in classes all in front of teachers who hear and see no evil. (p. 5)

Supporting this is Plummer’s (2001) research where he describes the homophobic actions hidden curriculum that is going on “at arms-lengths from adult authority ... and that the references were highly visible” (pp. 20). As with Hemmings (2000), Smith (1998) pointed out teachers are “generally complicit by their silence if not actively participating” (p. 309) in defusing homophobic situations.

Verbal Abuse

The 2003 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004) conducted in 48 American States and the District of Columbia examined the physical and verbal harassment experienced by

the LGBTQ community. The findings indicated that 84% of students faced verbal harassment and that 91.5% faced homophobic language such as “dyke” or “faggot.” Participants in Plummer’s (2001) research “recalled having heard homophobic references up to 50 times per day” (p. 20). Smith-Crocco (2001) described how negative language patterns exist in the daily discourse of schools. She used the example of a physical education coach who used terminology that is heterosexist and verbally abusive to pump up his students for better performances. Language is a powerful tool which can exclude and alienate youth in school. Consequently people who are employed by any academic institution should choose their wording in a sensitive manner.

Self-destructive Behaviours

Ignoring sexual identities and portraying heterosexuality as the only way to live can cause some students to act in a self-destructive way (La Fontaine, 1994). Such results were chronicled by Hagen (2004), who described his own daily isolation, depicting school as a place of ridicule and invisibility. Substance abuse and criminal activities became a vehicle for him to seek his parents’ attention. When being caught and coming out to his parents did not remedy his situation, he finished high school and left home.

Raising Issues

Since teachers are role models for students, their correct use of terms such as “gay” and “lesbian” can teach students acceptance. One example in elementary school is introducing the concept that a family may have a mom and dad, or two moms, or two dads. Presentations by people of the LGBTQ community have also been a successful tool to bring school communities together and embrace one another (Perotti & Westheimer, 2001).

LGBTQ content is still often taboo, even in academia (Wallace, 2002). An example of this phenomenon is Wallace's encounter with a summer bridge program for minority students. Two of his students voiced their concerns about their classes being scheduled during an LGBTQ group meeting. Wallace suggested contacting the program coordinator directly, and was rather shocked to find the students' request was denied. Wallace's initiative to mediate for a class time change was ignored by the coordinator with the excuse that he could not accommodate every student's life. This is an example of how teachers and administrators maintain rather than remove systemic barriers.

Possibilities for Change

Schools also have the potential to become positive places for LGBTQ youth (Perotti & Westheimer, 2001). For example, in Massachusetts, a school district formed an alliance between gay and straight students, as well as parents. One lesbian student initiated a gay/straight alliance (GAS) in her school. In the initial phase, she asked the principal about forming a GAS group; the administrator's agreement was dependent on finding a teacher who would act as a school advisor. The advisor, Polly Bixby, agreed to be part of the club, and was one of the openly lesbian teachers at the school. Bixby helped the GAS conduct an anti-homophobic workshop in the school to help straight students understand the impact that hurtful language has on their classmates. In consequence, the school won a rainbow flag in the Boston youth pride parade in 1995. The reaction of the wider community to this honour was initially disappointing, but the GAS presented its case in front of the school committee and won the right to fly the rainbow flag beside the state flag on the school mast.

There are other success stories upon which to draw. For example, a South London (UK) school found a way to channel the hidden curriculum into positive change (Patrick & Saunders,

1994). Through posters, assemblies, and crisis lines, teacher and administrators ensured equal access for students and families in the LGBTQ community. Their main success story was that one of their senior teachers came out at one of their assemblies for 'Pride Week.' Such courage and role modeling are needed within the LGBTQ community.

Corey, a student, shared testimony of his own coming out while in high school (Woog, 1995). He took an active role in securing a space for the LGBTQ youth in his school, shared written texts and statistical references with his peers, and challenged people who displayed homophobic behaviour. At one point in his school career, Corey made a teacher aware of unacceptable language use, and the teacher acknowledged his failure to realize his misuse of language.

Sharing his own personal history as a gay man and the trauma he endured during his school career, Macgillivray (2004) recounts a tale involving verbal and physical abuse, a tentative suicide attempt, and the help he received from a LGBTQ support group in the first semester of university. He wrote his book after many conversations with educators who voiced their need to have access to literature and their desire to understand the LGBTQ community. He consulted with program facilitators throughout the United States from groups such as Project 10, Support Services for Sexual Minority Youth, Out of Equity, and Out 4 Good. These groups provided advice about legal and health issues, as well as about anti-gay actions within schools. With the help of these same groups, one school district wrote and implemented its own policies, workshops, and support manual for LGBTQ students.

Schools Can Be Positive Places

The Triangle Program in Toronto is an example of how teachers and administrators can provide their schools with material and resources to ensure that all students feel safe and free

from exclusion and harassment by their peers. Relating their own experiences working in this program, Russell and Solomon (2004) describe the resources made available to the school board and staff. The video and handbook, *Apple and Oranges* (2003), for example, takes a critical approach to language, allowing students to think critically about their behaviour and language. Russell and Solomon state that homophobic behaviour was reduced in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) classrooms through the Triangle Program's education of all students about sexual identities. In particular, they assert that, when teachers acknowledge that harassment impairs all students' abilities to learn, change can happen.

Similarly, *Hear Me Out* (2004) is a unique book published by Planned Parenthood of Toronto (PPPT). Some of the people who share their stories in this book are members of T.E.A.C.H. (Toronto's Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia). This non-profit program offers educational workshops, runs a hotline, and is a place where many students state that they feel at home. In the book, young people share their feelings through storytelling, and note that they found storytelling to be liberating, and that sharing stories help young LGBTQ people feel less lonely or isolated.

A youth centre such as 'The Loft' that is a safe space for the LGBTQ community provided support for many members of that group who face heterosexism and homophobia in their schooling (Blackburn, 2003). Some youth share their stories and describe the challenge of moving out on their own and having to work to sustain themselves, a life-change which short-change them in terms of acquiring secondary educations.

Project 10, another outreach program for gay and lesbian youth in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), supports students and staff within schools (Uribe, 1995). This volunteer program is run with students and co-facilitators who are on call throughout the day and

provide training sessions for individuals prior to their actual volunteer work. Workshop topics include verbal and physical abuse, suicide prevention, and AIDS. Teachers, staff, counsellors, support staff, and facilitators work together to create a safe space for all students in their school without stigmatizing LGBTQ students.

In Massachusetts, a group of Grade 1 through 8 teachers attended a mandatory workshop to explore issues faced by sexual minorities (Perotti & Westheimer, 2001). During the sessions a facilitator encouraged the teacher to share their personal experiences with lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. He pointed out that labelling and name-calling turns students into invisible people, and that feelings for another person in the LGBTQ community are no different from those of people who are attracted to the opposite sex.

Coming 'Out'

Coming out, as described by Herdt and Boxer (1993), is a ritual that has a predictable sequence of tasks. The first is deconstructing 'natural' heterosexuality, i.e., heteronormativity, the assumption that every man or woman will marry the opposite sex and likely have children. A second task is eliminating one's own stereotypes around being a gay or lesbian person. The final task is learning how to be gay or lesbian, and entering into gay culture. The ritual is an ongoing process, as the person comes out to new people in his/her life. If the coming out is received positively, this affirmation of sexual identity within society and family allows each person to grow, and creates an opportunity for society to acknowledge the LGBTQ community.

Tierney (1997) uses the phrase 'a world of five second comments' to refer to the silencing and invisible life of the LGBTQ community. He shares his own coming out and the influences that prevented him from doing so until his thirties, when he finally shared his sexual identity with his brother, who then acted as a mediator between him and his parents. When asked

why he waited so long, Tierney refers to an incident in which one offhand homophobic comment left him in fear of losing his brother should he come out.

Perotti and Westheimer (2001) describe research conducted in a LGBTQ youth centre in Chicago. They found that, on average, girls have their first feelings for a same sex person at the age of ten, and for boys such feelings occur about six months earlier. However, both gay and lesbian youth stated that the age of coming out was closer to sixteen years of age.

How to Come Out as Lesbian or Gay, a fourteen-step program by Signorile (1996), describes how the journey of coming out can be framed as being liberating. His proposal of a step-by-step program aligns with Herdt's and Boxer's (1993) theory of rituals.

Research Needs

Lugg (2003) calls for research in education that investigates gender and sexual identity. Publicly funded schools and their staff have a legal obligation to teach the curriculum that is mandated by various Ministries or Departments of Education. For example, the Code of Conduct created by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2001) states that students and teachers

...treat one another with dignity and respect at all times, and especially when there is disagreement ... [R]espect and treat others fairly, regardless of their race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability ... [and] respect the rights of others. (p. 9)

The work of de Castell and Bryson (1998) points to the 'others' in educational research as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth. In the article, de Castell describes her experience as a commentator on a conference panel wherein she questioned the heterosexism in the papers and the generalizations made around gender and sexuality. The audience reacted with discomfort to the questions she raised. Taking the reactions of the

audience into account, de Castell asked two questions: (1) Is LGBTQ content missing in educational research because heterosexual researchers are unable or unwilling to voice the concerns of the LGBTQ community? (2) How can heterosexism be eliminated in educational research? She and Bryson then developed a manifesto for queer educational research that includes seven statements such as, “I will not sacrifice the chance to learn about how homophobia works in schools simply to be permitted to work in them,” and “I will not tell lies about what I see and what I do not see in my school-based research, simply to get that research published” (p. 249).

The academic and professional literature reviewed in this chapter provides a sounding board for the data collected in this study as to what individual members of the LGBTQ community have experienced at the high school level.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Research Design

Choosing a research design for this study, I had to look at my own position in society and the privilege that accompanies it. Since I have always considered myself an ally of the LGBTQ community, I had to sit back and think how the community would best be served throughout this research. I wanted to hear community members' concerns regarding their high school experiences, the difficulties they may have faced, their relationships with educational staff, and their recommendations.

A qualitative methodology was used to share the high school experiences of nine members of the LGBTQ community. In one focus group and face to face interviews individuals retold their own view of LGBTQ in the wider educational setting.

Qualitative Methodology

According to Merriam (1998) qualitative methodology allows the researcher to construct new meaning by deconstructing society's expectations and finding new meaning of social phenomena. She then notes "all types of qualitative research are based [on] the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (p. 6). Along this line, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) state that qualitative research must look at the setting the participant is in and take the position that everything in that setting is important and needs to be addressed. For example, in case of this study, I was looking for the insight of individuals of the LGBTQ community who shared their high school experiences. For these reasons, I chose a qualitative methodology that uses two avenues of inquiry. These are focus group and face to face interviews.

Participant Selection

The participants in this study were selected through the use of a purposeful sampling technique, meaning that they were chosen for their first-hand experience of the phenomenon (Vockell & Asher, 1995). Key participants were chosen on the basis of their membership in the LGBTQ community and their willingness to share personal feelings and experiences with me as the researcher.

I used three venues at an Ontario university to contact potential candidates: the Gender Issue Centre (GIC), Pride Central (PC), and two volunteer meetings at the Pride Centre. These locations are designated as safe spaces at this university where everyone is welcome. I introduced the purpose of my research to the staff at the GIC and PC. The coordinators at both centres granted me permission to place posters (see Appendix A) and to send one generic e-mail (see Appendix B) through an existing e-mail network to contact potential participants. I was also invited to attend two volunteer meetings to introduce the research and contact potential informants.

The target audience for participation were people between the ages of 18 and 30; it was my aim to not exceed 10 participants and to have an equal representation of males and females in the focus group session and in the interviews.

Data Collection

I used a mutually convenient location for one focus group and the interviews, which were all audio-taped and transcribed. Using the constant comparative approach, I found that a number of themes emerged from the focus group session; I used these themes as a guide to create appropriate interview questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) in consultation with my thesis supervisor.

Focus group.

The focus group discussion commenced in February of 2006, with three open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their personal experiences as members of the LGBTQ community. Supplemental questions were then used to prompt participants to interact with one another. The primary questions were as follows:

1. What difficulties, if any, did you encounter as a gay, bisexual, or lesbian high school student?
2. How would you describe your relationship with the teachers and administrators in high school?

What recommendations do you have for improving the high school experience for gay and lesbian students?

Nine people¹, Anne, Beth, Paige, Robyn, Anthony, Christobal, Frankie, Michael, and Tyler participated in this part of the project. Of these nine participants in the focus group, five were gay men, three lesbians, and one a bisexual woman; the duration of the meeting was 90 minutes. Krueger and Casey (2000) recommend that the number of participants in a focus group should not be less than four or exceed twelve, since focus groups that exceed this latter number tend to inhibit people from sharing their own personal experiences and minimize diversity of ideas raised. The one focus group session was conducted in a safe space for the LGBTQ community, located on university grounds.

I structured the focus group discussion and interviews to get at this information and the participants happily shared their experiences and recommendations with me. As I analyzed the data, additional sub-themes emerged, and were included in the results. In terms of the study's

¹ All names mentioned in this research are have been changed to pseudonyms.

limitations, the reader should recognize that the information gathered here was constrained by the time frame and what constitutes an appropriate length for a Master's thesis.

Face to face interviews

Upon completion of the focus group discussion, eight participants voiced their interest in engaging in individual face to face interviews. These eight people agreed to participate in the semi-structured interviews and provided their contact information. The face to face interviews were about 30 minutes in length. Beth was unable to join in the interview process. Some of the face to face interviews were conducted in my home office and some in offices that were available through the university. I audio-taped the interviews during March of 2006 and then began transcribing them.

Data Analysis

The first set of data that I transcribed originated from the focus group meeting. Utilizing Krueger and Casey's (2000) strategy of data analysis, I looked for the following in the focus group transcript: (a) frequency, using the transcribed data to see if there are words or phrases that recur consistently; (b) specificity, the shared information that relates to the context of the study; (c) emotions, which can be expressed through tone of voice and/or body language; and (d) extensiveness (not to be confused with frequency), the amount individual participants converse at different times. I used charts to display these recurring words, phrases, and themes.

The face to face interviews enriched the previously collected data from the one focus group session and provided further details on the participants' personal experiences. I used similar questions during the individual interview sessions in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants and their individual life experiences.

The one focus group and the eight interview transcripts were also analyzed using the constant comparative approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), with descriptive codes being assigned to emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Ensuring Credibility and Trustworthiness

I obtained ethics approval from Lakehead University to conduct a focus group session and interviews prior to contacting the GIC and the PC. I provided two documents to each participant, a cover letter (see Appendix C) and a consent form (see Appendix D). I asked questions and acted as a moderator in the focus group sessions and asked questions in the interviews. I then transcribed and analyzed the data.

Ethics

The approval of the University's Ethical Research Committee was obtained prior to data collection. Upon approval I contacted the GIC and the PC to introduce the research and contacted participants. All participants were informed that their involvement in this study was strictly voluntary and that they could leave at any time. Each participant assigned him/herself a pseudonym to protect his or her identity at all times. An additional form was signed by each of the participants requiring them to ensure anonymity of others after leaving the focus group discussion. Although there was no foreseeable harm to the participants in participating in either the focus group or interviews, I also provided a contact sheet for counselling services on hand (see Appendix E).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter I present the findings and discuss the results of this qualitative study. I have chosen to integrate the findings and discussion to avoid repetition and to better weave the ideas together. To recap, there were 9 participants: three lesbians, one bisexual woman and five gay men. Out of all the participants, one lesbian and two gays were 'out' in high school (see Table 1).

Analysis of the data from the focus groups and interviews revealed several themes. These were: the difficulties gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth face in high school; relationships with teachers and administration in high school; and recommendations for improving the high school experience for these youth. The first theme, difficulties gay, lesbian and bisexual youth face in high school, included five sub-themes: the atmosphere in high school towards the LGBTQ² youth; heterosexist thinking; non-inclusive language; calling on peers; and coming out. The second theme, relationships with teachers and administration, included these sub-themes: missing support systems; positive experiences, and negative experiences. The third theme, recommendations to improve the high school experience, included three sub-themes: recommendations for educators; educating other students; and support networks. After each theme I have included a discussion section that relates the findings to the literature and my research questions.

² For ease of reading and for its inclusivity, I have used the acronym LGBTQ throughout this paper, even though the participants in the research self-identify as lesbian, bisexual, or gay.

Table 1*Data on Participants*

Name ³	Age	Sexual Identity	'Out' in High School
Anne	28	Lesbian	No
Beth	28	Lesbian	No
Paige	19	Lesbian	Yes
Robyn	21	Bisexual	No
Anthony	19	Gay	No
Cristobal	19	Gay	Yes
Frankie	19	Gay	Yes
Michael	27	Gay	No
Tyler	25	Gay	No

Difficulties Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth Faced in High School

This theme focuses on the informants' views about the difficulties they faced as gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in high school. Five sub-themes emerged from the transcribed data: the atmosphere in high school; heterosexist thinking; language use; experiences of derogatory language; and coming out.

³ All and names mentioned in the focus groups or interviews have been changed to pseudonyms.

Atmosphere in High School

Six participants shared their views on the atmosphere encountered by LGBTQ youth in elementary school and high school. Informants had attended schools in both the separate and public education systems.

Anne and Michael attended public high schools in the late 1990's. Both witnessed incidents of harassment directed at peoples' perceived sexual identity. In Anne's case, she witnessed a teacher being harassed by his grade eight students. She stated, "the year before I got into high school, we had a teacher that our class thought was gay.... It was very negative for that, they were ... really mean to him" (interview). Anne did not describe the harassment in detail, but voiced her concern was that "[they were] going into high school and ... [in] grade school [they already displayed this negative behaviour about LGBTQ content and] I think it ... leads [into] high school" (interview).

Regarding "assumed sexual identities" by peers, Michael discussed his personal experience of verbal harassment. In his high school, heterosexual peers harassed boys who were viewed as effeminate. He stated, "[these] students ... were not treated well" (interview). He described the treatment he received from a group of three students: "every time I walked by their desks or ... within their general vicinity it was just under their breath, 'Faggot, faggot, faggot,' in stereo.... That was super intimidating" (interview).

Anthony and Tyler also perceived their high schools as not being "welcoming" towards LGBTQ youth, although neither had personally experienced verbal harassment. Anthony, who attended a separate high school, stated, "The last part of my final year ... I started realizing that I had certain feelings, but ... even if I did know that I was gay, I wouldn't have 'outed' myself" (interview). In the group discussion, Anthony stated, "I wasn't very popular in high school

[Coming out] only would have made my days worse for me” (focus group). He also felt that, “if I needed support I don’t think I could have counted on teachers for that, the majority of them ... made jokes like they were homophobic” (focus group).

Tyler, who attended a public high school, made comments similar to Anthony’s: “but socially I knew it wasn’t a very welcoming environment either, being gay or lesbian openly” (interview). He shared that one person in his high school was openly gay, and that “he faced constant harassment and difficulties; he ended up having to drop out” (interview).

Paige had a slightly different experience. She came out as a lesbian in grade nine and found: “No it wasn’t outright negative, but [teachers’ and administrators’] inability to deal with the issue made it a negative atmosphere” (interview).

Cristobal attended a separate high school until he transferred to a public school in grade 11 because of his sexual identity. In the separate school, he found that LGBTQ resources were not available. He stated, “I dare not even mention it to the counsellors.... I was afraid that would interfere with ... [my grades and peers]” (interview).

Discussion

These findings about the atmosphere in high school are not surprising, given the academic literature. The perceptions of the participants in this study were that harassment, intimidation, and homophobia are tolerated within some school settings. Koerner and Hulsebosch (1996), as well as Nelson and Robinson (1995), argue that, since heterosexuality is the assumed norm, people who identify or question their sexual identity may feel not included or silenced within the school setting. Even a teacher, as Anne noted, was harassed by the students because of his assumed sexuality.

Five participants expressed their concerns regarding the verbal harassment they encountered in high school; one may relate their reflections to research by Plummer (2001), Smith-Crocco (2001), and Kosciw (2004). Plummer, for example, stated the number of homophobic remarks that students encountered were estimated at 50 per day. Additionally, Smith-Crocco's research identified how verbal abuse exists daily within a school setting, and Kosciw reported that more than 84% of LGBTQ students faced verbal or homophobic harassment. It is clear, then, that for many LGBTQ students high school continues to be a less-than-welcoming venue.

Heterosexist Thinking

Anne, Michael, Cristobal, and Anthony reflected on what they perceived as heterosexist thinking on the part of their teachers and peers. They described the perceived personal views that some teachers and students bring into the classrooms.

Anne, who attended a suburban high school in the early 1990's, stated, "When I was in high school, you felt like [LGBTQ content] ... was a huge taboo" (focus group). She reflected on a journal entry that a grade nine English teacher had commented on. Students in that class had to write about their ideal future career and life. Anne's career choice was to be a veterinarian who would live with a variety of animals on a farm. The journal was returned with the teacher's comment, "Whatever happened to husband and kids?" (focus group). Anne revised her entry and added a husband, a boy, and girl to her journal. She recalled her thoughts about this incident, and now says, "I can't believe that I filled it out [to include a heterosexual family]" (focus group).

Continuing in this vein, Michael remarked that, "I had a school experience [that] was similar to Anne's. I came from [a] suburban ... picket-fence land" (focus group). He explained that while people were not openly homophobic in his high school, negative attitudes were still

apparent. Michael stated, “the school system neglects [and sees] homophobia ... only as outbursts against particular students ... Not like the subtle everyday ... things..., like someone ... whispers, ‘Fag’ under their breath” (focus group).

Cristobal and Anthony discussed teachers’ daily discourse with students. Both attended high school in the same board, but two years apart. Cristobal recalled his religious education teacher’s referring to same sex marriage in this way: “Ah, well, that will never happen ... actually, that faggots get married” (focus group). Another incident took place during Anthony’s geography class. The teacher’s explanation for not using a peer evaluation technique was, “if a girl had a crush on a boy, she would give him a higher [mark] ... Well, if a boy had a crush on a boy!” (focus group). Anthony recalled his peers’ reaction to this comment: “They just, they roared with laughter, thought it was hilarious. He was one of my favourite teachers, but then I lost respect for him, after that” (focus group).

Discussion

The participants’ notions of perceived heterosexist thinking which were discussed in this theme demonstrate the need of proactive measures such as those introduced by Perotti and Westheimer (2001). They found that early introduction of LGBTQ content at the elementary level and presentations by people of the LGBTQ community were successful tools to secure an inclusive school setting. This finding is significant, as participants found that the absence of LGBTQ content exposed the heterosexist thinking that exists in the high school setting.

Gender Stereotyping

Gender stereotyping employed in daily discourse is the focus of this sub-theme. Michael, Frankie, and Anne discussed “gender stereotypes” and “not fitting the norm”. Michael stated:

... whether or not someone is actually 'gay' or not it is directed at people who do not fit gender typical stereotypes, so because I did not play on the basketball team, ... I ... fit into the category of being gay, even though, ... it is no one else's business to decide that, ... I find there is that phenomena [of] people just using words to be ... edgy. Also I think that they use it and direct [it at] people ... in a way that is meant to centre people out, sexual sort of deviance, if you will. (focus group)

In agreement with Michael, Frankie continued:

I find it is a context thing You rarely use ... fag out of context when you are with friends ... but when you run into people you don't hang out with, that's when ... [fag] becomes not fitting the norm. The same thing happens within the gay community [when] ... we hang out and [someone would say], "You are such a fag." It is such a different thing because it is among friends.... It is more directed at sexual orientation and sexual deviance ...when ... someone you are not connected to, or someone who [is] kind of pestering you [uses these words]. (focus group)

Anne agreed with both participants that context was important, and pointed out that the undertone in someone's voice can make use of such a term derogatory and gender stereotypical. A conversation ensued between Anne and Frankie. Anne reflected on the experiences in her high school:

I still remember guys calling their friends "fags" in school and always in school, when they did something that wasn't stereotypically macho, so there is some kind of undertone and they are saying it to their buddies too, like there is still that undertone and they are saying it! (focus group)

Frankie responded to Anne's comment with, "But it's less directed than in terms of actual meaning" (focus group). Anne responded by stating, "there is still that stigmatism, but even you were saying you are using it with your buddies" (focus group), to which Frankie then replied, "but there seems to be more of a separation" (focus group).

Discussion

Nelson and Robinson's (1995) and Filex and Shogan's (2004) research on gender stereotypical images within society relate to the participants experiences of gender stereotypes and not fitting the norm.

Further, Smith-Crocco (2001) and Plummer (2001) both acknowledge that the use of words such as 'fag' and 'dyke' in the daily discourse, regardless of context, is still abusive and alienates LGBTQ youth. As indicated in this section and previous sections, gender stereotyping was seen as a problem for participants, a finding which connects to Filex and Shogan's (2004) assertion that society needs to understand gender in a neutral way to allow the LGBTQ youth to feel less excluded.

Coming Out

In this sub-theme, participants shared their 'coming out' stories. Different experiences are described by four of the informants, Paige, Cristobal, Robyn, and Frankie.

Paige, a lesbian, was a member of the football team at her high school, and came out during a Pep Rally that was televised by the local media. When it was her turn to shout her name to the audience, she came 'out' as well. I asked her about the reaction of the administration and teachers of the school. She stated, "I was chastised [by the administration] for that" (focus group). She described a conversation that took place in the principal's office: "They gave it

under the guidance of safety; they were concerned that I had put myself into a less-than-safe position” (focus group). Paige went on to say, though, “I got recognition in our newspaper about my coming ‘out.’ I live in a very conservative city, so it just boggled everyone’s minds” (focus group).

Cristobal shared his ‘coming out’ experience that took place during an online conversation with a highly regarded friend. This friend suggested inviting two other friends to join them online for moral support. Both agreed to have equal representation. Cristobal recalled the conversation: “It came down to awful things said; basically him [sic] and his buddies said we are a disease in society and we shall [sic] be killed off like the plague we were” (focus group).

Robyn, a bisexual woman, chose not to be ‘out’ in high school. She explained, “[A] lot of people who [came ‘out’ as bisexual] ... about 10 of them ... just decided [to]... I just didn’t want to fall into that” (focus group). She continued, “I do identify as bisexual, and ... this is who I am” (focus group), but it was important to her that people who identify with the LGBTQ community do so in an honest manner and not as a fad, which was what the group ‘outing’ felt like to her.

Frankie continued the discussion on ‘coming out’ as bisexual, adding, “at my high school ... the minute a guy comes out as bi[sexual], they are gay ... There is no middle ground” (focus group). I then asked him if his peers did not accept bisexuality in men. Frankie said, “Yeah,” and provided an example of his friend who came out as bisexual in Grade 10 and then later came out as gay. In Frankie’s opinion, “society is so bi-phobic” (focus group).

Discussion

Those participants who came ‘out’ during their school careers had similar negative experiences as those described in the research, such as verbal and physical abuse. Tierney (1997) and Macgillivray (2004) relate similar stories.

Relationships with Teachers and Administration

In this theme, Paige, Frankie, Robyn, Cristobal, Anne, and Michael shared some of their personal experiences with and observations of teachers and administration. Sub-themes include “missing support,” “positive experiences,” and “negative experiences.”

Missing Support

Two participants shared their experiences on the subject of missing teacher support in the high schools they attended. Both felt that, although some teachers were helpful, no one openly supported LGBTQ youth. Paige, a lesbian who was ‘out’ in Grade Nine, stated, “They pretty much tried to ignore it ... There were a few good teachers who would validate what I was saying, ... but no one was willing to take it further” (focus group). Frankie stated, “That ... same thing happened with my friend A few [teachers] here and there were very supportive” (focus group). However, both participants felt that their teachers projected the attitude that “we are not going to deal with that on a great scale. You are the ‘one and only,’ even if there are two or three. This is an individual case-by-case thing. It is not a social problem” (focus group).

Discussion

The feeling of neglect and being ignored in schools is strongly supported by Herr (1997), Wallace (2002), and Perotti and Westheimer (2001), all of whom argue that there is a need within educational settings to accommodate and support *all* students. This contention is significant as the participants in my study expressed the same concerns.

Positive Experiences

Three participants, Robyn, Frankie, and Cristobal, discussed the positive influences that some of their teachers had on them when they were students. Robyn shared several experiences she had while attending a high school outside Ontario. Frankie shared a personal experience of discussing sexuality with one of his high school teachers. Lastly, Cristobal reflected on the positive attitude of some teachers and students in his public high school.

Robyn discussed the support that both teachers and administration provided to the LGBTQ youth in her high school. Describing the relationship as positive, she stated:

In my school, administration ..., they just kind of knew they had to be okay with it, it was just something they had to deal with.... [The students] were totally “out” there, actually out and gay, even straight and crazy, [and] would use taboo words and talk about vibrators and stuff like that.... People just had to deal with it. (focus group)

She continued by reflecting on a particular media class in which classmates discussed pop culture:

[S]ome things would come up naturally in class and some of them would be completely unrelated, but for the most part ..., we would be talking about Christina Aguilera, how she shakes her ass, which could eventually get into some kind of sexual [discussion].... (focus group)

Robyn’s example shows the positive use of LGBTQ content in high school. The music teacher in one particular class provided a positive environment for all students. This teacher reassured her students with comments such as, “Feel free to say anything” (focus group). Robyn recalling this positive experience, stated that, “we did *Cabaret*, even our musical ... [was] gay. I

was a bisexual night club dancer, who danced around with another man and woman.... It was just kind of really open for the most part, which I felt really fortunate for” (focus group).

The second example of positive teacher-student interaction was a situation in which one female teacher responded to a personal concern of Frankie who was a known member of the LGBTQ youth:

I was lucky that I found the teachers that would talk to me about issues that were coming up, ... I spent a lunch hour with one of my teachers talking about anal sex and how it works, and it was informational (focus group).

Another positive example was Cristobal, who transferred from a separate high school to a public high school after being the victim of sexual harassment as a gay youth. His interaction with peers, teaching staff, and administration at the public school about LGBTQ content was positive. Cristobal stated, “When ‘off’ comments were made ..., teachers immediately questioned the student ... ‘What do you mean? That kind of language is not appropriate’” (focus group). He also commented on the display and presentation of LGBTQ content in the school: “[P]osters [were displayed].... People [would] stop and actually look in depth at that poster, and there were a lot of presentations at the public school, and they went pretty well” (focus group).

Discussion

Three participants’ experience of individual teacher support was positive; one was able to involve the whole school community to raise awareness of issues facing sexual minorities. In the literature, Uribe (1995), Blackburn (2003), and Russell and Solomon (2004) all suggest programs that have similar elements, such as positive images of sexual diversity in the form of posters, storytelling, skits, counselling, as well as efforts by teachers and other school staff to create safe spaces within schools for LGBTQ youth.

Negative Experiences

In this sub-theme, Anne and Michael shared their classroom experiences in a peer counselling course in secondary school and a teaching practicum in university in which sexual content was discussed. The reactions of peers and teachers showed an inability to cope with diverse sexualities.

Anne's peer counselling course included an independent study unit. This assignment had three parts: a written report, an oral presentation, and an invited guest speaker. Anne chose sexual diversity as her topic. Her teacher's reaction to the topic was "somebody did this last year and basically keep it [simple]" (focus group). The teacher directed her on how to present her report: "I kept it really quiet ..., did not tell people ... what my topic was ..., because it was so taboo" (focus group). She recalled the oral presentation: "It was a whole class of awkward people. They weren't looking at me.... They were uncomfortable with the topic, and I don't think they wanted to be there" (focus group).

Michael continued along the same line, stating that "schools don't prepare students at all to deal with complex issues [such as LGBTQ content]; we don't give them the language to talk about sexuality ... not even homosexuality [or] sex in general" (focus group). Michael provided an example from his student-teaching placement in a BEd program, when explicit sexual content came up in an English class. In this class, each student had to complete an independent study unit that included reading excerpts from the book in front of the class. In one particular presentation done by a student on a book about sex addiction, Michael perceived this student as "off beat ..., kind of edgy and out there" (focus group). At the start of the presentation, "I was excited [about the book]... because there is a potential for controversy and good discussion about difficult issues" (focus group). But Michael recalled, "every time [the student] came to a word that was

... taboo [i.e., sexually explicit], he would whisper it, and so I ended up being very disappointed” (focus group). When he turned to his associate teacher for help, she signalled to Michael: “please, please let that go; I don’t want to make a big deal out of this” (focus group). He was concerned about the fact that classmates were unable to “ask questions of the student because they didn’t want to use [sexual] language ... that would have made the discussion viable” (focus group).

Discussion

These anecdotes demonstrate that some teachers and students are uncomfortable conversing about sexuality in general, let alone about diverse sexual practices. This feeling of discomfort may be exacerbated since teaching about sexual minorities is not evident within most of the curriculum (La Fontaine, 1994; Koerner & Hulesbosh, 1996). Even though some school boards/districts have made an attempt to provide appropriate training for their employees such as the Triangle Program (Russell and Solomon, 2004), this not the case in every school board.

Recommendations to Improve the High School Experience

Participants made a number of recommendations about how to improve the high school experience of LGBTQ youth. Strategies discussed included “training for educators,” “educating students,” and the implementation of “support networks” in every high school. I will save the discussion to the end of this section to tie all of these themes together with the academic literature and to the third research question: “What are gay, bisexual, and lesbian youths’ recommendations for improving the high school experience?”

Training for Educators

During the focus group discussion, Michael argued that “homophobia is socialized; it’s actually what we are teaching, and it’s not what we are not teaching” (focus group). This

statement began a discussion of recommendations by participants that included “sensitivity courses” and “mandatory training.” Anne, Michael, Anthony, and Cristobal shared their views on changes to improve the high school experiences of the LGBTQ youth through sensitivity training while Michael, Anne, Robyn, and Frankie discussed mandatory teacher-training about such issues.

Sensitivity Training

Anne commented on her time in a Faculty of Education, stating, “I think they should have some kind of courses..., [a] sensitivity course” (focus group). She further reflected on the attitudes of her BEd (pre-service) student colleagues, saying, “A lot of them [are] already saying it is okay to talk ... certain ways [i.e., homophobic]. I can’t tell you how many people I have heard say that to me, and they’re [going to] be teachers” (focus group). Michael continues, “It definitely would be a good idea to have sensitivity training offered at the pre-service [level]. I also think that it needs to be mandated where they are going to be in roles where they are counselling students” (focus group).

Anthony stated during his interview, “I agree with [Anne’s comment in the focus group discussion that [teachers] ... need ... sensitivity training because ... they ... cracked jokes [about sexuality in class].” Cristobal also discussed this idea: “I just think that [teachers and administration] should be exposed [to] diversity workshops where they [are] taught about sexual orientation, because some teachers made very sly remarks” (interview).

Mandatory Teacher Training

Michael commented on the need for specific teacher-training in guidance counselling. He stated, “Teachers ... in guidance [or] ... in an academic advising capacity need to have specific training in dealing with issues of sexual diversity” (focus group). He felt that such training is

important, especially if students encounter exclusion when their concerns about sexual diversity are not properly or appropriately acknowledged in schools (focus group).

Anne and Robyn supported Michael's call for mandatory training for high school teachers. Both suggested the need for awareness of LGBTQ literature and of the fact that there will be LGBTQ youth in high schools. Anne commented:

...when [students] are starting to get more sexually identified, but [their] ideas are foreign, [educational resources and supporting teaching staff are needed to guide these students who are questioning their sexual identity]. Every teacher, no matter what, show them [educational literature]... I look through the resources; there are teachers out there that wouldn't care at all if it is not in the classroom. (focus group)

By introducing LGBTQ literature in class, "kids will know earlier and be ... 'I am okay, like the story we just read. I feel like a person, it's positive'" (focus group). Robyn, recalling her experience as a peer educator through the 'teen health centre', stated, "I think it should be generic for [teachers], but definitely mandatory.... If you are dealing with the service, especially [in] teaching ..., it needs to be mandatory" (focus group).

Frankie agreed with the need for training for pre-service teachers, and explored two options: mandatory training, and summer courses leading to professional certification. Opposing the view of Michael, Frankie was concerned about the impact mandatory training might have on teachers who are unable to cope with LGBTQ issues. He proposed the training should be voluntary: "I think it ... would be good if it was a summer course" (focus interview). Frankie felt that voluntary courses would lead teachers into accepting the LGBTQ community. In his ideal situation, the teacher would announce on the first day, "If you have problems come and talk to me ... I like gay people ... I have friends that are gay" (focus group).

Educating Students

Four participants, Paige, Anne, Michael, and Frankie, discussed the inclusion of LGBTQ content in the curriculum to educate students on the use of words such as ‘gay.’ Paige stated, “[T]he biggest things we need to do in high school is to educate [about] proper language use” (interview). During the focus group discussion, Anne commented, “[education needs to start young], kids ... can have ... preconceived notions. We have ... literature with mom and mom getting ... married.... [Teachers]... need to start using [LGBTQ] resources ... at a young age.” Anne also said, “[Kids see] their mom and dad together, it’s society that doesn’t make them ready for it” (focus group). Michael validated Anne’s comment by stating, “Improving the high school experience needs to start with education in the elementary level, and ... exposure through curriculum materials ..., infusing the curriculum [with] positive [LGBTQ] messages, from the time kids are in kindergarten” (interview). He also commented, “once kids are getting to the age that they are starting to identify [their sexual orientation] ... People in the school system [are needed] ... to validate whatever emotions and arguments they are having” (interview). He continued,

[B]ecause when I was in elementary school you are so socialized to believe, well, I am normal, and being gay is not normal, so therefore I am not gay. Like, you just want to separate yourself from that, so you train yourself to believe that is totally not true.
(interview)

Frankie’s example of self-identification in Grade Three is a good example of early introduction of LGBTQ content. He commented, “not everyone is that certain ... There wasn’t an awful lot of questions for me.... I knew right [away] and beyond.... But I had no way of ...

governing how it worked. I had no representation; it's like I had nothing [to identify with]" (focus group).

Support Networks

The need to integrate a support network into every high school in Ontario was a suggestion that several participants made. Robyn, the participant who grew up outside of Ontario, cited the concept of a teen health centre like the one that she had experienced in her own school, as one possible type of support in high school. Frankie liked this idea. Another suggestion Tyler, Cristobal, and Frankie discussed was the pro and cons of the possibility of introducing gay/straight alliances in high schools.

Teen Health Centres

As mentioned earlier, Robyn was very pleased with the support that she received in her high school 'teen health centre.' She stated, "[T]he one thing ... I really enjoyed was the fact that as a student I could learn about [LGBTQ content] and then I could go and make a difference ... and talk to younger people [about LGBTQ content] (interview)." I asked Robyn if this is one way of building leadership, and she answered, "Yeah, it's building leadership ... That peer to peer support ..., I loved when [the public health nurse and peer educators] came in ... [and] did ... skits.... [I]t was different, it wasn't a teacher [who taught us]" (interview). Anne commented on teen centres: "Yes, I think that would have been ... good, and even not just having the centre ... [but] going to each class. Because so many people would not [go] ... individually to the centre on their own.... [If the peer education group can] come to class, you get to hear it, whether or not you want to, at that age" (interview).

Frankie wondered about the idea of having centres run by outside agencies. He noted, “It doesn’t have to be from within” (interview). He continued, “It would be good to have a strong, almost confrontational presence [in the schools]” (interview).

Gay/Straight Alliances

Setting up gay/straight alliances in high schools was the second support system participants voiced as important, although there were two perspectives on this possibility. Tyler felt that it would be positive while Frankie felt it could be problematic in terms of labelling people as gay. Tyler stated, “Well, I think setting up gay/straight alliances in high school would be a very important thing to do” (interview). Following up on this point, he stated that for such a thing to happen, “[the] administration [needs to] be more, not necessarily open, but at least more friendly towards the idea” (interview).

On the other hand, Frankie pointed to possible problems that may occur for young men who attend such meetings. In his opinion, “[I]t seems like any guy to go to a gay/straight alliance ... would have to be gay.... The assumption would be made and it’s, like, it needs to be [clear that it is] a *gay/straight* alliance.” Frankie did point to the importance of gay/straight friendships in high school, and recounted a personal experience with his straight friend, Heinz: “[I]’ve had the opportunity [of] forming really ... close relationships with straight men, Heinz being the first in high school.... But in terms of that relationship, no one would accuse Heinz of being gay” (interview). Continuing, Frankie reflected, “it [should] ... be advertised [that] ... issues are discussed but no assumptions are made about the people that are attending.... [No] label should be placed ... unless someone chooses to self-identify” (interview).

Discussion

This section describes the many recommendations offered by participants to help improve the high school experience of LGBTQ youth, and many are mirrored in the existing literature. These strategies included “training for educators,” “educating students,” and the access to “support networks” in high schools. Perotti and Westheimer (2001), Macgillivray (2004), and Russell and Solomon (2004) all discussed these possibilities in their writing. Macgillivray (2004), for instance, encountered teachers who recognized the need for LGBTQ resources and literature. The participants also saw the need for sensitivity training and mandatory teacher-training. Perotti and Westheimer (2001) document how to be a facilitator, teaching teachers through role play, and through this show how sexual minorities become invisible by the dominant heterosexual society.

Participants also voiced the need to educate students. The literature offers many examples of this recommendation, including programs such as the Triangle Program (Russell & Solomon, 2004) and Project of Planned Parenthood of Toronto (2004). Positive images of the LGBTQ community in schools can occur through such outreach programs.

Recommendations for support networks included teen health centers and gay/straight alliances. This recommendation strongly relates to the research of Uribe (1995), Perotti and Westheimer (2001), and Macgillivray (2004). Uribe’s research involved a support network which was run by volunteers, and the teen health recommended by one participant operated in a similar fashion. The initiation of gay/straight alliances (GAS) was also mentioned by the participants. Perotti and Westheimer (2001) also discuss the process one student went through to begin a successful GAS.

Summary

The findings in this chapter represent the views and feelings of the participants in both the focus group and interviews. Each recounted the difficulties s/he faced in high school, and in relationships with teachers and administration. It is important to note that not all of the participants' experiences within the educational system were negative. They shared stories about individual teachers who integrated and discussed LGBTQ content into classes, and mentioned one teacher's rapport with a gay student, and the positive impact of a peer-counselling course.

Finally, participants made a number of recommendations to improve the high school experiences of LGBTQ youth. These included training for educators (including in pre-service teacher-training), educating students by infusing LGBTQ content into the curriculum of elementary and secondary school, and providing different types of support networks.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The three research questions I examined were as follows: What difficulties have gay, lesbian and bisexuals faced in high school? What relationships have gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth had with their teachers and administration in high school? What are gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths' recommendations for improving the educational high school experience?

Difficulties that gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants in this study faced included the following: being on constant alert not to reveal their sexual identity; feeling that issues of concern to sexual minorities were not welcomed by either the administration or teachers; and the inability of some teachers, peers, and administrations to cope with LGBTQ content.

The daily high school experience of the LGBTQ youth in this study was infused with homophobia and heterosexism. These students frequently endured harassment, largely verbal in nature. Other studies have noted that sometimes this harassment is also physical, as experienced by two participants, Paige and Cristobal. Many of these attacks occurred in "teacher-free zones" and thus went unnoticed, but some occurred in front of teachers or administrators, and some were from teachers and administrators themselves (Human Rights Watch, 2001; McCreary Center Society, 1999; Schrader & Wells, 2005).

Participants expressed in detail their opinions as to how the high school experience could be improved for the LGBTQ youth. They mentioned the need for pre-service and in-service teacher professional development, accessibility to LGBTQ resources in every school, inclusion of LGBTQ content in the curriculum, and trained support staff within the schools to raise awareness of sexual minorities in educational institutions. Participants also were unanimously in favour of educating all students, including those who are heterosexual, about LGBTQ content, and endorsed the creation and implementation of support networks.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, here are my recommendations for practice and future research.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Sexually diverse content should be infused across the curriculum, beginning in Junior Kindergarten (i.e. in the family unit).
2. Educational workshops and professional development regarding sexual diversity should be given for all educational staff and administrators.
3. Gay/straight alliances and peer education programs within the schools should be implemented to foster inclusion of LGBTQ youth. Content could include topics such as homophobia and heterosexism, anxieties of LGBTQ students, and violence against sexual minorities.
4. School boards or districts should hire or retain teachers who are 'out' in their professional life to act as role models and who promote a positive image of sexual minorities.
5. Each school should evaluate its own policies regarding LGBTQ youth. Student representatives of both the heterosexual and LGBTQ youth should be involved to develop a safe school policy that represents the perspective and guards the safety of all students.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Existing provincial curricula should be reviewed for existing or possible inclusion of sexual diversity issues.
2. A broad survey of the views of teachers and administrators regarding their views on sexual minorities and sexual diversity issues would be useful, as boards/districts can implement program accordingly to the needs of the schools.

3. Focus group research facilitated by an outside expert with groups of parents/guardians, students that identify as LGBTQ, heterosexual students, and educators could help raise awareness of sexual diversity issues in particular schools, and could be shared with other schools.

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Appendix A: Poster for Participation

The Educational Experiences of Young Lesbians and Gays

This is a research project conducted by a Master of Education student as part of her thesis. I am looking for volunteers who are members of the LGBTQ community to volunteer about 90 minutes of their time to participate in a focus group discussion of their experiences in high school. Anonymity in all published reports will be guaranteed. Although there is no direct benefit to you in participating, this research will help educators to gain a better understanding of the LGBTQ youth they may encounter. If you are interested in being a participant in the focus group discussion or the later interviews, please send an e-mail to me at platt@lakeheadu.ca

Appendix B: E-mail to Potential Participants

Hello,

My name is Petra Latt and I am in the second year of my Master of Education program. I am looking for volunteers who would like to participate in my study titled:

“The Educational Experiences of Young Lesbians and Gays”

There will be a focus group discussion that will take about 90 minutes of your time and possibly an interview at a later date that will take about 60 minutes of your time. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The focus group and the interview will be tape-recorded and transcribed. Anonymity in all published reports is guaranteed.

Thanking you in advance,

Petra Latt

If you are interested please contact me at:

platt@lakeheadu.ca

Appendix C: Informed Consent Cover Letter

Hello,

My name is Petra Latt. I am in the second year of my Master of Education program. My thesis is titled *The Educational Experiences of Young Lesbians and Gays*. You are being invited to participate in this study. Please note that your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to take part in the focus group discussion of about 90 minutes or the possible interviews of about 60 minutes at any time.

Your identity will remain confidential and pseudonyms will be used in reporting findings and discussion with my supervisor or committee member. Upon completion of my thesis the data will be stored at Lakehead University for seven years. If requested, I will provide you with a summary of the research following the completion of my thesis.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you in participating in this study, it will allow educators to gain a better knowledge of the LGBTQ youth they may encounter in their professional life and perhaps improve support systems available in educational institutions.

If you have any questions regarding this research please contact me at phone: 345-6872 or at platt@lakeheadu.ca, or my supervisor Dr. Patrick Brady at phone: 343-8682 or at patrick.brady@lakeheadu.ca.

Thanking you in advance for you participation,

Petra Latt

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

I the undersigned (print name) _____ agree to participate in a study that is tape recorded by Petra Latt, Master of Education student at Lakehead University, on *The Educational Experiences of Young Lesbians and Gays*. I have read and understood the cover letter and the purpose and procedures of the study. I understand that:

- 1) As a volunteer, I may withdraw from the study at any time.
- 2) The focus group discussion and the interview will be tape recorded.
- 3) I will remain anonymous in any publication/public presentation of research findings.
- 4) I may be asked to partake in a 90 minute focus group discussion and a possible interview of about 60 minutes.
- 5) The collected data I provide will be confidential and stored securely at Lakehead University for 7 years.
- 6) There is little or no risk of physical or psychological harm to me.
- 7) If, during the research, it appears I am in need of counselling, the researcher will provide me with a list of counselling services.
- 8) Upon request, I will receive a summary of the research following the completion of the study.

Participant Signature,

Date,

I the undersigned agree (print name) _____ that I will not disclose the identities of individuals participating in this focus group.

Signature of Participant